

County reluctant to separate mental health from Tahoe senior center

By Kathryn Reed

While seniors and mental patients continue to co-mingle at the South Lake Tahoe Senior Center, the electeds finally have a meeting on the books to discuss who uses that site.

South Lake Tahoe Councilmembers Tom Davis and JoAnn Conner are the city's committee dealing with the situation. They will meet with El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago next week.

The only correspondence the city had received from county CAO Terri Daly as of Monday was the letter dated May 15 in which she said the city had no right to kick a county agency out of a county-owned building.

"Please be advised that the county intends to continue occupancy and use of the building in accordance with the Facility Use Agreement. However, in the spirit of cooperation and being mindful and sensitive to the concerns raised by the senior groups, the county will attempt to look at other potential sites for the Mental Health Wellness Center," Daly wrote in that letter. "Frankly, I feel that by remaining we are subjecting the clients of our wellness center to unjustified and disrespectful mistreatment."

The city and county have an agreement regarding that building that dates to 1968. It's been amended a couple times. The changes in the late 1980s say the building is for the sole use of the seniors and if the city were to use it for anything else, the city would be in breach of contract. The county apparently doesn't have to abide by the same criteria.

Former City Manager Tony O'Rourke signed a deal in 2012 without council's approval to allow mental health to occupy part of the building. The council earlier this month refused to ratify that agreement, which essentially voided it. The county contends the council never had to approve it so therefore it is enforceable.

The problem is the two populations play together as well as the city and county. Space used by the seniors has been taken over by mental health. Items the seniors have paid for have been damaged and stolen. Seniors have repeatedly testified at council meetings and to city staff that they feel threatened and that their sanctuary is anything but that now.

Another issue is the county has not been paying its utility bills for the site. Daly didn't respond to an email about the senior center and county Auditor Joe Harn said he didn't know anything about the bill until contacted by *Lake Tahoe News* on June 24. He did say he would pay the bills as soon as the city sends him the bills directly.

The county owes more than \$9,000 for utilities from 2012. The county said it shouldn't have to pay all of that so the city said it would reduce it to about \$4,900. That invoice was submitted on Dec. 4, 2012. The next invoice will be for more, according to city officials, because it will include 2013 expenses.