

Website provides detailed SLT budget data

By Kathryn Reed

Accountability and transparency are buzzwords in government circles.

South Lake Tahoe wants to take ownership of them by allowing the public to delve into the city's multi-million dollar budget in ways it has never been able to until now.

In May the city unveiled its partnership with Open Gov, a firm that puts a government's budget online in a way that allows users to drill down into expenses and revenues. Colorful charts pop up, with just the numbers below.

Data goes back to the 2008-09 budget year.



South Lake Tahoe City Manager Nancy Kerry demonstrates how Open Gov works. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Budgets by nature are cumbersome. There are restricted and unrestricted funds. This simply means some dollars have strings attached, others don't. Part has to do with where the money comes from, and part has to do with what it is being spent on.

Things people might not ordinarily think about can be found – like how much money has been spent to pay on-call employees to remove snow on city streets. In 2009-10, it was a whopping \$76,633. It plunged to \$16,199 in 2012-13. While \$25,000 was budgeted this year, the final numbers aren't in.

Accounts are updated quarterly. The finance staff sends them to Open Gov to upload. The city then does a check to make sure it was done correctly.

But like anything, the data is only as good as what is provided. And in an era of extreme public distrust of nearly all political entities, how is the public to know what is being presented is really the truth? Just look at the city of Bell or California State Parks – distrust still lingers.

“Bell had an auditing firm without access to the budget. Our auditor gets the budget,” South Lake Tahoe City Manager Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*.

It's an independent auditor who is reviewing the city's budget. That is the public's assurance that the numbers the city provides are factual – that there are no hidden accounts, that the income stated is true and what it's spent on is factual.

What Open Gov does is allow people to more easily find the numbers. The actual budget document is so thick and convoluted that a few years ago *Lake Tahoe News* paid a financial expert to help sift through it in an attempt to bring understanding to it. Even then it was near impossible to grasp everything.

While Open Gov is a step in the right direction, it is still a bit clunky. So far there is no search button. The company is working on one, but has no time line for when it will be live.

Like most websites, there are multiple ways to get to what a person is looking for. The “reset” button at the top left is likely to be used a lot as people search for things.

In 2010, with the city changing how it categorized items, it makes the system seem a bit less fluid. After all, how many people know that in 2010-11 the vacation rental program enforcement became the job of the police department?

Open Gov cost the city \$7,000 in start up expenses and will be a \$4,000 line item each year for the company to upload and maintain the data.

This data, as well as the more than 40 other cities on Open Gov, is available to anyone. Kerry foresees this potentially being good for investors doing research on South Lake Tahoe to see how solvent the city is.

But her main goal with Open Gov is to get more engagement from locals in the budget process – for them to see where money is coming from and where it is going.

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Notes:

- Here is a link to South Lake Tahoe's Open Gov site.
- For help with Open Gov, call Debbie or Olga in the finance department at 530.542.6000.