

Cocking pulling the plug at South Tahoe PUD

By Kathryn Reed

Think South Tahoe Public Utility and Dennis Cocking is probably the first name that comes to mind.

Even his boss admits Cocking is the face of the district.

“People go to him when they want to know what is going on with the district,” South Tahoe PUD General Manager Richard Solbrig said.

But after May 1 people will have to go to someone else. Cocking is retiring.



Dennis Cocking with retire from South Tahoe PUD on May 1. Photo/Kathryn Reed

While his job title is public information officer, the job duties go well beyond being a spokesman.

“PIOs as a whole have evolved into legislative affairs. It’s legislative and public affairs,” Cocking said.

In a lengthy interview with *Lake Tahoe News* in his office, which is full of family photographs and certificates of

recognition, Cocking spoke of how his life at the district evolved from working part time in the summers in the field starting in 1988, to getting hired full time in the mid-1990s in customer service. He's had the PIO job since 1997.

Cocking has effectively put his business administration degree with an emphasis in marketing and public relations to work.

"As a board member, I can say Dennis has been an invaluable resource in terms of preparing me for understanding the community and understanding the issues and providing a bridge between the community and the board," board President Eric Schafer told *Lake Tahoe News*.

MTBE in Tahoe's drinking water

It was in 1998 that the district filed the lawsuit against the oil companies for contaminating the wells with the fuel additive MTBE. Then the legislative affairs aspect of the job kicked in and to this day has never let up.

It's talking about the legislative affairs side of things that brings out a sparkle in Cocking's eyes.

Shell was the last hold out in the MTBE suit. The British company wanted to settle for \$26 million. That wasn't good enough for the district. Their belief was the ratepayers should not have to pay a dime.

From 1998 to 2001, for three days a week, one of five district employees was in the San Francisco courtroom. Cocking was in that rotation.

"This small, little water district in the mountains took on big oil," Cocking said. "(MTBE) was elevated from a local problem to a national problem."

He said it was tricky to manage the media because saying the wrong thing could affect the trial.

And then he and board member Jim Jones faced contempt of court charges – which added more stress to the situation. Those charges were dropped in the final settlement negotiations.

“The lawsuit said the oil companies should have known the contaminants that were in it,” Cocking said. “We got money to pay for the costs incurred and attorneys. We netted \$35 million.”

The money could only be spent on the district’s water supply. The last of those dollars will be used this summer on projects.

“We have recovered all the lost capacity,” Cocking said of the wells that had been contaminated.

Working on Tahoe issues

Securing money for the district has been a primary goal of some of Cocking’s legislative activity. He is a regular in Sacramento and Washington. He says it’s all about developing relationships.

“His written skills are such that he can get across with clarity complicated issues and have it make sense to people,” Solbrig said.

While the 2007 Angora Fire is hard for most locals to forget, it’s often the firefighters who are heralded for containing the inferno in a matter of days. But it was South Tahoe PUD that was supplying that water.

“We were singled out by the incident commander. He said it was rare to go to a fire of this magnitude and not run out of water,” Cocking said.

But it was close.

The 254 houses that burned then created active leaks. Foundations were flooding. Water pressure was decreasing and

the threat of running out was very real.

STPUD crews scoured the burn area to try to turn off the valves. And, this, at a time when some of their own had lost their homes.

Cocking said the ability to keep supplying water demonstrated that the district's priority of replacing infrastructure proved to be prudent.

Going forward

A scare when Cocking was 37 had him and his wife come to the realization that when they could retire they would, the 60-year-old said. He was diagnosed with stage 4 melanoma and told he had six months to live. They had three kids all younger than 4 at the time.

Kathy Cocking will retire April 5 after spending 35 years with Barton Health. She is currently vice president of operations.

They sold the house Dennis Cocking grew up in, which had been in his family since 1965. (Cocking is a South Tahoe High grad.) Their new home is on 5 acres near the Pine Nuts.

Their first trip will be up the Oregon coast. RVing has been a passion of the Cockings for years. Now there will be more time to explore.

Plus, their first grandchild is on the way.

But neither one expects to stop being involved in the community. But what exactly the next chapter entails, well, that remains to be written.

With the district on a mission to not replace every person who quits or retires, the initial plan is for Cocking's duties to be divided between three members of upper management.

"I've always enjoyed his witticisms. He would be a difficult

person to replace, which is probably why we aren't," Schafer said.