

SLT Public Works – the backbone of the city



Azril Kalik with South Lake Tahoe explains snowplow operations. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe would not function without the Public Works Department. Employees do the little things like change light bulbs, the medium work such as maintaining the parks, and the big stuff – snow removal, fleet maintenance and erosion control.

In terms of staff, it is the largest in the city.

Some of the department's responsibilities include:

- Maintaining and plowing 258 miles of roads
- 115 lane miles of curbs and gutters

- 29 miles of storm drain pipe
- 13 miles of drainage channel
- 1,800 drainage structures and basins
- More than 7,000 signs/stakes
- 125,519 feet of bike paths/shared use trails
- 35 acres of landscaping
- Interior/exterior of 33 buildings, equaling 226,000 square feet
- 348 acres at Lake Tahoe Airport
- Entire fleet – nearly 250 vehicles.

Managers from the various sectors of Public Works gave an overview last week to members of the Citizens Academy. The free seven-week course is designed to give residents a better understanding about how the city works as well as an opportunity to ask questions of staff. (This reporter is part of the current class.)

“We don’t really repair anything, we restore stuff,” Alan Johnson, maintenance manager for facilities said. This goes for the buildings – some are older than the city, which turned 50 last year.

The same could be said of the aging fleet of vehicles, especially the snow removal equipment. The oldest is from 1970. Even so, the goal still remains to clear every street within 24 hours of a storm.

“There’s a misconception that the gate stops the berms,” Azril Kalik, who manages streets and snow, said. “We work 12-hour shifts until the snow is gone.”

The city’s fleet includes:

- Airport – 19 vehicles, average age 21 years
- Parks and Recreation – 43 vehicles, average age 18 years
- Public Works – 97 vehicles, average age 17 years
- Fire – 19 vehicles, average age 12 years
- Other/admin – 11 vehicles, average age 11 years
- Police – 60 vehicles, average age 9 years.

The department is also the lead on many projects in the city ranging from Bijou Bike Park to Lakeview Commons to stormwater installations.

“A lot of what we do is invisible,” explained Jason Burke, who heads the stormwater division.

This is because so many of the vaults collecting sediment are underground. These are in place so the water reaching Lake Tahoe is as clean as possible.

What gets built though – whether it’s with local, state or federal dollars – eventually is the city’s responsibility to maintain it. That is a key factor officials have to ponder before accepting grant funding – will the city be able to afford the maintenance and operation?

In listening to the general public’s needs, the department launched a work order request form on the city’s website so people can ask for a pothole or something else to be fixed. This is intended to be more convenient and efficient for everyone.

In the last year the department has gone through a reorganization that has employees being cross trained and a succession plan created so as upper managers leave-retire the younger staff will be able to apply for those jobs. Seasonal

employees have been hired full time to make all of this work more efficiently in terms of time and money.