

Opinion: STPUD facing tough decisions

By Richard Solbrig

Your public utility district has the responsibility of safely and reliably delivering water and wastewater services 24/7 to homes and businesses in South Lake Tahoe. Currently, we face the challenge of balancing essential facility repair and upgrades with the resulting need to increase revenue from our customers.

We are considering decisions about three specific challenges:

1. Providing adequate water to fight fires. Some neighborhoods are still not protected. This year there were several ferocious wildfires, including in Colorado, and closer to home in Yosemite, that remind us of the danger of major local wildfires. During our own Angora Fire, we were praised for having enough water for firefighters because we had implemented a series of multi-million dollar investments in the water system.

Today, many of our neighborhoods still do not have adequate water capacity to provide fire flow during a wildfire. We must invest in larger pipelines and upgraded pumps, hydrants and storage tanks to meet firefighting needs in those areas.

2. Legal requirement to install water meters on all customer connections. The state has mandated that we must finish installing water meters on every property by the year 2025.

3. Aging wastewater and recycled water systems must be updated. Our award-winning wastewater treatment system has protected Lake Tahoe and provided needed recycled water for almost half a century. This system includes pump stations that protect the Lake from sewage spills and others that pump

recycled water into Alpine County as required by law. These million-dollar pump stations are nearly a half century old and must be updated to avoid sewer spills or loss of recycled water.

Balancing risk and affordability: We must balance between the speed of improvements and the rates customers pay. The faster we go, the more it costs in the short term, but the less risk of a fire catching us unprepared or of a sewer spill, loss of recycled water, or violating a state law before installing the meters.

Developing options and seeking public input: Our engineers have developed detailed plans for completing the needed improvements, prioritized them and estimated the costs.

We are developing various rate change options needed to perform the work promptly to minimize risk as well as provide other options for slowing down the work and adjusting priorities to minimize rate increases. Of course, the slower we go the more affordable it is in the near term, but, the risk of a breakdown or problem increases and long-term costs will rise.

You can learn more in person and provide your input at a public workshop scheduled for Dec. 19 at 10am in the district conference room located at 1275 Meadow Crest Drive, South Lake Tahoe. We will provide numerous additional opportunities for the public to learn more and provide input in the coming months before making any final decisions concerning the facility program and rates. Final decisions will be made in late May.

Richard Solbrig is general manager of South Tahoe Public Utility District.