

Grand jury critical of STPUD-Alpine County deal



South Tahoe PUD's wastewater ends up in the Harvey Place Reservoir in Alpine County. Photo/LTN file

By Kathryn Reed

The validity of a contract between Alpine County and South Tahoe Public Utility District as well as the amount of money involved in the document were the subject of a grand jury investigation in the last year.

The 2016-17 Alpine County Grand Jury report that came out this summer concluded that the consolidated agreement from 2002 is not valid because only two members of the Board of Supervisors voted on it. This would be a violation of the Government Code.

The other main concern is the amount of money South Tahoe PUD pays the county for the right to discharge treated wastewater in the county. The \$100,000 annual fee does not rise with inflation. It has gone up to about \$117,000 based on additional hookups in the district, with the assumption more water is being discharged.

STPUD General Manager Richard Solbrig on Aug. 3 gave a brief update on the report to his board. The district does not have to respond to the report.

The county does have to respond. The report is expected to be a topic on the supervisors' Aug. 15 agenda.

"Even if the current consolidated contract is not valid, the previous agreements are still valid," Supervisor Don Jardine told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The original document was signed in 1967 and there have been six amendments since then. The consolidated document was to bring all of those previous agreements into one contract.

STPUD per federal law, which is the same for all sewer districts in the Lake Tahoe Basin, must export the treated wastewater. This is to protect Lake Tahoe. Nevada law does not allow wastewater from another state on its lands. This is why all the wastewater from STPUD goes to Alpine County.

It was easier and more cost-effective to pump it over Luther Pass than to go over Echo Summit.

Jardine, who has been a supervisor for 30 years, said none of his colleagues has brought up the contract in recent memory.

"I have not been approached by other board members to increase fees," Jardine said. He is the chair of the board.

The grand jury report says, "It is recommended the BOS request to have annual adjustments for inflation added to the agreement. Alpine County would be receiving about \$248,000 if the 1983 figure had been adjusted for inflation. The 1995 Alpine Grand Jury made this exact same recommendation which was never acted upon. If the 1995 recommendation had been acted upon, Alpine County would be receiving about \$185,000 annually if the annual adjustment for inflation took effect in January of 1996."

Jardine and Solbrig were part of a meeting earlier this week in which the grand jury report was discussed. They are on an advisory commission to the Alpine County Board of Supervisors. No one from the public or grand jury was at that meeting.

What was discussed more in depth was what might be in that wastewater; of particular concern was whether pharmaceuticals or chemicals from personal care products might be leaching into the soil or groundwater. This has been an issue in other parts of the country.

“The USGS has been in the basin sampling for those contaminants,” Solbrig said Thursday. “There have been no findings in Lake Tahoe or through exports of water.”

At the commission’s November meeting, it meets quarterly, it’s possible there could be a recommendation for some of the money STPUD gives Alpine County to be used on testing for contaminants. This will ultimately be up to the supervisors.