

Opinion: STPUD overcoming multiple challenges

By Richard Solbrig

With the new year just around the corner, now is a great time to reflect on all that has happened at South Tahoe Public Utility District in 2017.

This year the district became the first water and wastewater provider in the Tahoe basin to produce its own hydroelectricity. Hydroelectricity uses the flow of water to generate power. The district is required by law to export all of our treated wastewater out of the basin. We are now capturing energy as water flows from the top of Luther Pass down 2,200 feet into Alpine County.

We currently have the capacity to produce 381,000 kilowatts of renewable energy each year, which will power about 55 homes. This also saves 100 tons of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide from entering our atmosphere. The hydroelectric portion of the project was partially grant funded and will pay for itself within eight years. This is a win-win for our community and the environment.

The big winter of 2017 presented many challenges for our community. At the wastewater treatment plant we saw a 33 percent increase in water flow into the plant from storm water flowing into our aging manholes and sewer pipes. The plant almost reached maximum operating capacity during the intense rain on snow events.

Due to the exceptional work of our crews during flooding and power outages we were able to provide uninterrupted, safe and reliable drinking water and wastewater treatment for our customers.

We had a busy summer repairing and improving our sewer system, but with an aging system like ours, we will be renewing our infrastructure for decades to come. We continue to assess our manholes, pipes and pumps to prioritize upgrades moving forward.

You may have seen us in your neighborhood as we installed fire hydrants and water meters. Living in the forest, fire protection is a top priority for our community. As such, we installed 46 new fire hydrants. We also installed 1,200 water meters to meet the state mandated deadline of a fully metered system by 2025. It will take three more years to install the remaining 4,000 meters.

Complying with state mandates and updating an aging infrastructure can come with a big price tag. Over the last three years, the district has successfully secured \$6.7 million in grant funding and over \$35 million in low interest loans to help offset costs to our customers while providing reliable service.

From all of us at the district, have a wonderful holiday and thanks for a great year.

Richard Solbrig is the general manager of South Lake Tahoe Public Utility District.