

# SLT cracking down on illicit massage

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe wants to go after storefronts that claim to do massage when in fact human trafficking and prostitution may make up the better part of their business.

The police department devised a worksheet listing potential criteria. The department in the past has regulated individual massage therapists and establishments, but stopped doing so in 2009 when the California Massage Therapy Council was created by the state. (This reporter is a certified massage therapist.)

The state issues a license that is good for two years. Therapists must prove they've received 500 hours of training from a certified institution.

Going forward the city will likely mandate therapists show proof of the state certification in order to obtain a business license. All therapists must have a business license even if they are an employee.

Detective Jeff Roberson, who gave a presentation to the City Council on April 5, clarified that of the 113 people in town who have a business license for massage, most are providing legitimate, therapeutic massage. And while everyone who calls himself or herself a therapist would have to adhere to the new rules, they are not designed to be onerous.

"I'm concerned about the reputation of our community and the massage industry in our town and throughout California," Teresa Bertrand, owner of Bio Spirit Spa, told the council.

She told the electeds she welcomes more oversight.

This was the sentiment from other therapists who spoke as well.

City staff was careful not to single out any one business, though the ones advertising themselves as Asian massage inevitably were targeted. No one from those establishments spoke Tuesday. However, six owners wrote a letter to the council saying they are legit and would like the city to limit the number of establishments to lessen competition for everyone.

Asian massage is not a modality like Swedish or Thai or deep tissue.

Roberson showed images of some ads for massage in South Lake Tahoe that offer prostitution without using that word.

Some of the new rules under advisement include mandating therapists be fully clothed, that they can't come in contact with a client's genitals, and no condoms would be allowed at the business. None of those things would occur at an upstanding massage venue.

Roberson also expressed concern that the women working at the shady places may be doing so under duress, be cycled through from one city to the next, and are not free to leave.

He is a vice specialist and recently received specialized training in going after illicit massage parlors.

City staff will be working to come up with specifics that will be brought back to the council in the form of an ordinance.

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#### **In other action:**

- The City Council continues to tweak the vacation home rental ordinance. While no action was taken Tuesday, the subcommittee will be working with those affected by the law to

come up with revisions to be voted on in the future.

- The city is going to come up with a policy regarding when opening public comments are televised, and criteria to prevent staff and others from being slandered.