Tahoe trying to find sustainable workforce

By Kathryn Reed

INCLINE VILLAGE — Employers, educators and workforce providers spent nearly threes hours Wednesday trying to figure out how the Lake Tahoe Basin and Truckee can have a sustainable, year-round pool of workers that people want to hire.

Two of the main objectives of the meeting were to find out what the people in the room have to offer and what they need to better perform their jobs. Their needs, along with challenges they have and what they have to offer were recorded on large sheets of paper.

Kim Bateman, dean of Sierra College in Truckee, talks Oct. 2 about course offerings. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The diverse group gathered at the Parasol Foundation in Incline Village on Oct. 2. Representatives were from the four colleges in the region — Lake Tahoe Community College, Sierra Nevada College, Western Nevada College and Sierra College in Truckee, along with Ritz-Carlton Lake Tahoe, California Conservation Corps, Harrah's Lake Tahoe, Sierra-at-Tahoe, El

Dorado County, real estate, artists and others.

For more than a year the Lake Tahoe Sustainability Collaborative has been meeting to deal with a variety of issues. The workforce issue is the focus of the Economy-Education-Culture working group.

Inadequate public transportation, housing that isn't affordable and lack of communication between the sectors were major issues that were unearthed.

But as the human resources rep from the Ritz said, nothing he heard on Wednesday was new. And that concerned him — that nothing innovative came out of the meeting.

College personnel said they could do a better of job of getting the word out on what they offer.

Those helping workers find jobs said rules about crossing county and state lines make it difficult at times to place people.

Simple things that could come out of the session include developing a more robust internship program at the colleges with area businesses; and having businesses communicate with colleges what they would like from a graduate so perhaps courses could be developed to meet those needs.

The soft skills are what employers said they need more than workers with technical skills. They are able to train the person to do the job. What they can't do is teach them how to set an alarm, not call in sick on a powder day and the importance of proper hygiene.

The group not at the table was the actual workers. So it's not known if they are having a hard time figuring out the higher education opportunities in the Lake Tahoe-Truckee area, or if they know about job placement services, or if they know what employers want. And without workers it is not known why people

are looking to leave, why they never accepted the job here, or even why they stay to find out what might be working.

One placement person said she has been told people leave the area because of lack of leadership within organizations in the area.

A man who has a small engineering firm said even a six-figure salaried position is hard to fill because people want more than the area can offer. They want better schools, more opportunities for their children and more personal professional development.

But expecting to find what a metropolitan area has to offer in a rural location is not realistic. Any professional in Tahoe looking for training beyond the work site has to travel to find it. There are tradeoffs to living and working anywhere.

On the other end of the spectrum was the desire to work with seasonal businesses to find year-round work for their employees so they aren't continually training new people.

And while the arts received substantive discussion time as a potential economic savior in the way of providing a destination for visitors, tapping colleges that already have recognized programs, and embracing the renowned artists who live in the basin, their numbers skewed the discussion so it was hard to know if that is truly a viable and desired direction for the basin to go in.

The attendees said they want to meet again to possibly drill deeper into some of the issues that were broached.