

Cole leaving SLT council after 20 years



One duty as mayor in 2011 was for Hal Cole to welcome Amgen cyclists to the start line. Photo Copyright 2016 Lisa J. Tolda

By Kathryn Reed

Planning – it's what got Hal Cole interested in local politics and it's the reason he is getting out.

The South Lake Tahoe city councilman is not seeking another term. When he leaves at the end of the year he will have been on the council for five four-year terms that started in 1994. He was off the council between 2006-08.

Norm Woods is the longest serving member at 21 years – 1965-70 and 1976-92. By the time Tom Davis finishes his term in 2018 he will be tied with Cole at 20 years.

During his tenure Cole was mayor six times, each being a one-year term. (From 1965-68, mayors served six months.)



Hal Cole, right, speaks with Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., at the 2015 Lake Tahoe Environmental Summit. Photo/LTN

Near the end of each four-year term Cole would reassess if he wanted to stay. The passion for the job, the belief he was making a difference and the desire to keep learning kept him in the game. Now, he feels a bit like he's paddling upstream. He's tired – tired of trying to do what's right and have roadblocks thrown at him; tired of the pettiness on the council; tired of change coming so slowly.

“After the (California Tahoe) Conservancy and TRPA went sideways, I said, ‘What is the use?’” Cole said in reference to the **Knights Inn project**. “These organizations are policy-

based and not outcome-based. We played totally by the rules and they wanted us to change it at the eleventh-hour.”

He’s referencing the hotel project that could become a Whole Foods as the anchor. What the city and developer wanted was a project that would have had significant environmental gains and would have been a showcase for the basin. The agencies are accused of meddling and potentially derailing the project; and if it is a-go, it won’t be what it could have been. (Contracts still have not been signed.)



TAMBA’s Ben Fish and Hal Cole at the Bijou Bike Park dedication. Photo/LTN

The 67-year-old reflected back to previous councils where it seemed more like a team, with a vision even when there were disagreements. He liked the discussions, the respect they had for one another.

“This time with one councilmember suing us and putting things in the paper and on Facebook ... you go to the meeting and the tension, it is so thick. To the public we must look petty. I don’t think I want to be part of it anymore,” Cole told *Lake Tahoe News*. “I don’t want to sound bitter. I probably would have retired anyway. But the level of discourse isn’t as rewarding as it used to be.”

Still, Cole has a slew of accomplishments. Redevelopment is what he is most proud of – in particular Heavenly Village. That was a game changer for South Lake Tahoe. It took vision, it took more money than first budgeted, and it took courage.

While locals were slow to embrace the change and ever set foot there, that isn’t the case now. It’s a success in every sense – economically, visually, environmentally and socially.

Cole says the welcome sign by the airport is something that still brings a smile to his face. He’ll even stop when he sees tourists taking pictures and take it for them. It’s a project he started during his one year on the Planning Commission, which was then completed when he was on the council.



Hal Cole congratulates snowboarding Olympic gold medalist Jamie Anderson. Photo/Denise Haerr

Being on council was like getting a second or third college degree, he said. Becoming immersed in finance, learning the science of the lake, the advances of technology – the council afforded him (as it does all members) the opportunity to delve into topics he might not otherwise have been exposed to.

As a builder, Cole had a natural affinity to be interested in planning matters. That is what led him to the Planning Commission, then the council and now retirement from politics.

“I wish I was on the City Council in 2007 when they let (developer) Randy Lane pull permits to pour the foundation when he didn’t have site control,” Cole said of the failed Chateau project that went into bankruptcy and ended up being known as The Hole. “It irks me to this day. He didn’t own the lots. It’s the biggest mistake this council ever made.”

He’s had a few of his own regretful votes. One was when Tony O’Rourke was city manager and he brought forth a spending

mechanism for roads where the city borrowed \$5 million. That, Cole said, was an ill conceived, expensive plan.

Now he's advocating for the sales tax initiative that will be on the November ballot be spent on roads.



Hal Cole addresses the crowd at the city's 50th anniversary party. Photo/LTN

And if he could, Cole would like a do-over with the paid parking fiasco. While he still supports the concept, he admits the city didn't approach it correctly.

Other high points include approving City Manager Nancy Kerry's plan to overhaul the health care system, saving the city millions of dollars, as well a refinancing bonds at various times.

Being mayor last year during the city's 50th anniversary festivities is high on his list of good memories. It was a time to celebrate all of the accomplishments of the past five decades and dream about the future.

Cole's future is a little uncertain. Once he has his Tuesdays

free from council, no more Tahoe Regional Planning Agency board meeting or other city commitments, he is likely to be spending more time on the tennis court and enjoying life in South Lake Tahoe, the town he grew up in, and he'll still be building houses.

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Note:

So far eight people have taken out papers to be on the City Council. The four who have qualified are Patrick Jarrett, Ted Long, JoAnn Conner and Robert Topel. With Cole not running, the filing deadline is now Aug. 17 at 5pm.