

Voters get a peek at S. Tahoe council candidates



Seven people are vying for three seats on the South Lake Tahoe City Council. Photo/LTN

By Kathryn Reed

MEYERS – Defining the role of a council member and the use of eminent domain were the only questions all seven South Lake Tahoe City Council candidates were asked to answer at a forum Wednesday night.

The event was a bit schizophrenic, as the questions were all over the place and not everyone had the opportunity to answer each one. It left several people gathered at Lake Tahoe Golf Course more confused about who to vote for and where the candidates stand on issues than when they arrived. This was in contrast to the South Lake Tahoe Lodging Association forum the following morning at which the same three questions were asked of the four candidates who showed up.

The last question asked Sept. 10 by moderator Evon Yakar was racist in nature. When candidate Bruce Grego asked Yakar if he was questioning whether race played a role in marketing, Yakar merely repeated the question. The question was: With 70 percent of Lake Tahoe's visitors being from California and many are non-white in California, should this change our approach to becoming a world-class recreation destination?

(Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce and the *Tahoe Daily Tribune* were the sponsors.)

That particular question was asked of the four challengers. Grego said don't change things because of the color of people's skin. Matt Palacio, who works in sales for Sierra-at-Tahoe, said the resort has changed its approach by offering different food choices, and more lessons and helmets to cater to a population that is less comfortable with taking risks. Wendy David did not articulate her answer. Austin Sass said the city is not in the business of marketing, but added the ski and lodging industries are well versed in attracting an international clientele.

As for the responsibility of a council member: Sass said look to the future; Grego – listen to the community; Palacio – set direction; David – have a vision; Tom Davis – focus on the economy; Brooke Laine – do your homework; Angela Swanson – do the business of the city thoughtfully.

Regarding eminent domain:

- Swanson: Use it when all other options have been exhausted.
- Sass: Would use it, but hopes to never have to.
- Palacio: If it's for the greater good. (His family had land taken in the Bay Area to build a bridge.)
- Grego: Won't use it; believes it has been abused in South Lake Tahoe.
- Laine: OK as a last resort.
- Davis: Would use it in extreme circumstances.
- David: Would not be her first choice.

When it came to the demeanor of the council Davis had to be asked the question twice because he avoided answering it the first time.

- Davis: He called this the most progressive council he's been on, that there will be differences, but at the end of the day you stand by the majority decision.
- David: Important to be professional and respectful at all times.
- Palacio: He sees political infighting and believes personal issues need to be resolved out of public view.

Here are some key comments from the candidates:

- Sass: Create a vision for the entire South Shore that people can embrace, know where the return on investment is going to come from, create town hall forums to engage the public, make the trails for biking and hiking easier to get to.
- David: Advocate of transparency, three-quarters of the town looks old, do something with the dilapidated hotels, plastic bag ban is the right thing.
- Palacio: Need better jobs to stop the brain drain of younger residents, raising the transient occupancy tax is short-sighted, supports Tahoe Prosperity Center.
- Grego: Night meetings could attract more input, need more flexibility with land use, never favored paid parking.
- Swanson: Government needs to get out of the way for businesses to succeed, Tahoe Valley Area Plan will be good for the Y, TRPA's Regional Plan is good.
- Laine: Disappointed more policies are not enforced, need community vision, old hotels should be allowed to be converted to different uses.
- Davis: Nothing wrong with representing minority opinion, wants free bus service, believes town is on the right course.

At the Sept. 11 lodging meeting, the candidates were all asked the same three questions. Only one of them was in the room at a time. All the candidates were invited.

Question: What is your position on raising the transient occupancy tax?

- Davis: The council can't just do it; it would have to go to the voters. He prefers raising average daily rate and occupancy. TOT accounts for just less than one-third of the city's revenues.
- Grego: Believes the motel industry is taxed enough. Believes the private sector supports the public sector enough.
- Swanson: Not appropriate at this time. Could see doing so in the future for recreation.
- Palacio: Against raising TOT. Says other locations like San Diego have a lower hotel tax rate.

Question: Are you in favor of the loop road?

- Davis: He prefers cars driving in front of a business instead of around it. Will not use eminent domain for it.
- Grego: Has never been in favor of it.
- Swanson: Wants the loop road. Believes it will bring profound changes for the positive to the area.
- Palacio: Supports it, citing how most tourist areas don't have a four-lane highway with a middle turn lane in the middle of town.

Question: What is your vision for the city to bring more tourists to town?

- Davis: Infrastructure, including complete streets, will attract new businesses.

- Grego: Land use regulations need to be flexible so businesses will come to town. Government needs to get out of the way.
- Swanson: City needs to invest in its own infrastructure.
- Palacio: City needs to remove barriers, streamline regulations, and bring in recreation events in the shoulder season.