

Opinion: EDC thwarting media's access

By Kathryn Reed

El Dorado County is getting petty and personal – and *Lake Tahoe News* isn't going to take it anymore. We are done being silent.

El Dorado County has an image problem. El Dorado County says one thing (that it wants to be transparent) and does another (cuts off access). El Dorado County is void of effective leadership.

The citizenry needs to start paying attention. What is going on in Placerville – or not as the case may be – does affect Lake Tahoe. It may seem like a world away, but decisions being made by staff and electeds roll down Echo Summit to the basin.

It was only three years ago the **grand jury said**, “Early in its term, the grand jury began to see a thread of dysfunction running through El Dorado County government.”

It seems to be a systemic problem.

The county came up with a strategic plan that appears to have been an exercise in futility, or a gesture to look good. The residents are the losers in this game.

The county of late has become more insular. Transparency has been replaced by a guard dog.

El Dorado County CAO Don Ashton doesn't want the media talking directly to county employees, which might be why planning chief Roger Trout didn't return a call about the Meyers gas station project. However, Trout is who Supervisor Sue Novasel and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency directed *LTN* to. The media is supposed to go to the recently hired flack. When asked

about the gas station, public information officer Carla Hass in an email on Aug. 18 said, "The county hasn't received any application or notification for an intent to reopen the gas station."

Clearly, that is wrong based on **today's lead story**.

Ashton told *Lake Tahoe News* that Hass is new and isn't expected to know everything. No one knows everything, but a competent PIO knows where to get the answers. It isn't like she is right out of college, and she's worked in government before. Maybe the blame shouldn't be on Hass, but on her boss. That would be Ashton.

Ashton in a conversation with *Lake Tahoe News* on Aug. 21 essentially vomited all over the publication and various people who write for it. We have thick skin, and are used to scrutiny, rude comments and angry diatribes. What isn't called for is nasty, unwarranted attacks, especially from someone of Ashton's stature.

Whatever happened to civil discourse?

He thinks headlines should not reflect the tenor of a column if he disagrees with the column. He doesn't understand that a column is that one person's opinion. This isn't something unique to *Lake Tahoe News*.

He thinks a reporter should not expect questions to immediately be answered that were generated from a press release that his PIO sent out. (The point of a press release is to get media to write a story; and there is a contact name-number on it for questions.)

He said staff doesn't like working with a certain *LTN* reporter because she asks too many questions. I laughed. Asking questions is the media's job. He said staff is too busy to answer them. This last round happened to be questions related to that press released the flack sent.

He thinks the county should be able to vet stories before they see the light of day. I told him no reputable publication would do that. He said the *LA Times* let him read stories before publication. I told him I didn't believe him. He said it's true because he had a relationship with that reporter. I still don't believe him.

He thinks press releases should be published verbatim. He is wrong.

The Society of Professional Journalists, which I belong to, has a code of ethics. It includes:

- The highest and primary obligation of ethical journalism is to serve the public.
- Be vigilant and courageous about holding those with power accountable. Give voice to the voiceless.
- Recognize a special obligation to serve as watchdogs over public affairs and government. Seek to ensure that the public's business is conducted in the open, and that public records are open to all.
- Recognize that legal access to information differs from an ethical justification to publish or broadcast.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers, donors or any other special interests, and resist internal and external pressure to influence coverage.

I live by these standards and expect those who work for *Lake Tahoe News* to do the same. It would be great if El Dorado County came up with a code of conduct or ethics and actually lived by them.

I think a good PIO can do wonders for an agency. On a regular basis I work with ones who are outstanding. We respect each other and the jobs we each have.

This isn't about PIOs.

This is about a county that is sinking further into an abyss.

A PIO can do many things. One is to help get the truth to the people. The media is that conduit between an agency and the public. Another thing a PIO can do is put his/her agency's spin on that truth. It's up to the media to discard the spin and keep the facts.

Ashton seems to think the media works for the county. He's mistaken. *Lake Tahoe News* does not work for any public agency or even any paid advertiser (sometimes those are one in the same).

We will continue to seek the truth and report our findings. El Dorado County can put up roadblocks, but we intend to plow through them.

Kathryn Reed is the publisher of Lake Tahoe News.