

Community vision, determination brought college to South Lake Tahoe 40 years ago

By Kathryn Reed

No was not a word people who wanted a community college in South Lake Tahoe were willing to embrace. Their tenacity paid off and this year Lake Tahoe Community College District is celebrating its 40th year.

As Los Rios Community College District was forming in the 1950s there was a push to have all of El Dorado County be part of it. But Nels Nelson convinced the powers that be that it didn't make sense for Tahoe to be included.

Besides the legacy of a hardware store in town that bears his name, Nelson has a bench in his honor near the college's Demonstration Garden that was donated by his daughter Anne Johnson.

Had he not been so persuasive, South Lake Tahoe might be like Placerville, a city without a college and part of a district that doesn't make sense.

It was in the 1960s that serious discussions began about having a community college in town. Ann and Bill Harriman had two children in high school and didn't want to have to send them out of town. They approached Lake Tahoe Unified School District officials about starting a community college.

Superintendent Tony Magliari and Business Manager Bill Hauck were completely supportive of the idea. A committee was put together to figure out how to do this, what was needed and

gather support of the community.

Magliari went before the state board of education on Dec. 15, 1967, with the proposal and was told “no”.

Not giving up

The idea cooled off for a bit until legislation was passed saying every area in the state must belong to a community college district. The state thought Tahoe, Alpine County and Mono County should be a district. Alpine County residents weren't thrilled with this idea.

The El Dorado County Committee on School District Organization spent about three years studying what would be best for the area. Roberta Mason, LTCC board member, and Gene Bellisario were the Supervisor 5 committee members. Each of the five supervisorial districts had two members on the committee, plus there was one at-large member.



LTCC's first elected board: William Conlon, Donald Swanson, President Roberta Mason, Will Cluff and Fritz Wenck. Photos/LTCC

Mason said the reason the state wanted areas to be part of a district was to collect more taxes. Those outside a district paid 10 cents per \$100,000 of assessed property per year, while in districts the tax could be 90 cents.

The state said “no” again to Tahoe when advocates lobbied for a solo district.

Then state Sen. Claire Berryhill arranged for a special election where Tahoe and Alpine County would vote on the district. But it was up to the Alpine County superintendent to call the election because the Legislature had said the county with the largest geographic area was in charge. Alpine stalled; ranchers didn’t want higher taxes.

Hazel Hoak, assistant superintendent of schools for El Dorado County, got involved.

“She and I went to court to force Alpine County to call an election,” Mason told *Lake Tahoe News*. It worked.

A radio campaign was launched to convince voters. Brooke Laine, who was 9, and David Foster’s kids did some of the spots, saying how they wanted to one day go to a local college. Dick Shehadi was the main outspoken opponent to the college district.

A college in South Lake Tahoe

On March 5, 1974, voters in the Tahoe area of El Dorado County and all of Alpine County were asked if Lake Tahoe Community College District should come to fruition. Tahoe said “yes” and Alpine “no”.



Then-President Guy Lease opens the Child Development

Center in September 1993.

They also voted for the first board, with one seat for an Alpine County rep. Since that county said no to the district, the board started with four members. They were Mason, Donald Swanson, Will Cluff and Fritz Wenck. Wenck is also still on the board. In a special election for a fifth member, Bill Conlon was elected.

Mason was the first board president. She is also the current president. Her plan is to not run again when her term expires at the end of the year.

With the creation of the college district, it meant property owners would be paying 72 cents for every \$100,000 of assessed value.

Hoak, who lives in Shingle Springs, filled in as interim college president until the board hired someone.

Mason said that was the board's biggest decision – who to hire. A consultant was brought in to help find a president and figure out a salary.

“Jim Duke came to the top because he had quite a bit of experience with starting community colleges and four-year colleges,” Mason said. “Fritz and I were selected to make an offer to Jim.”

Duke's response was that he was already making more than what was being offered. A second offer was made and Duke left Canada College in the Bay Area. He started with LTCC in September 1974. The county advanced the district the money to pay him and for some other start up costs.

“We had nothing but a post office box,” Mason said. “Jim said I'll have a campus in eight years.” He missed the mark by a few years, but stayed long enough to be part of the permanent facility.



Board member Fritz Wenck hands out diplomas at LTCC's first graduation in June 1976.

Duke's initial task was to hire a secretary. Angie Burns still lives in Tahoe. The two first worked out of a basement in a building on Ski Run Boulevard that is now owned by Wenck. Real estate agents came up with tons of ideas for where the first classes could be conducted.

Ultimately the board decided on the old Gerkin motel on Highway 50, which is now the Econo Lodge. The pool was covered and the ice rink turned into science labs. Walls were taken out of some rooms to make them bigger. Classes started in September 1975.

The first year the college opened there were 119 classes and 1,407 students. Eleven people graduated in 1976. Tuition was free at California community colleges at that time.

"The biggest argument was do we buy electric or manual typewriters," Mason said. They went with IBM Selectrics.

To start with, a general education curriculum and business courses were offered. Through the years more programs have

been added, some eliminated.

The building where the former mattress outlet was housed the first library. The building behind it had a computer lab.

At the same time Duke was busy looking for land to build what is today's LTCC campus. The 164 acres were bought from Shell Oil Company for just less than \$900,000. Money was being set aside every year to buy the land.

It was state money that built all the buildings that are on the campus today. The oldest building is the administration/commons area, and the newest is the library.

But the college is not done growing – in terms of curriculum or facilities. It has plans to be around for another 40 years.

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Significant dates:

- March 5, 1974, 66 percent of the voters say yes to the formation of Lake Tahoe Community College District. The initial board was elected.
- The board was sworn in on March 25, 1974.
- September 1974, the board hires Jim Duke as the first president.
- Sept. 18, 1975, classes begin in a converted motel on Highway 50.
- Dec. 27, 1979, the district buys 164 acres from Shell Oil Company.
- July 8, 1986, construction begins on the first phase of the permanent campus.
- October 1988, the college moves to its current location.

- June 30, 1990, Duke retires and Guy Lease takes over as president.
- September 1993, the Child Development Center opens.
- 1994, the college has men's and women's cross country teams.
- 1995, a women's volleyball team is formed.
- 1996, the technology wing and theater open; portables are brought in for the garden classrooms.
- 1999, a Nordic ski team is formed.
- 2002, the physical education building opens.
- 2006, the library and Haldan Art Gallery open.
- June 2007, Lease retires.
- July 2008, Paul Killpatrick becomes president.
- July 2011, Kindred Murillo is hired as the fourth president.
- March 5, 2014, at 11am the college and public are returning to the old hotel, now the Econo Lodge on Highway 50, to celebrate the election 40 years ago.
- June 7, 2014, the college celebrates its 40th anniversary with a sit-down dinner from 6-8pm, plus the unveiling of the David Allan Barkley Memorial created by former Art Department Chair David Foster. For more info, email Julie Booth at Booth@ltcc.edu or call (530) 541.4660, ext. 245.
- Fall 2014, men's and women's intercollegiate soccer begins.