

SLT parade discussion becomes circus event

By Kathryn Reed

While the discussion was about a parade policy, the spectacle was more like a middle school play yard filled with prepubescent teens squabbling over something so inane that no rational adult would understand the significance of the banter.

And, yet, the people doing the bickering were the five elected members of the South Lake Tahoe City Council and the city manager, with the city attorney seeming to be the reluctant referee.

South Lake Tahoe City Councilwoman JoAnn Conner asked for the parade policy to be on the agenda. She organizes parades through her business Golden Bear Events.

In the city's 50-year history, there has never been the need for a parade policy. No one, according to city staff, has wanted such a policy except for Conner. Staff said no one has complained that there isn't one, nor has anyone filed any sort of grievance about how things have been handled, nor have they required clarification regarding the permit that must be obtained to put on a parade.

A handful of parades go through the city each year – the homecoming parade for South Tahoe High School, Slow Rollers bike parade, Conner has put on a Fourth of July parade since 2012 and she does one for Christmas Cheer, and there are random other ones such as the Olympic celebration and Jaycee Lee Dugard's return.

Conner has wanted city resources – like police and fire – to be in her parade, as well as officers to provide an escort.

Police Chief Brian Uhler explained that several factors are considered when deciding if a police escort is required. The size of the parade is one, as is the route, time of day, day of week and other criteria. He said the limited number of vehicles Conner had last July 4 did not warrant an escort.

City Manager Nancy Kerry, when not being interrupted, tried to explain that no city resources could be in a parade organized by a city council member.

Conner vehemently and repeatedly insisted she makes no money from the parades, but instead produces them as a fundraiser either for veterans or Christmas Cheer. She claims the Fair Political Practices Commission has ruled there is no conflict because there is no financial benefit to her. She said the letter is in her file. The city told *Lake Tahoe News* it does not keep files on council members.

While Conner's bank account may not have a positive cash flow from the parades, she is collecting money from participants. She is then able to write a check from her business to the designated charities; the tax write-off would be a benefit. She can also curry political favor such as votes by putting on these parades with city resources. That is the rub, and the type of conflict that the FPPC has not weighed in on. She also has her business name on all promotional material.

It is highly unusual for an elected official to even be participating in a discussion about the business they are in when it is an agenda item. For example, Councilman Tom Davis recuses himself on a regular basis regarding vacation rentals because of his stake in Tahoe Keys Resort.

Councilman Hal Cole took issue with the year then-Councilwomen Brooke Laine and Angela Swanson were not invited to be in the Fourth of July parade. Conner blamed it on the veterans not wanting them. Davis said he spoke with board members of the American Legion and they had no idea what Conner was talking

about.

At the end of the meeting March 1, the motion was made to adopt the policy as presented and for the city to put on a Fourth of July parade. This passed with a 4-1 vote; Conner in the minority.

She nearly went ballistic when Davis proposed the idea of the city putting on the parade. But it was his idea long before she started putting on her parade. Those two went at it verbally.

Conner was adamant the action was all about taking work away from a local business. Cole reminded Conner that she said she doesn't make money off the events, and therefore said it wasn't taking business away.

Conner said in a good year she makes \$200 to \$300 for the veterans. Cole and Davis said they would ensure the veterans are compensated, and would help them raise money.

Councilman Austin Sass said there is nothing stopping Conner or anyone else from putting on a parade in addition to the city's.