

Douglas County manager candidates down to 7

By Anne Knowles

MINDEN – Douglas County has narrowed its search for a county manager to seven candidates who spent Aug. 4 in a marathon of panel interviews, culminating in an evening reception for the public at the Carson Valley Inn.

The county received 72 applications for the job vacated in April by Steve Mokrohisky, who left to become county manager in Lane County, Ore.

The field was reduced to the seven now vying for the job based on education, experience and input on the ideal candidate from the Douglas County Board of Commissioners, said Phil McKenney with Peckham & McKenney, an executive search firm in Roseville, which conducted the search for the county.

The job seekers, who come from Arizona, California, Nebraska and Texas as well as Northern and Southern Nevada, are taking a five-hour community tour this morning and spending the afternoon in individual discussion with the commissioners.

All the candidates have experience in either county or city government or both, and some have worked on water infrastructure issues, a subject that came up often at the informal social for the public.

“Water is the issue that keeps us up at night,” Commissioner Greg Lynn said. “Water at the lake is intractable.”

Lynn said the county needs \$12 million to fix the water infrastructure at Lake Tahoe, which has multiple, unconnected delivery systems.

Christine Vuletich, assistant county manager and chief

financial officer for Douglas and a candidate for county manager, said the county will need \$14 million to replace decades-old worn out water lines.

“We’re working closely with the state revolving fund to get below market interest rates and looking for grant opportunities,” Vuletich told *Lake Tahoe News*.

“There is some aging infrastructure up there and some bold action is needed,” said Tim Hacker, the interim director of parks and recreation for Las Vegas and one of the candidates for county manager.

Charlie Cassens, another candidate, said water and sewer rates are part of the issue. Cassens worked for Lower Colorado River Authority in Austin and Otay Municipal Water District in Spring Valley in San Diego County prior to his current position as city manager in Lake Havasu City, Ariz.

“My fundamental philosophy is we are a public service agency here to make things as easy as possible for people who want to get things done,” Cassens told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Cassens talked about working to get a \$463 million bond measure passed in his current job to build a waste water treatment facility during his brief speech as part of an introduction made by each candidate.

Jim Nichols, former assistant city manager for Midlands, Texas, who is now living in Henderson, has degrees in civil and environmental engineering, which he said helps him understand the challenges facing Lake Tahoe.

“The lake requires environmental attention and I hope I’d be an asset, assuring the lake is protected and preserved for future generations,” Nichols told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Other issues that came up were economic development, tourism and the decline in gaming.

“Gaming has gone down and that’s a challenge for jobs and for revenue for the county,” said Rick Benson, currently county administrative officer for Mariposa County. “It’s a big challenge to fill that void.”

Prior to Mariposa County, Benson worked in Kern County, home of Bakersfield, which he says is diverse area like Douglas County, containing desert, farming and a city.

“It’s always a balancing act, that’s the challenge of a county,” Benson said. “Everybody deserves a full slate of services no matter where they are.”

Mary Lou Brown, city administrator for Grand Island, Neb., said tourism drives the economy at the lake and unites rather than divides the different constituents of the county.

“People in the valley rely on tourism at the lake so they have an interest,” said Brown. “There’s a tie and they care about each other.”

Curtis Calder, currently city manager in Elko, said he’s impressed with Douglas County’s many planning documents which map out a path forward.

“It allows leadership, staff and elected officials, to focus on the highest priorities,” he said, referring to the county’s Economic Vitality Plan and master plan. “Douglas County has a lot of diversity, that’s its strength.”

The seven candidates are scheduled to return Aug. 18 for formal, public interviews with the Board of Commissioners, which is set to announce its selection on Sept. 4.

The goal is to have a new county manager in place in October.