

S. Tahoe's aging snow removal fleet a concern

By Kathryn Reed

Dismal snow years are good and bad for South Lake Tahoe's Public Works Department.

The good means the aging fleet doesn't have to be used much.

The bad is that the state reimburses the city in part for its snow removal expenses, which means fewer dollars will be in the coffer for next winter. That's bad if even a normal snowfall accumulates.

Ron Corbett, fleet manager for the city, told the City Council last week, "We have a lot of equipment that is in dire straits. This is the oldest fleet I've ever seen." He's been around fleets for 35 years.

A \$20 a year parcel tax passed in 1989 is what the city relies on for buying equipment. (None of it goes toward operations.) In that time 15 snow graders-plows, one snowblower-loader combo and two snowblowers have been purchased. The three newest pieces were bought in 2007 and will be paid off next year.

There is no money in the kitty for new equipment until the current debt is paid.

The city received \$227,753 from the parcel tax last year. A snowblower costs \$750,000. Maintenance of the fleet is costing \$800,000 a year.

"This \$20 is not even close to (what is needed) to replace our equipment," Corbett said.

Voters were asked in 2005 to up the \$20 fee, but they said no.

The City Council in September 2013 voted to go back to the ballot box in 2014 to double the fee. That never came to fruition.

“I don’t think it had a good chance of passing,” Councilman Tom Davis told *Lake Tahoe News*. “Is it needed? Absolutely. Maybe it needs to be packaged with road repair and repaving.”

He said the council’s change of mind came about because other entities – Lake Valley Fire, the library and community college – were coming forward with tax initiatives and that the thinking was voters would not be happy to keep having their wallets tapped.

Davis also said it’s hard for the public to see the need for equipment replacement when the snowfall has been lackluster for the last few winters.

But what worries Corbett is he’s not sure if the vehicles are taxed in a heavy winter, if they will be able to hold up to the demand.

The \$18 million fleet would cost \$30 million to replace today. Corbett urged the council to put aside money for fleet replacement. No such action was taken at the April 21 meeting.