

S. Lake Tahoe not playing around with recreation

By Susan Wood

Let's be honest. You'd have to be living under a rock to not know what's important to South Lake Tahoe residents and tourists.

Recreation. Recreation. Recreation.

So, the city – which is now all over recreation – is hoping you won't be living under a rock as it launches a series of four input-gathering meetings to talk about what to do with the South Lake Tahoe Recreation Complex. The site features a main building that by most standards is as old as dirt at four decades.

In a town that worships ways to play and get the blood pumping, the state the structure is in is unacceptable. It's cold, dingy and energy inefficient – costing the city more than \$170,000 a year just to heat and light it. And it leaks. Lauren Thomaselli, who runs the site, had to place trash cans in the gym to catch water dripping from the roof.



The men's bathroom reflects the age of the facility.
Photo/LTN file

"This building has outlived its use," city Parks and Recreation Commissioner Pete Fink told *Lake Tahoe News* after this week's first meeting that brought out about 40 people to share their diverse ideas. The next gathering facilitated by planning consultant Greg Tonello is scheduled for February. Tonello plans to feature sketches of predominant themes.

Fink seemed as pleasantly surprised by the turnout as the prospect of wild-eyed ideas for the recreation-oriented site.

"We could have a SnowGlobe inside," he said referencing the three-day outdoor music festival.

Earlier, Fink had mentioned to the group the idea of perhaps treating a new building on the site as a focal point in town for routine gathering places and for events.

"The one thing we're lacking in our town is a hub," he said Dec. 8. "We might want to take this opportunity and make it

our town center.”

Fink admitted that now's the time for those who are passionate about recreation to dream big with a "pie in the sky" attitude and through time what's been deemed for years in government circles as "the scoping process" will weed out what's secondary and elevate what's primary.

Ideas abound in respect to what to build and what to consider when the infrastructure goes into place.

They include: a multi-sport complex, indoor soccer facility, bouldering wall, zero-energy pool, therapy tub, spa, arts gallery, kitchen, café, gymnastic center, racquetball and badminton courts as well as a place for the U.S. Ski Team and promising Olympians to train.

The mood of those who showed up resembled kids at Christmas.



Retaining a swimming pool is a priority with many people. Photo/LTN file

City Assistant Public Works Director Jim Marino and

councilmembers Wendy David and Austin Sass listened in as the attendees spanning three generations from a junior in high school to seniors seeking a hang out in their autumn years shared their goals.

Teenager Jordan Deas, who sat in the front row, urged the city to make a place for youth.

“Kids are looking for activities,” he said.

Local arts guru Robert Schimmel suggested the theme expand into the arts as a “connected component” and use display areas to promote local artists.

“I don’t know if we want a facility to be all things to all people, but the arts can be a real add-on as practically everything can be done with an eye to art,” he said.

“We need this facility so bad for so many reasons,” South Lake Tahoe Ice Arena operator Van Olson said.

Olson added he’s enjoyed success at the rink since he’s had “to run it as a business.” He advised the city to do all it can to woo the locals who volunteer and make up team sports.

Marino also reminded the group of locals to keep in mind what keeps the city’s facilities going.

“As much as we want a facility for us, we want to build a facility to drive tourism,” he said.

The thought shared by Fink: “If it’s a great place to live, it’s a great place to visit.”

Think sales tax and transient occupancy tax dollars.

A few ideas ranging from grants and taxes to a rich donor and a public-private partnership floated around informally about how to pay for such a venture, but nothing concrete. The council has had no formal discussions about the matter. The

new South Tahoe Middle School track was built under a nonprofit financial structure.

Marino cautioned that while dreaming big is a noble goal, the reality is the group of ambitious endorphin seekers may have just spent \$25 million with shared ideas in one meeting alone.

“If we make it so big, we’ll never build it. We might have to temper it,” he said.

The city staffer reiterated what he heard that a “pool component is huge” from many who came out to share their thoughts.

Marino was deadpan serious when he talked about how motivated he and his fellow public works staffers are to making things happen because the city’s recreation “train is rolling right now.” He explained that after years of working on storm drains they’re ready to dive into something above ground and prominent that the citizenry is likely to support.

“If we want to see a new recreation center on this site, we need to show up at meetings,” he said, as if speaking to those who weren’t there. “We’re tired of working long and hard on projects that get shelved.”

And don’t forget maintenance. For example, the city buys about 13,000 rolls of toilet paper just for Lakeview Commons.