

Exline: Renewable energy is the future

Publisher's note: Lake Tahoe News asked candidates for South Lake Tahoe City Council, Lake Tahoe Community College, Lake Tahoe Unified School District, Douglas County School District, South Tahoe Public Utility District and Lake Valley Fire Protection District a series of questions. We are running the responses in the order received.



Nick Exline is running for one of two open seats on the South Tahoe Public Utility District board.

Name: Nick D. Exline

Age: 35

Job/profession: AICP, senior land use planner, Midkiff and Associates Inc.

What boards, commissions, or other experience, including volunteering, do you have?: Master's of science degree in land use planning, bachelor's of science degree in geography, American Institute of Certified Planners, American Planning Association, Tahoe Chamber Government Affairs Committee, Tahoe

Drug Free Coalition board member, Leadership Lake Tahoe. I began a non-partisan, market driven climate change group.

Why are you running for the South Tahoe PUD board?: I believe in developing innovative ideas that support the economy and our community. Through the installation of renewable energy we can stabilize rates and improve/expand fire safety infrastructure. I would also like to create a fair construction fee system.

High construction fees put an undue hardship on middle and lower income households. When a project is halted due to high fees this puts our community members out of work and hurts our economy. I would like to introduce a sliding scale on fees that will ensure everyone in the community has the opportunity to improve their businesses and homes. I would also like to improve community participation in STPUD board decisions. The STPUD board meetings start at 2pm, which means if you work during the day, you can't participate.

Why should voters vote for you over another candidate?: Every candidate talks about rates and fees, some talk about health and safety and too few talk about how renewable energy is the future. We need to take action on those issues and start making the future happen now. In my role as a solution orientated planner I succeed everyday in getting government, private business and community members working together so that innovative projects become reality. Using my experience and determination I will work extremely hard to ensure my plan to stabilize rates is given top priority, that there is fairness in the fee system and to make certain our homes, businesses and most importantly our families are safe.

Through the installation of renewable energy we can lower STPUD's energy bills and fight climate change. Those savings would be used to improve/expand fire safety infrastructure. As we are all aware fire is the single greatest threat we face and we need to make sure our fire department have the tools

they need to ensure our safety.

I'd push for the introduction of a sliding scale for construction fees so lower and middle-income homeowners and businesses are not stopped from improving our community and creating jobs, but are encouraged to do so.

Finally, I understand our community's concerns. My family is a single income household so I can sympathize with anyone that has stayed up at night worrying about money. Our town's thoughts and worries will be with me at all times whenever I am faced with a tough decision.

What distinct experience or competency makes you uniquely qualified to lead effectively as an elected official?: I am currently a solution oriented AICP, senior land use planner with Midkiff & Associates. In this role I work with local businesses, homeowners and with every level of government from the federal to the local level to get innovative projects completed on time and under budget. These projects benefit the economy, create jobs and help the environment. Recently the \$18.7 million state loan to complete phases 2-5 of meter installation was changed by the state. This resulted in higher annual debt payments, which negatively impacted the future borrowing capacity of STPUD. My experience will allow me to assist STPUD with any regulatory processes and to negotiate with governmental agencies ensuring the best deal for us as consumers.

Public agencies have been under scrutiny the last few years for lack of transparency and accountability. What will you do to ensure both?: First, I will work to change the board meeting time from 2pm to a time that works for more people. If someone plans a party when they know you can't attend, you would think they don't want you there and that is how the community feels now. Secondly, I would make myself available. I have publically posted my phone number, address, email and have a Facebook page on which I invite everyone to discuss

their thoughts on our water. This level of openness will enable me to be accountable to the community and transparent in all my actions.

What stands out for you in the current budget that you support and that you would change?: I fully support and would like to see increased investment into our fire safety infrastructure. A percentage of the water distribution system is undersized and does not provide appropriate fire protection. Fire is the single greatest threat we face and we need to ensure that when fire comes our fire departments have the correct tools and are fully prepared to fight it.

STPUD's energy costs are huge. With so much of STPUD's budget being fixed, we need to find areas in which we can lower costs without sacrificing service. With innovation and technology, and through the installation of renewable energy on STPUD properties we could lower our energy costs, which would allow us to reinvest those savings into fire safety infrastructure, rate stabilization and improved conservation efforts. We need to start looking at how we can make money instead of just spending it.

Do you support current legislation for \$15 minimum wage? Please explain.: I would prefer we ask the question, how do we create good paying jobs in our community? We need to begin to diversify our economy because a diversified economy is far more stable. I am very aware that small businesses are concerned about the additional cost a \$15 minimum wage would result in, but those costs would be outweighed by more members of our community having money in their pockets to spend locally. We are a community and with so many living in poverty we need to start working to create a brighter future for all.

Do you support Proposition 55? Please explain: I do support proposition 55. In a globally competitive world, education is only going to become increasingly important for both personal and community success. We need to support education, which

will ensure our economic survivability.

Describe three attributes for a successful board: Rational: In my experience with boards (from every level of government and regulatory agency) I see decisions being made, not on a rational review of the information provided, but rather to check a bureaucratic box. Often times this box checking poses significant hardships to the people. A board should be a reflection of the people and decisions should be made rationally to the benefit of all of us.

Forward thinking: Boards need to be evaluating plans that extend 10, 50 and 100 years into the future.

Team work: Which not only includes other board members, but also extends to the STPUD staff, local businesses and our community.

What are your thoughts about public employee defined benefits?: Having employee defined benefits allows families to properly plan for the future and enables them to invest in the economy. Unfortunately these sorts of benefits are on the decline. I believe that the future of these plans is one that combines the best features of all those currently available including employer contributions, pooled investments and annuities along with the best parts of 401(k)s, including employee contributions and portability.

Please explain your position on contracting out work normally done by staff: I do not support contracting out work that would result in layoffs or a reduction of critically important staff. If the contracting work is needed to assist staff, to speed up projects or infrastructure improvements (specifically fire safety infrastructure projects) then I am supportive.

What is your 10-year vision for STPUD?: Throughout this questionnaire I have outlined my proposals and vision. Now I want to explain how that vision affects our community. In 10 years we will have installed renewable energy both in Alpine

County and up at the lake. This renewable energy will have created good jobs, stabilized our rates and resulted in savings while fighting climate change. These savings will be used to install fire protection infrastructure so that wherever you live, you and your family can feel safe knowing that in the event of a fire you have the proper protection.

As a result of the sliding scale for construction permit fees more of us in the community will be improving our homes and businesses. This will lead to more work for those in the construction field, engineers and landscapers, etc. This additional work will spur economic growth throughout the community as people begin to spend more money locally.

Finally, the board meetings will be held at a time when the community can attend and the transparency I am demonstrating throughout this campaign will become the norm and more people will be involved in the conversation about our water.

What one vote in the last four years that the current board made do you disagree with and why?: STPUD has done many things well over previous years and has kept up with basic needs from a "business as usual" stance. For a time the rates were kept low because of the poorly performing economy but then eventually a rate increase was made. I am concerned that if the board continues working in the same vein we may reach a time when every decision is made from an emergency only perspective.

We should be building for tomorrow and not making decisions from a standpoint that leaves us constantly playing catch-up. I will bring progressive ideas to the board that will keep STPUD at the forefront of innovation and fire infrastructure. I will work to develop a fair construction permit fee system so more of us can improve our homes and businesses.

How many meetings have you attended this year for the board you are running for?: The current STPUD board meeting schedule

does not allow for participation. That is why I propose changing the meeting time to when more people can attend. I have always kept up with STPUD board decisions, as it is also a part of my role as a planner to do so. I am up to date with all staff reports and meeting minutes for the year and have been present at two meetings.

What do you know about the strategic plan, finances, debt, goals of the district?: I have been the lead land use planner on projects with comparable budgets, strategic financing and debt mechanisms as STPUD deals with annually. In addition, I have done a thorough review and met with staff regarding all STPUD related plans and budget items.

What concerns me is that with aging infrastructure the speed at which rates will have to increase within the next 10-15 years will begin to accelerate. Today we need to begin to lower long term cost wherever possible. The area of energy is a large, non-fixed cost in which STPUD could begin to realize savings immediately. With the installation of renewable energy (specifically solar) we could lock in low energy rates and fight climate change. With California's cap and trade law all non-renewable energy will become more expensive. What this means is that as time goes on the savings made will only become greater. We can use those savings to ensure that we don't see the "business as usual" massive rate increases in the next decade.

In addition, construction permit fees only comprise 3 percent of STPUD's revenue, but these fees make it difficult for households and small business to redevelop. This has a negative impact throughout the community because when projects can't start, people can't work. We need to create a fee system that incentivizes redevelopment and creates more, good paying jobs.

Being on a board means working as a team. How will you work with the other board members for the greater good of the

community?: I grew up in the world of sports and the idea of team is fundamental to my very core. Being part of a team means picking your teammates up when they are down, spending the extra time to get something right or running that extra mile. Although there will be disagreements on any board I will never let ego or arrogance get in the way of working with board members to accomplish what is best for the community. Because in the end the team's performance doesn't stop with the board, the team is all of us.

What should be the three main priorities for the board?: 1. Water supply and quality: To provide reliable and safe water distribution, wastewater collection/treatment and recycled water systems.

2. Keeping infrastructure up-to-date and innovative: To make use of any appropriate technology to improve efficiency and ensure infrastructure and other assets are kept up to date/replaced. Renewable energy.

3. Health and safety of our community: To continue to ensure we have appropriate fire protection and the installation of fire hydrants at 500ft intervals.

How do you balance the economic situation of the community with the infrastructure needs of the district?: As a community we have aging infrastructure and a high rate of people living at or below the poverty line. We simply cannot afford to keep raising rates because fewer and fewer people can afford to pay those increased rates. Nor can we simply put off infrastructure improvements or routine maintenance because that will leave a huge unfunded bill for our children resulting in rate increases in excess of 10 percent annually in years to come. If we don't install fire protection infrastructure, we could be putting lives at risk.

To solve these conflicting problems we need to fundamentally change the economic realities of the district. Where possible

we need to lower cost and that is why I am proposing the installation of renewable energy on STPUD properties so we can lower our energy bill and use those savings to stabilize rates, accelerate the installation of badly needed fire infrastructure and improve conservation efforts. The business as usual model will eventually result in huge rate increases, but with innovation and forward thinking ideas we can stabilize rate growth, which will not only help our pocket book, but the environment as well.

STPUD is often criticized for having some of the highest paid public employees on the South Shore. Any comment?: Currently \$16.4 million or 32 percent of STPUD's budget goes to employee pay and benefits. In the private sector you would want your payroll to be between 15-30 percent and as you can see STPUD is slightly above the high end of that threshold. I will work to keep payroll at a reasonable level while taking care to have great staff moral, which will minimize turnover and keep the high standard of service currently in place.

I work with government agencies from the federal to city level. Agencies with a high employee turnover are slower, less responsive and impose many unnecessary and expensive regulations onto a project. This is our water we are talking about and we need to ensure a high level of service.

When it comes to permits for construction, the district has high fees. Do you believe they are fair? Why or why not?: The district fees have a disproportionate impact on middle and lower income individuals. These fees are only 3 percent of STPUD's revenue but pose a significant barrier to improvements. In my role as a land use planner I have seen projects halted or abandoned as a result of high fees. This has a ripple effect throughout the economy. It results in our neighbors who are in the trade fields being out of work, construction equipment not being sold, a reduction in our property tax base and stops the ability for many of us to improve our homes and businesses. I would work to implement a

sliding scale for fees so that every one of us in this community, regardless of income level has an opportunity to improve our home or business.

Tell us something about yourself that people may not know:
Besides the fact that I like to paddleboard at night with my dog, I love to read. It is enlightening to be able to see things from a different point of view and that really helps in the decision making process.