

SLT planners hold builders accountable

By Kathryn Reed

To build or not to build? If only it were that simple.

What is allowed to be constructed and where depends on a slew of criteria. And once those rules are met, local, state and federal mandates come into play. Then when it's all done, the work must be inspected.

That was the oversimplified version of what the Development Services Department in South Lake Tahoe does. This was week five's lesson for attendees of the Citizens Academy.

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.)

To bring home the complexities of what the department has to deal with the class was divided into three groups to go through exercises that employees deal with on a regular basis. One involved a new fence. This requires a permit, but the applicant is allowed to draw her own site plans, which lowers the costs. This process was deemed simple and straightforward.

Another group dealt with Americans with Disabilities Act regulations. "There is a lot of stuff you don't think about, like door handles," one class member said.

The city has an ADA specialist who works with businesses to make sure they are in compliance. The city is also in the process of making sure all of its facilities are up to code.

The third group had to figure out what uses are allowed in the various sectors of the Tahoe Valley Area Plan and whether a

special use permit would also be needed. The Y area allows for residential, tourist accommodations, retail commercial, entertainment commercial, service commercial, light industrial commercial, wholesale-storage commercial, general public service, linear public facilities, recreation, resource management and open space. Categories are further defined from there.

One of the problems the city runs into is people doing construction without a permit. In the last year 198 stop work orders have been issued. Mostly it's people knowingly doing illegal work – like remodels without a permit. There is a fine of \$321 and then the original permit fee is doubled for those who are caught.

Inspecting vacation rentals has become a big job of this department, with 712 inspected since October and another 800 or so to go. Most have failed the initial inspection. Hot tubs without permits are one of the biggest infractions. Emergency lighting, defensible space and handrails are other common violations.

The city has a checklist for owners so they can work on things before inspectors come to the dwelling, so most of the required fixes should not be a surprise.

New to the department is a fire inspector. The 115 hotels in the city limits will be the first to be inspected. South Lake Tahoe has not done commercial inspections in more than eight years.