

Opinions: Ways to deal with bears

Publisher's note: The following letter was sent to the South Lake Tahoe Basin Waste Management Authority from Ray Jarvis the director of Public Works for South Lake Tahoe, Jeanne Lear the Human Resource manager for South Tahoe Refuse, and Catherine Cecchi the executive Director of Clean Tahoe Program.

The South Lake Tahoe service area covers the City of South Lake Tahoe, unincorporated El Dorado County East Slope and American River Watershed and Douglas County Tahoe Township, generally from south of Emerald Bay to Spooner Summit. All three jurisdictions have ordinances addressing nuisances caused by animal disturbance of trash and similar code compliance procedures, involving notices, fines and/or installation of animal resistant trash boxes.

Currently, South Tahoe Refuse provides clean up of trash messes during regular collection routes. This has been a long time customer service practice, reflecting STR's respect for our customers and our environment. However, STR is now tracking and taking photos of trash messes through its customer account system. Last year, STR changed the residential start time from 5 am to 7 am to encourage residents to put garbage out the morning of pickup. This does not, of itself, change the bears' behavior or resolve the problem, but it does make it more reasonable for residential customers to put their garbage out the morning of pickup.

Clean Tahoe, a non-profit organization operating in California, provides additional response to calls from the public on individual properties where wildlife has had access to trash. Clean Tahoe has been cleaning up messes, without compensation, and also provides courtesy notices to property

owners with information that refers to applicable ordinance violations. Clean Tahoe responded to, and cleaned up, 265 animal-in-trash incidents last year and reports multiple infractions on at least 100 properties a year in the California areas. These are usually properties that have placed trash out days before their collection day, often vacation and long-term rentals. Neighbors call them into Clean Tahoe. Repeat offenders and problem properties are eventually referred to City of South Lake Tahoe's Code Enforcement Division or El Dorado County's Environmental Management Division for code enforcement. Douglas County code enforcement staff responds to and issues violation notices in the Tahoe Township area.

The South Lake Tahoe Solid Waste Management Joint Powers Authority, comprised of elected representatives from the three jurisdictions, oversees a wide range of solid waste issues, including recent discussions of coordinating and improving policies to reduce bear interaction with the human environment. At the JPA's direction, City and County staff and staff from STR and Clean Tahoe have been meeting and submit the following update:

Preliminary strategies include:

- Utilize STR and Clean Tahoe databases to collect data on location and number of incidents at problem properties, including photos of incidents. Add Douglas County incident records, consolidate data and map through City GIS department to identify problem areas. STR will merge Clean Tahoe's data into its customer data base so that incidents can be sorted by property address. Incline Village, which has been actively addressing these issues for years, has taken a similar approach by mapping problem locations and animal movement.
- Make jurisdiction ordinances as compatible as possible on compliance procedures. A three tiered notification process is recommended as a reasonable level to make property owners

aware and initiate compliance. Tighten ordinance language to limit the time that residential trash can be placed at curbside; the morning of pickup, not the night before. Require locking of dumpsters at commercial properties. Clarify language on suitable refuse containers.

- Discuss the efficiency and effectiveness of civil compliance, i.e., fines, versus administrative compliance, i.e., service fees leading to installation of animal resistant enclosures. Pursuing civil penalties requires staff time from compliance personnel and ultimately legal staff and may not be as effective in reaching the ultimate goal of reducing animal interaction with trash as the administrative process of tiered notification and requiring enclosure installation. Likewise, collecting fines and then rebating them back for enclosure installation requires additional administrative time. Make the message straightforward and clear – three notifications means installation of a residential animal resistant metal trash enclosure.

- Include waste management as part of vacation rental regulations. Many vacation rentals are overseen by property management companies, which, by and large, handle the solid waste responsibly. Many have the cleaning staff remove the garbage and bring it directly to the South Tahoe Transfer Station. Others may have arrangements with neighbors or friends to place the garbage out on collection day. Vacation rental regulations should address problem properties, using the tiered notification process to eventually require installation of an animal resistant metal trash enclosure.

- STR to work with individual commercial properties for appropriate resources and equipment, i.e., locking dumpsters and/or installing compactors at resorts and retail complexes. Ordinances should require that dumpsters located at these commercial properties must remain closed and locked when not in use or be subject to fines if problems develop because of access to open dumpsters. Multi-family complexes have a

particular problem with metal dumpsters that are both animal resistant and still manageable for young and senior residents. STR is testing several designs that integrate hand leveraged metal doors on dumpsters so that tenants are not struggling with metal lids. In the meantime, ordinances should require that multi-family complex owners, or their managers or a designated tenant, close and lock dumpster lids each night before dark. This may be another area where a fine schedule is necessary to reinforce compliance.

- Clean Tahoe has an existing service fee of \$35 for various services, such as picking up bulk items. It is recommended that this service fee should also apply to cleaning up animal in the trash incidents at properties. As a fee, not a fine, it can be administered by Clean Tahoe and STR through existing billing mechanisms to cover the cost of staff time and disposal of the material.

- Coordinate among our jurisdictions and with other Lake Tahoe and Sierra region jurisdictions on educational platforms that provide a strong and consistent message that “a fed bear is a dead bear”. Incline Village General Improvement District has excellent educational material that can be modified to address our particular community needs. IVGID is also developing a bear/human conflict management plan by working with other resources and agencies. The Tahoe Fund includes bears and trash in its new “Take Care” campaign. Linking with area resources to get the word out can help create the public and community support necessary to move from reactive bear management to a proactive approach that reduces bear deaths and improves public safety.