

1 plan left for stalwart SLT worker – retirement



Judy Finn has been the go-to person for city planning issues for 16 years. Photo/Provided

By Susan Wood

While it isn't a one-woman unit, those who do business with South Lake Tahoe's planning department have been relying on the same person for the past 16 years – Judy Finn.

The associate planner is retiring this month.

"I have to tell you, this is the worst news to come out of the city for a long time," attorney Lew Feldman said. "Judy's awesome, and she'll be sorely missed. I couldn't be more happy for her. She's so deserving."

Feldman is the king of representation for high-dollar, town-altering projects that have needed Finn's gentle hand and rational guidance to get off the ground. Think of projects like the Marriott-anchored Heavenly Village.

The declaration from *Lake Tahoe News* of her looming retirement sent shivers down the spine of the Tahoe-area collective that relies on her to help them turn their ideas into brick-and-mortar reality.

Finn started as a temporary permit clerk in 1990. She left in 1991 because there was no full-time job. It was in 2000 that she started her current tenure. In 2001, she was promoted to senior permit technician and in 2006 she became an assistant planner. In 2009, she earned a certificate in land use and environmental planning program from UC Davis extension. She's been in her current post for four years.



State Sen. Ted Gaines with Judy Finn the night she was awarded the 2012 Blue

Ribbon Award for public service from
Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of
Commerce. Photo/Provided

“Judy has a warmth and kindness that separate her from many who interact with the public in that capacity. It’s not an easy position. She always goes above and beyond,” Feldman told *Lake Tahoe News*.

And then, the professional care goes beyond the work.

“We’ve absolutely been interested in one another’s well being outside the role of work,” Feldman said as if losing a friendly confidante at the counter.

Some implied the city planning department should brace itself because projects may be hitting the counter in the hopes Finn would work on them before she leaves. Another suggested placing Finn on speed-dial during retirement to get that institutional knowledge at crunch time.

Mick Clarke of Signs of Tahoe, who seemed in complete shock after hearing the news, said he was genuinely worried. Clarke’s thriving sign business has seen a lot of action at the city in its 36 years of existence.

“Of all the planning staff I’ve ever worked with, Judy is light years ahead of anyone. She understands. She really cares about local business people. I tell all my customers to make sure they talk to Judy,” Clarke told *Lake Tahoe News*.

City Councilman Tom Davis, who has known Finn for decades, sends difficult applicants to the planner. He recalled how TJ Maxx experienced challenges with sprinklers and water connection fees, but Finn worked through the process with grace.

The longtime politician pointed out in an age where government can get in the way Finn demonstrates a “can-do” attitude.

“I knew if I sent them to her, (problems) would get resolved. She’ll be missed,” Davis said, while joking he’s “not accepting her resignation.”

Nick Exline of Midkiff and Associates also shared an example of Finn’s empathetic work ethic.

Getting the Landing Resort hotel off the ground was “complicated,” needing a creative solution to keep 40 construction workers on the job while the city worked out how the high water table would affect the excavation depth relative to the final best management practices design.



Hilary Roverud, left, knows it will be hard to replace Judy Finn.
Photo/Provided

“Judy was very aware of issues, and she allowed us to keep working – all because she understood the difficulties of the site,” Exline said of the crew. “It’s a genuine customer service approach.”

The listening skills didn’t end there. Finn kept up on the latest happenings of Exline’s children and shared her own experiences about her grandchildren – one of the personal

interests that will receive added attention in retirement.

The other area of attention will be her tomato starts in the yard. Finn's boss, Hilary Roverud, said she will miss the fresh produce, but it will be Finn's work ethic and gentle demeanor that will be hard to replace. The development services director, who refers to Finn as "a friend to everyone," singled out Finn as having an "uncanny ability to handle situations with unhappy people and make them feel that their issues are important."

Roverud mentioned how she's appreciated the support from Finn "so many times."

"These will be hard shoes to fill – to have someone with that kind of experience who knows the town really well. I don't think you plop someone in the chair, and they become Judy Finn. It's a tough job. Part of the job is regulation. It's the regulation part that you have to tell people the law doesn't allow you to do that. She has a talent for being able to work with people to calm them down. Her calming ability is very valuable," Roverud said. "She's good at finding solutions within the law."

Roverud noted there were several instances in which Finn received compliments from customers and citizens.

Finn plans to stay in her hometown of 45 years.

"I definitely have mixed emotions. I enjoy my job. This is a very gracious community and often times I feel like I make a difference, and I still have contact with these people," said Finn, while preparing to volunteer for St. Theresa's annual St. Patrick's Day dinner. Her service to the church will be another post-retirement priority, along with cooking, sewing, reading and gardening. Finn grows those "tricky" tomatoes as well as herbs and zucchini.

She'll miss her work and colleagues.

What advice does she have for the person filling her shoes?

“My advice is just try not to be bureaucratic and on a power trip. Think of both sides. Think of what the applicants and business owners want. It’s such a short building season here, and people depend on these jobs. Of course at the end of the day, you still need to stand in front of the council and justify your actions. When people come into a government office and ask: ‘How can I do this,’ they’re nervous. You can’t always say yes, but you try to find a way to make it happen,” Finn said. “It’s really rewarding when they come back and say thank you. You don’t expect it.”

(Reporter’s note: Thanks Judy for making sense of convoluted planning complexities over the years. – Susan Wood)