

South Lake Tahoe grapples with aging fleet

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe's snowplow fleet was breaking down so much this winter that it eventually resembled scrap metal more than it did working machines.

"Catastrophic" is how staff described the situation. Four pieces of equipment are no longer operable.

"By not replacing them, you lower the level of snow removal next year," Jim Marino, deputy public works director, warned the City Council.

The newest equipment – three graders and a blower – were purchased in 2007.

To get by this winter the city rented equipment.

At a council meeting last month staff also explained how other departments need new vehicles – like the fire department and airport.

At the same meeting the council agreed to continue the \$20 a year assessment on property owners for snow removal equipment purchases. This policy has been renewed every year since its inception in 1989. It generates about \$200,000 a year.

The problem is that's not enough money to keep up with needs and escalating costs. A single machine can run \$400,000 new.

That is why the council needs to look to other funding mechanisms

This was all part of a larger discussion about capital improvement needs and how best to spend a potential \$1 million

in excess revenue. Those are projections based on current tax revenue, though the fiscal year goes through Sept. 30.

Councilman Austin Sass said to borrow the money out of the General Fund to get whatever snow removal equipment is needed. However, that's not possible. The city can't legally spend money it doesn't have.

"You can't amend the budget without evidence the revenue exists," City Manager Nancy Kerry explained.

The council could take cash out of reserves. That would take four votes to draw down below the 25 percent threshold.

Normally it would be council saying it wants to buy something and then staff coming up with how that could happen. Kerry explained that a funding plan needs to be place.

That is what part of the May 3 council meeting will be about. The possibility of asking voters in November to raise the hotel and sales taxes will be discussed. Still to be decided is if the influx of cash would be dedicated for something in particular – like recreation and/or roads.

If there were to be a dedicated revenue stream for roads, then the amount that goes to them today could be allocated toward something else – like the fleet. That's why staff is paid to come up with big picture ideas with thought behind them.