

S. Tahoe prefers punishment over prevention when it comes to dealing with animals in trash

By Kathryn Reed

Bear boxes won't be mandatory in South Lake Tahoe any time soon.

Instead, the City Council members on Tuesday chose to continue to react to a problem instead of being proactive. The majority of the council believes mandating bear boxes punishes those who are not creating a problem.

The Waste Management Joint Powers Authority has been working for about a year to come up with regulations that would pertain to all three jurisdictions – the city, El Dorado County and Douglas County.

With the council not wanting bear boxes to be necessary with new residential construction or remodels, this conflicts with what El Dorado County already has on the books. At the last JPA meeting, Supervisor Sue Novasel made no indication the county would want to soften its rules.

“It comes down to the property owner, not the property,” Mayor Hal Cole said.

The boxes also count as coverage per the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

The JPA board meets in September with the goal of adopting an ordinance. In order for an item to be approved all three members must be in agreement.

"I'm OK with the bear-proof containers and not the box. I think they work just as well," Councilman Austin Sass said.

John Marchini with South Tahoe Refuse said bears appear to be getting smarter and learning to open the twisty tops.

He also noted it's not just bears that are getting into people's garbage. Coyotes, raccoons and dogs are common, with crows doing a bang-up job in spreading litter.

Although STR has changed its protocols to not pick up trash before 7am, people are still leaving garbage out the night before. It's put in plastic bags and topless cans that can easily become a buffet for wildlife. STR cleans up the mess on trash days. Crews have cameras and can document the situation so the offender is then notified.

Clean Tahoe, the nonprofit that deals with picking up after other people, is also out cleaning up debris.

The council agreed with the JPA's recommendations for punishment – warning the first time, buy a bear-proof container or pay a fine for the second offense, install a bear box on the third offense.

"It gives us a hammer for repeat offenders," City Councilwoman JoAnn Connor said. She represents the city on the JPA.

Sass said this protocol contradicts what the vacation rental ordinance says. There was no further discussion and no comment by the city attorney.

The council also likes the idea of mandating commercial entities – including multi-family dwellings – lock dumpsters at dusk or at the close of business.

The plan is also to have an educational component so people can better understand why human food and wildlife are not a good combination.

While the JPA had talked about a loan program for people to buy bear boxes, that idea has been tabled for now.

Who will be responsible for the enforcement – most likely STR; and who will send out citations – most likely individual jurisdictions – still need to be solidified.

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In other action:

- The council agreed at the urging of Planning Commissioner Judy Brown to revisit the historic sign designation criteria so the Trout Farm sign might qualify. The sign is nearly 70-years-old.

- The city will be sending letters next week to all property owners advising them of the vacation home rental ordinance that takes effect Oct. 1. The letter will also include comprehensive information about how to “leave no impact”.