

Douglas County water rate drama heating up



Douglas County commissioners on Dec. 18 discuss water issues. Photo/LTN

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Mark Twain was on to something when he said, “Whiskey is for drinking, water is for fighting over.”

And when it comes to Douglas County, the fighting has been going on for years.

“I’m sure that I speak not only for myself when I say that if we are expected to pay for the most expensive little water system on the lake, then we expect something in return. We want to have a say in how our money is spent,” Jim Wire told the county commissioners at the Dec. 18 meeting. “What we expect is more accountability and more control. I propose that you establish a water advisory board with more power.”

Ratepayers are furious about having to continually pay exorbitant prices for water, not get adequate service and being left with an uneasy feeling about where all of their money has gone. The county has been operating the water systems for 25 years, but takes no responsibility for why things are the way they are and ratepayers feel they are being

blamed for problems they did not create.

Resident Dana Tibbetts pointed out that Skyland is paying \$100 less a month for water.

“Why?” she asked. “They are using the same water, the same pumps and getting the same service.”

No one answered her question.

No matter how many customers of the Cave Rock/Uppaway Water System spoke, the commissioners were resolved to vote for the staff’s recommendation on that and the Skyland Water System rate structures.

The vote was 4-1 on the Cave Rock plan, with Commissioner Barry Penzel dissenting. He wanted an advisory board. It was a 5-0 vote for Skyland.

Cave Rock/Uppaway customers will see rates drop from \$202.46 per month to \$172.68 in fiscal year 2015 and rise to \$195.37 the following year.

In Skyland the monthly water bill for fiscal years 2015 and 2016 will drop by nearly 26 percent to \$84.56.

While a couple people spoke against the Skyland proposal, most of the testimony was against the Cave Rock/Uppaway plan.

Most ratepayers anywhere would welcome a drop in rates. But when the reality is rates are projected to be \$300/month for Cave Rock in the coming years, the ratepayers want a solution so their water bill is not equivalent to their property tax.

They were practically begging the commissioners to come up with a more permanent solution and not just a Band-Aid, as well as to let them have a seat at the table for a resolution. They got neither.

John McCall, after the meeting, told *Lake Tahoe News* that

residents hired an engineer years ago to come up with a plan. It reportedly would have cost one-third of what the county implemented and would have been half paid for at this point.

Residents want commissioners to listen to them – not just to county staff because they believe staff isn't relaying the whole story.

Water rates have been on commission agendas for years. The problem at the lake is that there are multiple agencies with their own budgets, so the cost of maintenance and other items is greater than it would be if expenses were shared with a larger pool of customers.

In the spring commissioners agreed to consolidate the lake water districts. But that unraveled when others protested in having to pay for debt that wasn't theirs.

Commissioners agree a long-term solution needs to be created. Commissioner Nancy McDermid believes meters would be one solution – at least to get people to pay for what they use.

But there will always be fixed costs no matter how much one uses so the base rate could still be high.