

LT Humane Society's future in state of flux

By Kathryn Reed

It will take the will of community members to make the Lake Tahoe Humane Society relevant, solvent and functioning without a cloud of distrust. Today it is teetering on becoming just a memory.

A handful of people gathered Thursday at the South Lake Tahoe office of the 51-year-old nonprofit, begging the board not to shut down the Humane Society.

The three-member board – Sue Pritchett, Lorna Lefler and Kim Stephenson – were at the helm when former Executive Director **Niki Congero** allegedly stole more than \$100,000. She was fired a year ago this month. The case rests with the El Dorado County District Attorney's Office.

In the past year, the three have done nothing to build the community's trust. They have not taken control. They have implemented few new policies. They have not brought on new board members. They have not tried new fundraising techniques.

They admit to being exhausted and burned out.



Lake Tahoe Humane Society board members Lorna Lefler and Sue Pritchett on March 29 express a willingness to move on. Photo/Kathryn Reed

“I can’t think of anything we haven’t done,” Pritchett said when asked what the board is doing to be solvent. Yet specifics were in short supply, and ultimately it was evident little has been done.

At least three people on Thursday expressed interest in keeping the Human Society’s doors open. Wendy Jones said she would help keep the Disaster Animal Response Team viable. After Hurricane Katrina the federal government said cities had to have a plan to care for animals during an emergency. However, Fire Chief Jeff Meston told *Lake Tahoe News* the city has functioned just fine without the Humane Society and wasn’t even aware of its DART group.

Others at the gathering questioned how the Humane Society had the audacity to simply give away crates that cost more than \$100. Or why the trash service was canceled, which then led to

wild animals getting into the garbage. This all occurred in the last week.

The board appears to be on a path of downsizing, purging assets and throwing in the towel.

The **board fired** the last remaining staff member. They have paid off some debt. They would all like to resign. They have contemplated selling the office on Emerald Bay Road that is paid for.

It was only about three weeks ago that Pritchett even asked Judy Brown, the now former office manager, how to go about changing the bylaws. Brown told her it's a complex process. Pritchett didn't pursue it further.

The bylaws are an issue because they put a great deal of power into the executive director's hands. This was a problem when Congero was at the helm. It's not known why the board, which is the boss of any employee, has not made the changes to prevent another fiasco.

Brown became the interim executive director last summer and at that time was directed to come up with a budget for the last six months of the year as the agency transitioned from a fiscal year starting July 1 to being on a calendar year. Revenues did surpass expenses for those six months, but that is also the time when the bulk of the income comes in.

The relationship between Brown and the board has completely soured, but why is a mystery.

Board members said they don't know how to use the office computer or get onto the website. They didn't even know where a copy of the bylaws reside.

When Brown was there she kept documents like that in a folder on the desk because she knew the public had a right to view them if requested.

Stephenson, who came to the meeting late, had a better handle on the financials and was able to answer some questions her colleagues couldn't, even though Pritchett is the treasurer and Lefler is the president.

There is about \$40,000 in the bank account. A hard loan of \$180,000 that was secured last year comes with a \$1,500/month payment for 10 years. Veterinarians are owed about \$20,000. Those aren't the only debts, though.

The board didn't have a definitive dollar figure March 29 for what is owed, nor what the operating budget is. The board's only plan to pay the bills is to sell the building.

Lefler revealed, "Donations never covered everything."

In other words, expenses were always more than the revenue. This became even more apparent when three years ago the board bought the building with money that had been bequeathed to the Humane Society. (Lefler and Pritchett were on the board at that time.) This meant the cash reserves were drawn down by more than \$300,000.

Lefler said this was done on the advice of a financial consultant.

The board intends to schedule a meeting soon with the desire to have prospective board members come forward, as well as volunteers. The current board is ready to walk away and turn everything over to others. For more information, to donate or learn about being a board member, email info@laketahoehumanesociety.org or call 530.542.2857.