

Opinion: Revamp S. Tahoe's mayoral process

By Kathryn Reed

In one week, South Lake Tahoe will presumably have a new mayor.

It is customary that the council selects the mayor at the first December meeting. And it is customary that the mayor pro tem becomes the mayor. There have been exceptions, including mayors serving for more than one term.

This has pretty much been the process since the city incorporated in 1965. For most of those 48 years the role of mayor has been little more than ceremonial. The primary job is to run meetings that are once or twice a month. The mayor signs paperwork. That person helps set the agenda with city staff. And the mayor attends events in town on behalf of the city.

The Brown Act doesn't allow for council members to work out among themselves ahead of time who the mayor will be. At most, they may discuss this, or any topic, with one other council member.

If I were to bet, on Dec. 10 I would say Hal Cole – who is mayor pro tem – would become mayor and Brooke Laine mayor pro tem. But that's not what I'm advocating for.

First, I think we need to change the process of how the mayor is chosen. And while that is not likely to happen this year, it is time the citizenry became more interested in who the mayor of South Lake Tahoe is.

In the last few years as the city has taken a stronger stance regionally, in California and Nevada, and nationally, the role

of mayor has evolved into more than a ceremonial position. Mayors are seen as leaders of a city and a notch above the other council members. With the title, there is a perceived sense of power from the person who has the job and those looking in from beyond the basin.

That is why it is time South Lake Tahoe rethinks how the mayor is chosen. Right now it's a bit of popularity contest. If your colleagues don't like you, you won't get to be mayor. Just ask Bill Crawford and Bruce Grego. There have been others, too, in the past who served on the council without ever being mayor.

I am not a fan of the top vote getter being mayor. Being most popular does not make one most qualified.

It's probably not legal, but what if when there is a council election, if there could be a question asking who out of the candidates as well as the council members not up for election would you want to be mayor? And then the top person became mayor.

Or what if the five council members had to fill out an application form like city commissioners do? A special form would be created for this position. Then each person wanting the position could give a short speech about why they are best. The five deliberate in public and a vote is taken.

Then the mayor gets to pick the mayor pro tem.

Or maybe there should be a public committee convened to pick the mayor? There have been community members asked to help select staff.

What if the mayor had the job for two years?

These are just things to think about. I'm sure others have better ideas. But we as the residents of South Lake Tahoe should start thinking about how our mayor gets appointed and who it is. That person represents us. We have the power to

effect change in the process if we want to.

So, if I were the anointer of South Lake Tahoe's mayor and mayor pro tem, I would pick Angela Swanson and Brooke Laine, respectively.

First, Tom Davis' lack of leadership this past year as mayor proves he does not warrant a second term. As mayor he showed up at the state Legislature wearing one of his infamous Hawaiian type shirts. And he was there to give testimony. He used his tired phrase to tell the lawmakers "it was like speed dating" when it came to the amount of time he had to talk.

Davis and Hal Cole are often dismissive to their female colleagues.

At the Veterans Day ceremony Davis acknowledged the whereabouts of all of his colleagues except for Swanson. Davis and Cole have shunned Swanson in part because she was party to a charity taking money from someone who was later sent to prison on felony drug charges. She has never been charged with a crime, let alone arrested. Cole also hasn't forgiven Swanson for alleging he was being racist during a council meeting.

While Cole runs a meeting well, he is not one who likes to socialize and glad-hand. Plus, he is the city's rep on the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency board. Doing both well can be difficult. (Think Claire Fortier.)

JoAnn Conner is still too green to be mayor.

Laine, while she has served on the council for four years before this stint and was mayor, is there this time as an appointee to Fortier's term. No one who was not elected by the citizens of South Lake Tahoe should be mayor, in my opinion. If she had been elected, I would have picked her. She is the only one who looks at people when they speak – whether it's the public, a colleague or staff. The others have dismissive body language to colleagues, spend time on smart phones

despite a ban on them, and often don't seem to pay attention.

Put Laine in as mayor pro tem. This way if she runs for re-election in a year and gets on, she would be the front runner for the job as mayor – especially if the process is not changed.

While some could say by default this leaves Swanson as the choice for mayor, but the truth is she is the right person for the job. She has come out as saying she is not running for re-election next year because she wants to be county supervisor. Being mayor will give the public a chance to see if she is a leader. It will force her to learn the meaning of the word brevity and practice it – because a mayor needs to have that skill and she has yet to demonstrate she has it. The mayor should be the last person to give her or his opinion. She will need to be efficient with her time and be able to not mix campaigning with city work. That will be a test of ethics.

Swanson has shown leadership by taking on tasks beyond the expected council assignments. She is working in Sacramento on behalf of the city. At some point she will have to demonstrate how all those hours translate into meaningful benefits for the city and not just for herself as she seeks a life in politics.

This is by no means an endorsement of Swanson for supervisor. It's just one person saying Swanson should be mayor of South Lake Tahoe for the next year. And more important, it's time we rethink how the mayor is chosen.