

# Sides being drawn over SLT vacation rentals

By Jessie Marchesseau

Residential neighborhoods in South Lake Tahoe being used for tourist lodging are beginning to divide the town.

More than 100 people packed the City Council chambers for Tuesday's vacation home rental workshop, while still more looked and listened in from outside the door. The meeting, originally scheduled for 1½ hours, lasted twice that long, with more than two hours taken up exclusively by public comment.

Dozens of people voiced their opinions on the subject, including residents who do not own vacation rentals, and residents who do, property managers, contractors, real estate agents and business owners.

While there did not appear to be a unanimous opinion on any of the topics, it was generally agreed upon that stricter enforcement was needed. However, there was a divide when it came to who should be fined, the owner or the renter.



City Manager Nancy Kerry outlines proposed changes to South Lake Tahoe's vacation home rental ordinance. Photo/Jessie Marchesseau

People weighed in on the proposed amendments and some proposed their own. Many shared experiences as neighbors, owners, renters and managers.

Non-VHR-owning residents voiced the most concerns and complaints with some going so far as to request a moratorium on VHRs altogether. This is not likely to happen though, as City Attorney Tom Watson said such a move would almost guarantee a lawsuit.

In the end, no final decisions were made at the March 24 meeting; however, the City Council received myriad comments and feedback with which to move forward.

"This is to have all sides heard," Watson said. "Both opinions are important to the community."

City Manager Nancy Kerry reiterated how residents as well as VHR owners have property rights that must be respected and taken into consideration when creating new ordinances. She said the city is aiming to balance the needs of everyone, not just serve one group. They are considering how any changes will affect real estate values, the tourist economy, the environment, the community, and the quality of life for residents and business owners. Taking all those things into account, Kerry presented the city's proposed amendments.

According to the city's research, there are four main issues with VHRs causing a negative impact on the quality of life for local residents: noise, trash, parking and the commercialization of neighborhoods.

Increased enforcement of regulations would include possibly hiring an additional enforcement officer for one year and conducting on-site visits to check for compliance. Increased fines, citations to renters and owners, and the elimination of the first time violation warning in lieu of a fine are all on the table.

Another proposed amendment is to provide incentives for owners to use local property management firms as opposed to doing it themselves through services such as VRBO. This incentive would be in the form of lower permit fees for locally managed properties. The proposed fees for properties not having a local manager would be double those of locally managed properties.

The new fee structure would also be based on occupancy, meaning larger homes would have higher permit fees. The council suggested changing the occupancy limit from two people per bedroom plus four, to just two per bedroom, exempting children under 10. The hope is this will help to reduce both the noise and parking issues often plaguing vacation rentals.

Also addressing the noise issue was the proposal to restrict

hot tub use after 10pm as well as any use of outdoor speakers or other noisy equipment or activities. When it comes to parking, the possibility of neighborhood permits was mentioned, but Police Chief Brian Uhler pointed out that it is not possible to limit public parking on public streets. Any enforcement must be limited to illegally parked vehicles.

To help remedy the issue of vacationers leaving trash on the curb for days, the city could require VHRs to have bear boxes. However, there was some concern that this could become unsightly.

The Council will discuss the topic further at the April 7 meeting. The first reading of the new ordinance will likely be April 21.