

Residents unload VHR frustrations on EDC supes

By Susan Wood

It was like a back-to-the-future flashback on vacation home rentals at Lake Tahoe. Only this time, it was El Dorado County fielding the brunt of fiery opinions – not the city.

On the same day South Lake Tahoe officials hashed out rules on vacation home rentals within their boundaries, El Dorado County supervisors met Tuesday on city turf to open the door to dialogue on the nagging issue. The topic brought out about 30 people for the supervisors' annual gathering at the lake.

Speaker after speaker on Oct. 17 lined up to express their opinions. Most were disgruntled residents. Others were property managers defending the practice that has turned into an economic gain for homeowners and the jurisdiction.



El Dorado County Board of Supervisors on Oct. 17 get an earful about vacation rentals. Photo/Susan Wood

Suggestions differed. But many agreed the process needs expanded law enforcement and to be taken out of the county tax collector's office. Department head C.L. Raffety gave an informational presentation at the urging of Tahoe Supervisor

Sue Novasel.

When all was said and done, the county committee of Novasel and Supervisor Michael Ranalli that was formed Sept. 12 agreed to host community meetings in the next few weeks. Novasel wants to bring stakeholders together in the same room in order to revisit the existing ordinance.

“We need better enforcement,” said Novasel.

Within the county jurisdiction of the Lake Tahoe Basin, the tax collector’s office reported 575 vacation home rentals in 2015. It has grown to 876 in a few years. Those are just the ones the county knows about. It monitors 15 VHR websites to check for homes listed without a permit. The process takes precious man hours – more than what Raffety’s staff can handle.

“We are moving into a shared community. It’s an ongoing problem everywhere,” Novasel said.

With the growth of the shared-home industry comes investigations of wrongdoing spun out of complaints that involve an overburdened county sheriff’s department. The county has opened 128 investigations this year. Violations numbered 129 in 2015 and 59 a year ago as the permitting process was being addressed.

“It’s been incredibly difficult to watch the (city’s) process knowing the tsunami is coming our way,” Novasel said, adding “an overhaul” of the county’s rules is necessary.

El Dorado County’s current ordinance mandates two people per bedroom plus four additional visitors per residence; prohibits spa use between 10pm and 8am; dictates when trash can be taken to the curb; regulates the posting of the permit; demands a local contact person within a one-hour’s drive from the rental; restricts parking to only the driveway; and requires noise kept to a level not deemed “excessive.”

Violators may get a warning on a first offense, but will be fined \$250 on the second. The third complaint may lead to a \$1,000 fine and finally a fourth could result in the permit being revoked.

A citizen's group called the Peaceful Tahoe Coalition formed because neighbors of the vacation home rentals got fed up by outrageous behavior by some visitors.

Among the demands, John Adamski outlined a few suggestions including a cap on the number of units, tighter restrictions and more "teeth" in enforcing the law.

Adamski shared a concern observing the city still doesn't have a final ordinance.

"I don't want to see that happen with the county," he said.

Time is of the essence for some residents.



County residents tell elected officials what they think of VHRs. Photo/Susan Wood

"We're being terrorized in our neighborhoods," Carrie Williams told the board. She described a disruptive street in which she lives where one neighbor's dog was killed "on leash" by a vehicle racing down the road.

In another instance, gun shots were fired into the night.

And yet another, 30 visitors showed up to rent a two-bedroom home.

"This has gotten out of control," Williams said.

Ed Miller of the Meeks Bay Fire Protection District said he wants more order.

"It's a quality of life issue," he said.

Miller shared a story of disrespect when renters on his street blocked plows, prompting the driver to return to no avail because vehicles were still blocking the road.

"The entire neighborhood didn't get plowed," he said.

Miller would like to see the "Good Neighbor" brochure the county uses to say more than South Lake Tahoe. The county seems to have ignored its reach goes to the West Shore.

A 55-year resident on the South Shore, Janet McDougall told the board it should take the ordinance out of the tax collector's office because it's a zoning issue.

"This is a serious problem," the former South Lake Tahoe legal analyst said. "This is completely inappropriate from a land-use perspective."

She also lamented over the practice pitting residents against visitors.

Leona Allen added to the list of unlawful observations. These incidents range from strewn trash to strippers showing up to perform lewd acts to urinating in public to cigarettes tossed

off decks. Extinguishing the latter is critical to Allen considering her involvement with the Lake Valley Fire Protection District.

“Vacation home rentals aren’t going anywhere. I get that. But neither are we,” she said.

Allen insisted the county set up a community service division within the sheriff’s department to enforce the new rules.

“Something’s gotta change,” Rick Mapes said with a sigh.

Mapes runs a snow removal company and must get up at 4am to conduct his business – a difficult task when neighbors are partying and creating a ruckus into the night.

His wife, Jamie Mapes, attended several community meetings over a decade ago when the city was undergoing the formation of its ordinance.

Still, property managers got up to voice their support of the industry, careful not to condone the types of behavior mentioned. Those who spoke appeared to genuinely care about being a part of the solution.

Kathy Jo Liebhardt not only runs Tahoe Destinations, she owns a vacation home and is “saddened to hear” the stories.

She cautioned the county on placing a limit on the number of them.

“Capping is not going to do anything,” she said.

In the meantime, her rules are strict and non-negotiable.

“I have no problem fining and evicting,” Liebhardt said, adding she is “not going to put up with that crap.”

Another property manager, Josh Priou admitted to feeling sheepish about even stepping up to the podium.

"I feel like crap after hearing everybody's horror stories," he said.

Nonetheless, he reminded the crowd renting homes is still considered residential use, not commercial.

The tourism industry drives Lake Tahoe.

"Lake Tahoe is a huge vacation rental destination," he said.

Priou has been involved in the tourism industry for 24 years – half of that time renting homes in the marketplace. He likes "to provide an experience to the visitor."

Shaken by the homeowners' stories of unruly vacation home renters, Ranalli turned to county Counsel Michael Ciccozzi asking if the board may place a moratorium on permitting new rentals until the county figures out its changes to the ordinance.

"I'm bothered," Ranalli said.

Ultimately, the board shied away from the suggestion but agreed to move on the matter sooner rather than later.

With that, Raffety will host a public meeting Nov. 1 at 2pm in the South Lake Tahoe Library at 1000 Rufus Allen Blvd. to review the vacation home rental policy.

In other action, the Board of Supervisors:

- Heard an economic report on the impact of e-commerce on brick and mortar retail space and how it relates to land-use planning. Chief Administrative Officer Don Ashton requested two outside economic advisors provide the study that highlighted the need for the county to accommodate such a shift.

- Watched a presentation from a land-use planning team providing a glimpse into the county's Economic Development

plan with a new website campaign coined "Elevate to El Dorado, a great place to live, work and play." The \$14,000 campaign is intended to coincide with the county's strategic plan.

- Observed a silent protest from the El Dorado County Public Employees union as almost a dozen members sitting a short time in the audience came with signs reading "Fair Contract Now" and "Negotiate."