

S. Tahoe council candidates outline stances to voters

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Budget and fire department staffing were two issues the South Lake Tahoe City Council candidates tackled before each answered three random individual questions.



This second forum of the political season was hosted by Soroptimist International South Lake Tahoe at Harrah's Tahoe. Two positions are open, with five people vying for them. Clinton Schue did not attend the Oct. 10 event.

The first question was: *The consensus among many residents is that the city is practically broke, between what is owed bondholders through the now defunct Redevelopment Agency and the need to keep borrowing from reserves to balance the city's general fund. Some would go so far as to say the city is insolvent. What is your response to the claim of insolvency?*

Incumbents Bruce Grego and Hal Cole took issue with that assessment of the city's coffers, while challenger Austin Sass' response was about 180 degrees different from theirs, and newcomer JoAnn Conner was about 90 degrees different.

"We have a balanced budget," Grego said. "Things are not out of control. I think the problem is resolving itself."

He didn't mention that by state law the city has to approve a balanced budget each year.

"I'm really proud of our city's financial condition," Cole said. He mentioned a AA minus rating, that there is more than the required 25 percent in reserves. He also boasted how the

city is paving streets.

He did not mention how the city borrowed millions of dollars to pave those streets and that taxpayers will be paying that off for the next 30 years.

“We do have a problem and we need to address it now,” Sass said. He doesn’t see how using \$6.2 million in reserves in the last few years is good fiscal policy.

Conner likes that employee agreements have been revamped and said the city is doing better today than it was a year ago. She wants to increase revenue by making sure everyone is paying their transient occupancy tax – especially vacation rentals – and to levy a business tax on duplexes, triplexes and fourplexes.

Question 2: *Public sentiment is that with no upper management, the staffing at the fire department is in shambles. How protected is the city?*

Cole: He believes with three people responding to each fire and an ambulance at each station, the city is protected. He said the fire marshal duties have been contracted with Lake Valley Fire and that consolidation talks are ongoing to determine if that is the best route.

Conner: She believes with neighboring agencies working well together the residents of South Lake Tahoe are safe. She did confuse the role of the fire marshal with battalion chiefs when she said, “The captains are doing the job of fire marshals.”

Sass: He, too, believes the mutual aid agreements keep city residents safe. However, he said talking to Lake Valley and Tahoe Douglas fire staff, he has learned those agencies are “concerned with onsite management of a fire.” And he said city staff is worried about equipment, especially with an engine failing during the Peter Darvas house fire last month.

Grego: "We are fully protected." He said the city is looking at buying a new fire apparatus, but that it costs \$500,000.

[No one mentioned that the city does not have a capital outlay fund so when any equipment reaches the end of its usefulness there is no pot of cash to replace it.]

Next up, Ann Swallow, who moderated the Wednesday event, asked each of the four three questions.

Q: The city has tightened its purse strings by reducing expenses, some of which have included eliminating positions and/or departments. As a result, employees are potentially facing a more work and less pay scenario. How would you address the potential for decline in morale and productivity?

Grego: "Morale is something we need to work on by recognition." He also suggested hiring people outside the city to do some of the work.

Q: The city of South Lake Tahoe currently has no position on the use of eminent domain. If the issue is raised, would you vote yes or no?

[This was a false statement by Soroptimist. A previous council passed the policy that eminent domain will not be used. It would take four out of the five councilmembers to change that policy.]

Sass: "Eminent domain should be used as a last resort." He could see using it if 95 percent of the loop road property and business owners accept to be bought out and that for the greater good the 5 percent are taken by eminent domain.

Q: Would you vote for the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's Regional Plan update as it is currently proposed?

Conner: "Yes." She believes how TRPA wants to change best management practices as well as allowing sensitive property to be traded to encourage development elsewhere are good things

in the plan.

Q: Beside yourself, who else will you vote for for City Council?

Cole: "Elect two candidates who have a vision." He wants someone who is like-minded.

Q: Do you think councilmembers should be on nonprofit boards that could benefit from the councilperson's elected position?

Grego: "No. It is against the law." He said councilmembers are not allowed to vote when there is a conflict.

Q: What are your views about a recreation master plan and how would you pay for it?

Sass: He wants to create a sports and recreation commission and assess what the facility needs are. He believes revenue will come from attracting tournaments and other athletic events to the area – especially when the facilities are in place.

Q: Is it appropriate for the South Shore Chamber of Commerce to endorse a candidate?

[There is the South Tahoe Chamber of Commerce, which Conner is president of, and the Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce. It was not clear which chamber the Soroptimist meant.]

Conner: "We have always felt we should not endorse candidates." She said her chamber endorses issues, not people.

Q: Explain a vote you made during your tenure on the council that you would change today and would you change it?

Cole: He wishes he had not allowed medical marijuana dispensaries because he says they ended up selling drugs in bulk to people out of state and that it has been bad for the

city. He called the operators "drug dealers".

Q: The Tahoe Transportation District is moving the loop road forward with \$810,000 in grant money. What is your position on the loop road and how would you protect city residents and business owners?

Grego: "I oppose the preferred alternative. I see no benefit for the city of South Lake Tahoe to support it."

Q: What are your thoughts about the El Dorado County Grand Jury's recommendation of merging the city of South Lake Tahoe and El Dorado County?

Sass: "I'm not sure if it's a good or bad idea. A study would need to be done about what the city residents would gain and what they would lose."

Q: What steps would you take to generate revenue in the city while keeping expenses at a minimum?

Conner: "Market our recreation because it's the most viable asset we have." She wants residents to be tapped to do some of the work, which some already are when it comes to securing grant funding. She says broadband would allow different businesses to come to town. "I would put studies on a pause."

Q: Over 18 months ago the City Council met jointly with Douglas and El Dorado counties in public session. Since then no meetings have taken place. What is your opinion with regard to the City Council meeting regularly with these neighboring counties?

[The meeting was actually Nov. 4, 2011, when the city and Douglas County met. The city and El Dorado County have not met.]

Cole: "There is no state line." He would like more meetings and is disappointed the second one with Douglas was canceled.

[The election is Nov. 6. Vote by mail ballots should arrive this week.]