

Seniors convince council to kick out county

By Kathryn Reed

Instead of El Dorado County taking over office space, they repurposed the South Lake Tahoe Senior Center building to the point where the original occupants no longer feel welcome.

Tuesday's South Lake Tahoe City Council meeting was full of people in support of returning the building in the middle of town to be just a senior center as was the agreement between the two government bodies when documents were first signed in the 1970s.

They got what they wanted. The council unanimously agreed to tell the county it has until June 30 to find another place for its people or the locks will be changed July 1.



City Attorney Patrick Enright said the agreement in place is not valid because it was never signed by the mayor or any council member, and there was never a meeting before the council to discuss the potential changes.

The signatures on the agreement allowing mental health into the senior center are Enright's, City Clerk Suzie Alessi and former City Manager Tony O'Rourke.

The county owns the land. The building was constructed by the city. The city pays the county for use of the land.

An amended agreement dated Dec. 12, 1972, for what is known as the 56 acres, said the city had until the end of 1976 to build

the senior center.

In 1981 the nonprofit Tahoe Basin Senior Citizens Center was founded. This was so the seniors could essentially govern themselves, raise money and make improvements. More than \$200,000 in improvements has been made since then.

The facility had been operating exclusively as a senior center. That changed last year with the county in its quest to consolidate offices told the city it would be moving mental health and veterans services into the senior center.

The county hasn't even reimbursed the city for its share of the utilities from last year.

The American Legion has offered to let the vets have office space when needed. According to Councilwoman JoAnn Conner, who is a member of the veterans auxiliary, the offer has fallen on deaf ears with the county.

No one from the county was at the April 16 meeting, but city staff has been working with county staff and elected officials to come to a resolution. The city says the talk all sounds good, but nothing changes.

And while the seniors knew changes were coming based on meetings that were conducted last year, the outcomes were not all anticipated.

Rooms are off limits, making exercise time be rescheduled to the recreation center. But for this age group to walk in snow and on ice is not the ideal option.

Even more disturbing to the 19 people who spoke on Tuesday is not feeling safe at the center.

Vagrants are now sleeping outside the building. Mental health clients are smoking cigarettes and pot in the bathroom. Kitchen privileges are not what they were. Equipment and furniture belonging to the seniors are missing.

Across the parking lot is the Lake Tahoe Museum, which has been vandalized since mental health patients showed up.

And while it was stressed by many that the intent is not to come down on mental health clients, it's about the need to segregate these two distinct populations. It's also about keeping the senior center just that – a center for seniors. For many, this is their one place to socialize, to get a hot meal, to be among their peers.

In other action:

- The council is having a special closed session on April 22 and possibly April 23 to interview up to five candidates for city attorney. There is no local candidate. It's expected to be a few weeks before the new person is named. Enright's last day is May 31.
- A two-year agreement with On Course Events will be entered into for the South Lake Tahoe company to operate the Thursday night summer concerts known as Live at Lakeview. There is, however, some disagreement as to who owns that name. Rob Giustina, owner of the company, told *Lake Tahoe News* he has the rights.
- The council revised the lease with Tahoe Sports Entertainment so alcohol sales are no longer part of the gross sales.