

No opposition to STPUD rate increases

By Susan Wood

Looks like the thousands of South Tahoe Public Utility District customers are going with the flow in respect to proposed water and sewer rate increases.

The district scheduled a workshop on May 12 to gather input and provide a presentation on the infrastructure-laden plan. No one showed up.

The capital improvement plan with rates amounting to a 6.5 percent increase for water and a 6 percent uptick in sewer services generated zero feedback. The public absence demonstrates a huge departure from meetings two years ago that created a little unrest.

“I am surprised no one showed up. We put a lot of effort into advertising it. Maybe what’s happened is we made extensive outreach to the community, and even though they had to be confirmed each year, the rates were adopted for five years. We talked about the projects, and it brought out a lively discussion (two years ago),” Executive Director Richard Solbrig told *Lake Tahoe News* Thursday night.



South Tahoe PUD plans to install more fire hydrants this summer.
Photo/LTN file

In 2014, the district sent a five-year notice to all its customers – 14,000 water and 18,000 sewer – to meet Proposition 218 guidelines. The measure requires local governments to gain voter approval to increase taxes, fees and charges.

The infrastructure-laden plan will be folded into a larger discussion when the district takes up its 2016-17 budget May 19. The meeting is delayed from 2pm to 6pm because of the Amgen bike race.

The STPUD 2016-17 budget rounds out to about \$40 million between the two utility services.

A typical consumer will pay an additional \$15.36 per quarter from the \$122.30 water bill and \$94.35 sewer statement. Two years ago, the increase was \$13.62 per quarter.

If it passes the board as expected, the improvement plan for the year appears to be aggressive and ambitious.

Over the long haul, water expenditures call for \$43.7 million over the next decade and \$57 million for sewer in that timeframe.

For starters, the installation of water meters is about halfway done, with about 5,000 more to do.

Solbrig lamented over California's laborious process in settling a low-interest loan to help fund the massive project. Even though the loan is 1.6 to 1.8 percent, "interest payments are significant."

The feedback on the whole metering process has been tenuous at best.

"In general, most people think meters are a fairness issue, and that they should pay for what they use," Solbrig said.

In other words, some customers thought their bills would go down.

But the delivery of water and sewer is different compared to rate setting for electric and gas. It's based on infrastructure regardless of how often residents inhabit their homes. Case in point – fire protection becomes a steady constant need "whether you're living in it or not."



Luther Pass pump station is part of

the 2016 capital improvement plan.
Photo/LTN file

The cost is in the delivery of the product – not the product – when it comes to water.

Solbrig also addressed the specific earmarking of the money gained by rate increases.

“One hundred percent of the rate increases are driven by infrastructure needs,” he said.

Beyond meters, South Shore residents will also notice 105 additional fire hydrants installed in places that are “strategically located to meet the fire departments’ standards for fire flows,” he added. The hydrants are placed alongside the stretches where the new, larger 6-inch water lines lie. The U.S. Forest Service absorbed \$400,000 of the \$1 million plan through a grant designed for fire suppression.

And Tahoe knows about fire.

One of the scariest times during the 2007 Angora Fire was two days after the start when the back blaze reversed and jumped Highway 89 toward the Tahoe Keys in the Lukins Water district jurisdiction. The small company had just announced major challenges in having adequate flows.

Fire districts are requiring hydrants spaced within 250 feet of properties. Some sketchy areas include the uphill side of Pioneer Trail and pockets in the Sierra Tract, Solbrig mentioned.

On the sewer side, the district wants to rehabilitate concrete treatment tanks and replace electrical equipment and motors at the Luther Pass Pump Station. This station sends all of the recycled wastewater from the district over the Highway 89 pass to Alpine County.

STPUD also plans to replace equipment that fails to meet standards, namely for air quality regulations. One mentionable is the standby generator at the wastewater treatment plant, a necessary device in case of an electrical outage.