

SLT's No. 1 priority – improving roads

By Kathryn Reed

The 13 strategic initiatives that came out of the South Lake Tahoe City Council's strategic planning session last month were whittled down March 7, with roads being the No. 1 priority.

It was agreed a survey will be taken soon, with the goal of having results presented to the council by May. The survey will gauge what voters think of raising the sales tax by one-half percent to be used strictly for roads. It could then be on a ballot this year. (The state sales tax rate went down 0.25 percent on Jan. 1.)

With requiring 66 percent of the voters to approve it, the money would be solely for roads and could not go anywhere else. While there was no proof given, Councilmember Austin Sass said 75 percent of the tax burden would be absorbed by tourists.

Sass also advocates for a toll fee; something the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and Tahoe Transportation District are looking into. He is on both of those boards, though the council as a whole is not in agreement that is a good idea.

Another survey question would be asking people's thoughts about creating a road authority. It would be similar to the now defunct Redevelopment Agency in that the council members would likely be the road authority members. However, the council could put community members on the authority's board. The point of such an organization would be to make sure there is no question in residents' minds about where the money is going. The authority could also have decision making responsibilities beyond just where that tax money is spent.



South Lake Tahoe City Manager Nancy Kerry on March 7 leads the strategy session workshop. Photo/LTN

South Lake Tahoe needs \$3.2 million a year to maintain its roads. A dedicated program will bring jobs – internally and externally. The goal is to improve the pavement condition index. According to Jim Marino, deputy public works director, within three to four years the public would see a significant improvement with a dedicated funding source for roads. By year 15 the money would be for preservation and keeping the roads in good shape.

The city's roads were never constructed correctly. Last week a plow took a huge chunk out of a street – not just a pot hole size section.

Even without a new revenue stream, the city will be spending at least \$1.5 million on road repairs this season. The contract is signed and work will begin as soon as the weather allows. Plus, the city is trying to get as much money out of the state and feds from storm damage. That should at least fund pot holes as things dry out.

The council decided to combine Fixin 50 with business façade improvement and single room occupancy hotels into what will be a new program. Staff will bring back this yet to be named program to the council with achievable outcomes. This is when one-time funding would be used. The city would provide financial incentive for business owners to improve the

aesthetics of their buildings to meet design standards, but those structures also must be up to code. The money will be for businesses fronting highways 50 and 89.

The Fixin 50 initiative was passed when Tony O'Rourke was city manager, but it didn't go anywhere. The hope is it would be better received this go-round because the economy is better, the city is likely to put more money into the program – maybe \$500,000, and a better marketing plan will be devised. With this, Police Chief Brian Uhler wants more enforcement of codes.

Vacation home rentals is not coming off the work plan, but because a study is under way on the subject there is nothing to decide at this moment. The study outcome should be released in May or June, and at that time decisions will be made.

Council wants to make sure VHR enforcement is happening. The 90-day extra enforcement ends mid-March. After that a report will be forthcoming. Uhler said few complaints are made about VHRs. Kevin Fabino, development services director, said the industry is beginning to change and be more compliant.

When it came to the idea of creating one Tahoe county, the council opted to make it a future workshop topic in order to delve deeper before making a decision about pursuing this. A positive is that it would reduce duplicate administrative services. For every dollar in property taxes sent to the county the city gets 40 cents back in services.

Councilmember Brooke Laine, who is spearheading the idea, wants to hire a consultant to gather financial data. Sass said because 51 percent of El Dorado County needs to approve this and that there has not been a new county in 100 years, he is skeptical of its ever becoming a reality and doesn't see the reason to put money toward to it. Councilmember Tom Davis wants to know the costs and political process.

Regarding marijuana, in particular recreation use, the city

needs to have a policy in place by the end of the year before the state starts allowing the use in 2018. State voters last year approved recreational marijuana.

Delivery services are one concern. According to Uhler, the district attorney will not prosecute those cases, but the city could still shut the operations down in other ways.

Community workshops will be forthcoming, then the council will decide what to do. If pot were taxed, there is the possibility that money could go to restore the narcotics task force. For taxation to happen, it could go to voters in June 2018.

The plan is to have a workshop and talk to folks in Colorado. Advice to date from others is to go slow with decision making.

Some call it marijuana tourism. At the one local medical pot shop there are 38,000 cards, which proves with only 55,000 people living in the entire basin that this isn't just a medicinal business.

Everyone agreed housing is an issue; what needs to be decided is what the city's role should be. Councilwoman Wendy David is the champion for this cause. Single room occupancy, vacation home rentals and affordable housing need to be talked about together. It was noted there is limited state money for affordable housing.

Coverage and commodity rights are the biggest obstacles, according to Marino.

City Manager Nancy Kerry mentioned the El Dorado County-led housing task force, spoke of how the city has created a lot of housing projects, and said the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency needs to change commodities.

With anyone allowed to buy here (or anywhere in the United States), the supply-demand issue cannot be resolved. But it's possible to limit second homebuyers as other jurisdictions

have done.

An issue is that old tourist hotels are becoming single residency occupancy lodging for locals because they are profitable.

Renewable energy goals are being deferred to the public, with those advocates asked to bring more information to the council. Creating a sustainability committee is being considered.

Fiber optics – Tahoe Prosperity Center is working on this. The plan is to keep funding TPC to work on this endeavor. Tied into this is the support of “dig once” policy. Ray Jarvis, public works director, said conduit should be put in the ground when someone cuts the road.

Regarding an outdoor events center, Marino believes this would be a huge money generator. Councilman Jason Collin said it should not be a priority.

Staff will bring back a work plan to the council, most likely in April. Other things on it will include airport improvements and possible rent hikes, relocation of the public works yard, negotiations with the county regarding the 56-acre site, changes to development services, financial policy stabilization initiative, CalPERS, communications infrastructure, storm water program and the recreation center.

Workshops are going to be part of this council’s future in order to delve deeper into topics and help determine where to go with specific issues.