

SLT about to set moratorium on VHRs

By Kathryn Reed

Data. It's the four-letter word that could make the difference in the world of vacation home rentals in South Lake Tahoe.

Instead of making arbitrary rules based on emotion, at least three City Council members want facts to guide their decision-making.

Mayor Austin Sass with his pouting, fidgeting and lack of professionalism toward his colleagues on Tuesday showed why the gavel needs to change hands in December.

Sass has been lobbying for substantive change to the rules governing short-term rentals since he was elected three years ago. He was hoping in his one-year stint as mayor to have that change in place. He's not going to get what he wanted.

While he kept asking if the first reading of the new ordinance would take place Nov. 17, he was repeatedly told by the city attorney the substance of the changes would require a first reading to be down the road. That meant that no matter the outcome this week, there wasn't time for Sass to get in place everything he wanted while having the title of mayor.

He was beside himself that his peers were changing their minds and others never agreed with him.



City Councilman Austin Sass at the Oct. 17 meeting did not get his way about vacation rentals. Photo/Kathryn Reed

While two weeks ago it appeared there were three votes to implement a density rule where VHRs could not be closer than 150 feet to each other, Sass was the lone backer of that idea this week.

It's hard to know if what's on the books today works because data has been elusive. The council has had a habit of making changes to the ordinance based on the loud chorus of those who don't like VHRs. The problem is the city didn't have facts to corroborate those stories; or evidence to show they had even tried to address the complaints filed.

Nor were those tasked with enforcing the rules seeming to do their job because the same rental houses keep being the subject of public outcry.

Councilman Jason Collin has been harping on the need for data-driven decision making. Councilwoman Brooke Laine is echoing that sentiment. Her main soapbox has been all about enforcement and wanting to prove it is or isn't effective.

Collin repeatedly said it's time to "hit the pause button"

with VHRs in order to figure out what is working.

That could come next Tuesday at a special council meeting. The four will meet at 5pm Oct. 24 to vote on an urgency ordinance. (Councilman Tom Davis recuses himself from VHR discussions because of his interest in Tahoe Keys Resort.) It's expected that the number of VHRs on the books as of that night will be the limit for a 45-day period. For the emergency law to take effect, all four must vote for it.

City Attorney Nira Doherty said she will come back with evidence as to why the urgency ordinance is lawful. It's possible the bear box mandate could be wrapped into that ordinance because health and safety issues could be cited.

The council could vote to extend that moratorium for a year or enact something else at the 45-day mark.

At the Nov. 7 regular meeting other aspects of the VHR ordinance will be discussed. This includes the three strikes and the permit is revoked rule, higher fines, increased fees for more enforcement, rules regulating owners using their dwelling and more.

Occupancy was a sticking point. This gets back to Collin wanting data to show the type of residences and the number of people in a unit causing X infraction. He broached the idea of square-footage possibly being a better gauge for the number of people allowed than bedroom counts. That issue will warrant further discussion next month.

Eliminated from the ordinance on Tuesday were all regulations pertaining to those who rent a room while staying on the premise. Those shared rentals will be the subject of a future ordinance unto themselves.