

Opinion: Chamber explains political activity

Publisher's note: Even though the Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce claims to not have a preconceived political agenda and says it wants to be transparent, board member Jason Drew last year at a public meeting said, "Our goal is to find, recruit, and elect people to the South Lake Tahoe City Council and then hold that council accountable."

To the community,

There have been many questions related to our new activities associated with candidate endorsements so in an effort to clarify here is an overview of the history and process. I apologize for the length – this is a complicated topic and not one well suited to brevity.

Tahoe Chamber has a long history of representing business to government via advocating for policies that provide a fair and predictable process for businesses of any size. This process is guided by our Government Affairs Committee (GAC), the board, the chamber CEO and our government affairs liaison. In 2012, the Tahoe Chamber board of directors decided it was time to take an active role in political advocacy by engaging in the electoral process. This decision was based upon the premise that the future sustainability and economic vibrancy of our community was dependent upon well informed and capable elected leaders. Board and staff members participated in several workshops and trainings with experts. While this is a new activity for Tahoe Chamber, hundreds, if not thousands of other proactive chambers across the country have long been engaged in the electoral process.



B Gorman

It is perfectly legal for a chamber of commerce to endorse candidates and to share the reasons for so doing. Given a chamber's mission of supporting and growing business it only makes sense that candidates who are endorsed by a chamber are those who exhibit the greatest understanding of business and economic development.

If a chamber directly contributes funds to candidates or ballot measures it risks triggering a reclassification of its corporate status resulting in complex reporting. Thus chambers who wish to support candidates or ballot measures with direct expenditures form committees that vary depending upon the type of activities to be undertaken. These committees typically fall into one of three categories: Independent expenditure committees, 529s or political action committees. These entities have separate bank accounts, reporting requirements and boards which typically include the chamber CEO and several board members. Tahoe Chamber has initiated 2014 candidate endorsements through our newly formed Candidate Endorsement Committee (CEC) and also formed a California Independent Expenditure Committee (IEC).

The CEC is comprised of eight individuals who have volunteered an inordinate amount of time to develop a process they believe is fair to all concerned. The IEC is comprised of five community leaders who are raising funds separately from the Candidate Endorsement Committee. A listing of these committees can be found online and the work of the IEC online, too. If you are interested in serving on either of these committees, please contact me.

Prior to forming the CEC or IEC our pre-existing Government Affairs Committee (GAC) developed the Tahoe Future A South Shore Community Vision 2020, which can be found here. This document guides the GAC's support or opposition of ballot measures, legislation and initiatives and it now provides the foundation upon which candidates are being questioned and measured by the Candidate Endorsement Committee (CEC).

The candidate endorsement process:

The CEC is focused on local California races. Candidates are being evaluated for LTCC, STPUD, City Council and El Dorado County District 5 Supervisor. Endorsement recommendations will be provided to the board by the CEC. The board will vote at their regularly scheduled open meetings on whether to accept the slate suggested by the CEC. Endorsements will be provided to the media and highlighted in chamber publications.

All candidates have an opportunity to be evaluated – TRUE

Every candidate, even those running unopposed, were sent a letter by the CEC Chair inviting them to seek an endorsement. All candidates will be evaluated irrespective of whether they seek an endorsement. Candidates can choose to what extent they engage in the process. Research will include:

- o Questionnaire answers
- o Websites and collateral materials
- o Interviews
- o Public forums (City Council forum is Sept. 10)
- o Past voting records
- o Ability to collaborate and affect positive change
- o Alignment with Tahoe Future Vision 2020
- o Background checks

Tahoe Chamber has solicited specific candidates to endorse – FALSE

TahoeChamber encourages civic engagement through its Leadership Lake Tahoe program. Leadership participants are encouraged to join service organizations, serve on commissions, volunteer for a nonprofit, coach youth sports and consider running for office. This year we are pleased that five graduates from the 2003 [Nancy McDermid], 2006 [Austin Sass], 2012 [Jeff Cowen] and 2014 [Matt Palacio and Shane Romsos] classes are running for four different offices. The fact that they are graduates from this program in no way guarantees them an endorsement from the CEC. It does however provide the community assurances that the graduates have been exposed to many facets of the South Shore contributing to their knowledge base.

The review of candidates is not fair or transparent – FALSE

The CEC continues to evolve and is committed to making this process fair and consistent. Every candidate is being scored using the same grade sheet and process related to Tahoe Future 2020. All questionnaire answers (with the exception of personal information) and their scores will be posted on the Tahoe Chamber website whether or not the graduates sought an endorsement.

Tahoe Chamber will publish Social Security numbers or background information – FALSE

We would never publish sensitive information and will ensure that all personal information is protected. Only the chamber CEO will handle personal information. Candidates may provide their Social Security number as it ensures the background check doesn't retrieve negative information associated with another individual. (For example, one candidate background check picked up several other individuals of the same name with arrest records). Chamber CEO will provide the CEC with a

pass or fail on background checks and provide no details.

The campaign process:

The Independent Expenditure Committee (IEC) is raising funds independently from the CEC and the candidates. It cannot by law coordinate efforts with any of the candidate's campaign committees. Any individual or business can contribute funds to the IEC. The donor cannot dictate to which candidate(s) their funds support. The IEC will conduct its own research including taking into account which candidates the CEC recommends, but it is under no obligation to support those candidates.

The IEC will purchase ads or publish direct mail – TRUE

The purpose of the IEC is to engage in the political process to educate voters on why it believes a particular candidate(s) is a good choice for our community.

Some candidates will be given money – FALSE

The IEC cannot contribute funds directly to a candidate or their campaign committee. Any funds expended must be done independently.

I hope this overview is helpful in highlighting our process that in reality is no different than that being undertaken by myriad organizations across this great nation given our constitutionally protected rights. Materials and information will be updated on the aforementioned websites regularly and additional information provided in the upcoming issue of our Business Review.

We trust that you will value the labor of many volunteers in their effort to provide you with credible information on which to base your voting decisions.

Sincerely,

B Gorman, president/CEO Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of

Commerce