

Recreation – the cornerstone of South Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

Parks and recreation – it's the toy department of any municipality and South Lake Tahoe isn't any different.

It's all about fun and games for the public, and that spills over a bit for the local staff. Lauren Thomaselli, who runs the department, insists her staff work and play hard. The same went for her day leading the Citizens Academy.

In between learning about the inner workings of the department, academy members played pickleball, basketball, ping pong and spun hula hoops. These are all activities available at the rec center.

The academy is a free seven-week course 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.)

Campground by the Lake and Bijou Golf Course are money makers for the city. (The golf course is slated to open May 16.) Last fiscal year the campground netted \$388,000. It's bound to do even better in 2016-17 because this spring the council agreed to raise rates. The city has made incremental improvements to the grounds, like adding six tent cabins in 2011. The stumbling block is El Dorado County owns the land, so until the city and county have resolution regarding that parcel and the surrounding land, nothing major will take place.

Another recent change, though, to the campground is that online reservations are possible.



A slew of activities are available at the South Lake Tahoe Recreation Center. Photo/LTN

One of the main programs city staff oversees is the summer STAR camps for youth in grades K-5.

“The whole concept is no child left inside,” Thomaselli said. She called the camps “authentic Tahoe recreation.”

These camps are so popular that a waiting list is often necessary.

A facility designed more for the tourist is Explore Tahoe near Heavenly Village. This visitors center has a wealth of information about Tahoe in terms of how it was created, the forest, the lake and history.

“The final message we promote is recreation with a conscious,” Thomaselli said of Explore Tahoe.

Aquatics at the swimming pool at the rec center is one of the core services the city provides. Every **fourth-grader** in Lake Tahoe Unified School District may participate in swim lessons during the school year. A variety of programs are offered year round. A bubble on the pool makes it more enjoyable in the winter. It comes off every May.

Thomaselli's department is also responsible for some of what goes on at the senior center. This is coordinated with the county, which owns the building and provides services like meals and veterans' care.

Special events such as Live at Lakeview are under the rec department's purview.

The city and county developed a recreation master plan that is now being implemented. Douglas County simultaneously created a plan, too, using the same consultant. One thing to come out of that is a joint activity guide for the South Shore.

"It recognized recreation is our economy. So what should we be doing to deliver a better product?" Thomaselli said of the master plan.

A bigger picture item to come out of the master is potentially overhauling the recreation center. It was identified as a need for locals and tourists. It could mean razing what is there and starting from scratch, or renovating what exists. Ultimately that will be the City Council's decision.

Funding to do so, though, is likely to be up to the voters. The city is contemplating raising the hotel and sales taxes to create a dedicated source of income for recreation.