

Crusade under way to pass SLT sales tax for roads

By Kathryn Reed

When South Lake Tahoe was incorporated in 1965 many of the roads were still dirt. The engineering at the time called for asphalt to be laid on top of the dirt. That's not how things are done today, especially in an environment with a freeze-thaw cycle like Tahoe.

Bad roads to begin with and no plan to deal with maintaining them has led to the city to have streets that some say resemble Third World countries.

Advocates to raise money for South Lake Tahoe's roads via increasing the sales tax are making their rounds to various groups.

Many at the Progress for Tahoe meeting on Aug. 16 admitted it was like preaching to the choir.

Leon Malmed, who is one of the main leaders behind the city's efforts of Measure C, led the discussion, with council members Austin Sass and Wendy David adding additional facts. Attendees offered advice on how to spread the message and what to say to the naysayers.

The question on the November ballot asks to raise the sales tax from 7.75 percent to 8.25 percent. It will require two-thirds of the voters to say yes. This equates to an additional 50 cents on every \$100 spent. Locals are expected to be impacted by \$25 to \$50 a year, according to Malmed.

While there is no definitive proof, Measure C advocates say about 75 percent of sales tax dollars collected in the city are from tourists. The biggest contributor to those dollars

are restaurants, with Ted Kennedy's three restaurants at Heavenly Village collectively being the No. 1 generator of sales tax in South Lake Tahoe.



Palmira Avenue between Reno and Carson avenues is rated 4 out of 100. It's the worst rated road in South Lake Tahoe. Photo/LTN

The \$2.5 million that is expected to be raised annually could only be spent on roads. Where appropriate, this will also include curbs, gutters and bike lanes. A bike lane is on the street, not a separated trail. It essentially requires a line of white paint and the lane is created.

David pointed to how Al Tahoe Boulevard was rebuilt nearly a decade ago. It was reconstructed as a road should be and still is in good condition. That is the type of work these new dollars would go toward – not patches and pothole repair –

true road construction.

Measure C is designed to sunset after 15 years. This would give taxpayers an opportunity to assess if the money is being well spent.

Two ways the city wants to ensure transparency is with a roads management authority and a roads oversight committee. The latter is just like what Lake Tahoe Unified School District and Lake Tahoe Community College created for measures G and F, respectively. It's community members analyzing the books after the fact to make sure the money was spent as the agencies said it would be. It's an audit of sorts.

The roads management authority, which the council approved at its Aug. 15 meeting, is more akin to the Planning Commission. The main difference is that all decisions will go before the council. In essence the RMA is the one deciding what gets done first. City staff will give input and be at those public meetings. The RMA will consist of members of the public appointed by the council. The council, though, will have the ability to overrule what the RMA recommends.

The plan is for these roads groups to be formed before the voters even weigh in. This is so the RMA in particular can be working this winter – if the measure passes – to start prioritizing projects.

Another advantage to having an RMA is that the state requires jurisdictions to have one to qualify for funding from the recently passed gas tax. Malmed said the city is expected to receive \$134,000 the first year from the gas tax and then \$300,000/year.

At Wednesday's meeting it was noted that so many grants require matching dollars. Measure C would qualify as the city's portion of those roads dollars from other outlets.

The city also intends to work with utility companies which are

doing work that tears up local roads. Southwest Gas in the next 10 years intends to replace all of its underground lines in South Lake Tahoe. The city plans to coordinate efforts so the road is torn up once and fixed to a higher level than what the utility would have been required to do.

The other added bonus is that with a dedicated source of money it means contracts can be long term. This will add to job creation in the area and trickle down spending. This work will be done by outside contractors – not city staff. All projects valued at more than \$70,000 must go out for bid. The local employees will still be doing the pothole repairs, storm drain and other summer work.