

# SLT recaps storm, applauds its response

By Kathryn Reed

Snowmageddon tested South Lake Tahoe personnel and infrastructure in ways that are still being assessed.

The full impact of last week's rain and snow storms might not be known until things fully dry out. This is especially true of roads and drainage systems.

The City Council on Jan. 17 received an update by department heads about how the multi-day event played out; what worked, what didn't and what needs to be improved upon. Overall, though, staff was pleased how everyone and everything worked. Training was lauded as being a key for everyone knowing their job.



South Tahoe firefighters respond to water in a garage. They use a sump pump to clear the area. Photo/Provided

The electeds voted to declare a state of emergency, which will allow the city to apply for money from the state and feds. Businesses and residents would be able to seek financial relief, too, not just the city.

“During the height of the storm we doubled our capabilities,” Fire Chief Jeff Meston said.

The police department brought in more people, too. When snow removal personnel came to work, so did the mechanics; such are the requirements with old equipment.

Meston headed up the emergency operations center at the airport. It was a fluid situation. When urgent care flooded it was necessary to have a backup plan. When the recreation center, which is the usual shelter, flooded, Plan B was implemented. When the school district didn't want pets at South Tahoe High School, education by the Humane Society was necessary to explain how animals wouldn't damage the school-shelter.

City staff helped Denny's and Pet Supermarket deal with their flooding. The Knights Inn and residences on streets in that vicinity are still recovering. Flooding was also an issue in the state streets. Sump pumps are still running to clear water from under houses.

The width of the roads was problematic at times for fire personnel. Meston admitted there is damage to some of the apparatuses. He said it's either that or risk not reaching a patient in time.

It wasn't until this Tuesday that streets started to be widened. The snow gang was given the weekend off to recover; especially with more storms arriving today.

In preparation for last week the police department had a small boat, motorcycles and snowmobiles ready in case standard vehicles wouldn't suffice.

Cops had their own flooding to deal with when the roof at the station started to leak. Plastic was already in the building since this wasn't the first incident.



A plow works to clear the parking lot at the library in South Lake Tahoe. Photo/Susan Wood

For the first time the city used a drone. This provided near live coverage to the EOC regarding how high the Upper Truckee River was. Had roads been blocked and post-storm assessment been needed, the drone could have provided a visual.

During the chaos regular conference calls were made with about 100 people from throughout the region, including the National Weather Service.

Staff assessed various businesses for safety concerns, issuing one of three flyers: a) all is safe; b) some storm damage; and c) do not enter.

While the bubble on the pool sustained damage, the facility will reopen this morning at 10.

Ray Jarvis, head of public works, said one of the biggest problems was dealing with parked cars on streets. It delays plows and then sometimes a backhoe had to be employed to dig out the vehicle just so it could be towed.

He is going to be in contact with Caltrans to see if that agency can do anything to provide a longer left turn lane, which would make travel safer. This was a request of Councilman Jason Collin's.

Councilman Tom Davis was critical of Liberty Utilities, saying no one was telling the city when power would be restored. He wanted them to be part of the emergency operations center. The reality is if they have their own command post and cannot allocate personnel to every EOC in their service area.

Police Chief Brian Uhler said if Liberty were to give out more information, he believes dispatch would not have received as many power outage related calls.

Other city staff, in talking with *Lake Tahoe News*, was less critical of Liberty.

"Every time we respond to wires down we ask for an ETA, which is done by our dispatch," Fire Chief Jeff Meston told *Lake Tahoe News* after the meeting. "The utility then puts them into a priority system; generally with widespread emergencies they do not offer an ETA."

City Manager Nancy Kerry told *LTN*, "Throughout the event, I spoke to Randy Kelly (with Liberty), who accepted my phone call every time and directed me to the person who could provide more detail as to when the power would be back on; he also provided us a direct phone number to Liberty's EOC that was activated on the North Shore, because power was out and the conditions on the South Shore – snow-flooding – were more

substantial.

“What Tom Davis was referring to is that we have to take the initiative to contact Liberty, we seek out information. Previously Liberty would often send emails regarding outages. Also Liberty does not have any social media presence, which would greatly assist everyone in knowing when power would be restored – or that they are working on it – and people could share information on Liberty’s social media platform.”

*Lake Tahoe News* on the other hand received regular emails from Liberty during the storms, which were then included in the multitude of updates on the news site each day.

Things the city will consider in the future include moving the sand away from the Rufus Allen location so it does not interfere with city vehicle traffic, putting in a device to make it easier to load sand into bags, enlisting the California Conservation Corps members to help, having a conversation with Heavenly so the resort isn’t encouraging people to drive when the city is saying shelter in place, and assembling a volunteer snowplow team to assist those who can’t remove their own snow.



Snow finally replaced days of rain. Photo/Denise Haerr

### **Some stats from last week’s storms:**

- Seven graders in the snowplow fleet went down; but all

were fixed in house

- 2 million gallons of water tested the storm drain system
- 150 tons of sand were scooped up by residents
- The ladder truck was used  $2\frac{1}{2}$  days; it was never used in 2016
- South Tahoe Action Team was called in for the first time; mostly these volunteers helped at the emergency operations center
- On Jan. 8 the fire department responded to 21 calls
- 65 disabled vehicles were tended to
- 16 flooding issues were handled by the police
- 86 snow citations were written
- 11 tows were required because of the snow
- 12 other tows were made
- More than 6 inches of rain fell between Jan. 7-10
- 2-5 feet of snow fell from Jan. 10-15
- More than 100 people called to complain about berms.