

SLT councilwoman blurs elected, personal lines

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe City Councilwoman JoAnn Conner sat in her official chair on Tuesday lobbying for special favors for her business, though she denied that is what she was doing.

Conner, who owns Golden Bear Events, is putting on an event at the South Lake Tahoe Recreation Center this weekend. She went through the normal permitting process – sort of.

The gym, meeting rooms and kitchen each have an hourly rate.

Her permit does not include the kitchen.

At one point Conner seemed flustered, not even sure that the kitchen rental was even a separate item. Coincidentally, on that day's agenda was an item to finalize the master fee schedule for all city property. City Attorney Tom Watson showed her how the kitchen is separate.

Yet, Conner had been having correspondence with staff for weeks about the kitchen rental.



JoAnn Conner during the April 19 council meeting claims her issue with

the kitchen rental at the rec center
is not personal.

In a March 30 email to Lauren Thomaselli, who oversees the rec center, Conner wrote, "I received the contract for the facility rental for the Home and Garden Show, but there is an error. We do not rent the kitchen for this show as the food vendors have their own set up."

Five hours later, Conner received an email from City Manager Nancy Kerry stating, "JoAnn, Lauren has revised the contract to reflect the change as you have described, no rental of the kitchen."

The two engaged in another exchange of emails on April 13 regarding access to the kitchen.

Kerry wrote, "In regards to the rental and use of the kitchen, your application indicated Golden Bear Events does not want or need to rent the kitchen, which is why the [facilities use permit] was revised and sent to you without the rental of the kitchen. [On April 12], we heard very clearly from the court that it is very important to you and to the court to be treated the same as every other business and not receive any adverse impacts, as well as any advantage or favor. Any other business or person who uses the kitchen must pay the rental fee. The city's permit is with [Gold Bear Events] and you requested the application be amended without the kitchen, which results in the kitchen being locked."

Conner, after the contract was signed, asked for the kitchen to be open without expecting to have to pay for it. At first she claimed it was only to get water to make coffee.

"I just want to clarify the issue of accessing the kitchen just for water has nothing to do with my business. I just want someone to draw that line," Conner said at the April 19 council meeting. She called the Humane Society a separate

entity and said the nonprofit only needed the water for coffee.

The Humane Society actually needs hot and cold running water because it is selling food, and will need to wash utensils. The county Health Department requires access to the water. If it were only a case of potable water, it would be cheaper to bring in gallon jugs than to rent the kitchen at \$25 per hour. (Nonprofits receive a 25 percent discount on rentals.)

Conner claims it is all about a vendor needing access – not her. However, all the vendors are working under Conner's business license and permit. Vendors pay her as the producer of the event to have access to things like running water, electrical outlets, chairs and tables. (However, the Humane Society has been given a free booth.)

The rec center does not charge renters extra for tables and chairs, though event promoters may tell vendors there is a special fee for those things.

Instead of footing the bill for the kitchen, Conner said the Humane Society would have to pay for it.

On April 13, Niki Congero, who heads the Humane Society, emailed Thomaselli, regarding the kitchen: "I think it might be best if we, the Lake Tahoe Humane Society, rent it then as we are the ones using it. When would be a good time for me to pop in and take care of details/contract and whatever you need?"

In the end, an anonymous donor paid for the kitchen rental on the Humane Society's behalf.

If Conner were to be seen doing something special for anyone because of her real or perceived pull with city staff because of her elected position – like getting fees waived, this would be currying political favor and is unethical at a minimum, and would be potentially illegal. She could have made her points

from the public podium and not her council seat to have ethically avoided the conflict of interest.