

Affordable housing – lots of talk, little action

By Kathryn Reed

An annual salary of \$80,000 is what is required to rent a two-bedroom apartment in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Kings Beach and South Lake Tahoe were called the two poverty pockets in the basin.

These dire circumstances were illustrated by Heidi Hill Drum of the Tahoe Prosperity Center.

“At least 30 percent of the community is living at 150 percent of the federal poverty line. That is \$36,000 a year for a family of four,” Drum said at this week’s TRPA meeting.

She gave a presentation Jan. 23 to the South Lake Tahoe City Council and then on Jan. 24 to the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board. Joining her in Kings Beach at the TRPA meeting were representatives of the Mountain Housing Council based on the North Shore.

“We don’t want people living in motels or in trailers held together with duct tape,” Drum told the TRPA.

The nonprofit she heads up plans to create a demonstration affordable housing project. But like so much in the basin, the wheels of progress move slowly. While the plan is to turn a South Lake Tahoe hotel into affordable housing, no hotel has been selected, no developer is on board, no money has been secured to pay for it, there is no plan to decide who would get to live there, let alone there being an opening day.

“We’re just starting, so all these questions are to be answered during the first year of the process. We want it to be a very high-profile, public process,” Drum told *Lake Tahoe*

News.

While there have been endless studies, a litany of meetings and multiple task forces put together, little has been done to solve the issue. (*Lake Tahoe News* ran an entire series on the topic in 2017.)

The lack of affordable housing is not an issue that is unique to the Lake Tahoe Basin, but there are constraints here other locales don't have.

Tahoe has limited land to build on. It also has some of the most restrictive development requirements in the country, along with high permit fees. This in part is where TRPA might play a role in affordable housing. It could be through development rights or bonus units.

"We need to look at our own policy and development rights to make sure we are not a hindrance or at least we're not the reason projects are not going forward," TRPA board Chairman Jim Lawrence said.

California voters will be presented with an affordable housing bond in November. Thirteen counties will also have housing bonds on the ballot.

The day before the TRPA meeting the Nevada Legislature's interim affordable housing committee met for the first time this year.

The *Las Vegas Review-Journal* reported, "U.S. Census Bureau data from 2016 shows nearly half of all renters in Nevada are cost burdened, meaning they spend more than 30 percent of their income on utilities and rent or mortgage. And recent reform of the federal tax code has devalued tax credits that incentivize private investors to help build apartments for low-income families."

Austin Sass, who is South Lake Tahoe's rep on the TRPA board,

said, "We literally need close to 1,000 units to satisfy the hourly workers in this community. That sounds like projects or a big apartment. Given the density requirements, I'm not sure where we go. At the end of the day it doesn't seem like there is a solution to put a dent in the housing problem."

Affordable housing advocates have an eye toward Colorado, which is considered a leader in this arena. Ski resorts there have started to put tiny houses on campgrounds for employees.

Of the four members of the public who spoke to this issue at Wednesday's TRPA meeting, one from Tahoe City said affordable housing has been a problem since the 1970s. He added that he's trying to put a project together, but the "process is cumbersome." Someone else said it's time the ski resorts are held more accountable.

With the Lake Tahoe-Truckee area being a tourist destination, the problem is exacerbated with people wanting a second home here that stays vacant much of the year or is rented out to tourists – not locals.

In the Truckee-North Shore area, it was stated that 50 percent of the single family residents sit vacant 68 percent of time.

But this isn't new. Twenty years ago it was reported that 70 percent of the homes in South Lake Tahoe were not occupied by full-time residents.

Never part of the affordable housing discussion is wages or whether employees should expect to live and work in the same town.