

Letter: SLT needs to rethink motel ordinance

Publisher's note: *This letter was sent to the South Lake Tahoe City Council and is reprinted upon request.*

Honorable City Manager and City Council,

I am writing to you out of concern about the possible new ordinance regarding motel housing. In the past six years I have been involved with working for and advising various properties. The seven different properties opened my eyes to a separate part of our community that goes mostly unnoticed.



Duane Wallace

This part of the permanent housing fills a need for very low cost housing. The renters can be single moms who for a variety of reasons are barely getting by. They can be elderly people who are on a small fixed income or who have health issues that take a large portion of their income. Unfortunately, some of the people who occupy these rooms are mired in drugs and alcohol habits that eat up their money. But many of these have children who need clothing, shoes and a decent meal. In any case these units are all these people can afford as they bounce in and out of homelessness.

I can see why there is concern for the condition of the properties. There ought to be a minimum health and safety condition. There are human beings occupying these properties.

As I have managed these properties or advised the owners, I have actually seen little communities form as the occupants babysit each other's children or share cars. They often help each other ending up working for the same businesses. It is not the type of housing they want or the type of housing we would live in but it is what they can afford. It is all they can afford. As a substitute teacher and a former Boys & Girls Club executive director I have seen how many children are housed in these month to month motels. If it weren't for the Kiwanis, Christmas Cheer and other groups they wouldn't even have suitable coats for winter or shoes.

My concern is that in the zeal to drastically raise the minimum standards that element of the housing mix will either be greatly reduced or completely eliminated. The residents are not an empowered group who will show up at a Council meeting to complain about the poor conditions. They may also not speak up as you possibly take away their only available place to live. They will simply become homeless.

There certainly are motel owners who don't fix up their properties. And they certainly have health and safety issues. There is a feeling that they should be punished. However, as the various agencies in our County add ordinance after ordinance the residents are getting punished rather than the owners. Jobs are bleeding away to other places. On a macro level, states like Texas are reducing fees and laws while we do the opposite. As an elected person myself, I am pushing for reduced connection fees even as our utility is being forced by state mandates to do things that financially hurt businesses and residents. As a result of TRPA and strict building ordinances and high costs from the city and county who have followed suit, the motels here have become a literal museum of the 1960s. The only customer they are suitable for is for month to month housing. These agencies are dealing with market forces that it appears they do not understand. Until job creation and business advocacy becomes the primary

objective there will be a need for the housing type that the old motels provide. Eliminating the motels won't eliminate the need for housing. Only increased opportunities for work will do that. A comprehensive economic development plan should be implemented first. Maybe it is time for an economic summit that includes every aspect of our town. That of course includes tourism that is often reactive and creates secondary jobs but also retail, government and education as we jointly come up with a plan that creates primary jobs. We cannot legislate prosperity but if we are not careful we can legislate poverty.

My request as a citizen is for the council to set reasonable standards but to also create graduated improvement schedules that do not hurt the very families you would like to protect. By making draconian regulations the motels will either become mini black holes or be fixed up to a level that leaves these lower income community members with no place to live.

Sincerely,

Duane Wallace, South Lake Tahoe