

Opinion: SLT deserves better council members

By Kathryn Reed

Thank goodness the employees of South Lake Tahoe are proficient at their jobs because the elected officials are anything but that.

Two employees report directly to the five council members – the city manager and the city attorney. This council has managed to run both of these women off.

One has to wonder if the council's actions will spill over to the department heads and then down the ladder.

Former City Manager Nancy Kerry assembled a capable team, having hired all but one of the directors. Plus, there are employees who have been with the city for decades.

Still, it depends where one works as to whether things are chugging along smoothly or sputtering in chaos.

Part of this has do with the alleged poison pill who helped usher the city manager out the door.

Remember how on the last council meeting **Mayor Wendy David blew it** with calling a special closed session meeting? It was not agendized properly so it could not be held on March 6.

On March 10, *Lake Tahoe News* emailed her asking: Was the meeting solely your idea? David's response was, "No, I was contacted by our city clerk and asked to call this meeting because of an anticipated litigation. Only the mayor can call for a special meeting. I gave my approval to call this special meeting."

This is highly unusual. Anticipated litigation usually goes

through the city manager or city attorney. Though, the city clerk could have been the one bringing the litigation.

David was also asked if the litigation item would be on a future agenda – after all, somehow it was so urgent it required a special meeting. David said she didn't know. If she doesn't know, who the heck does?

It's not on the agenda for today, nor was that meeting ever rescheduled any time in the last two weeks.

So, one has to wonder did the threat of litigation disappear with Kerry's resignation? In other words, did the city clerk's "problem" no longer work for the city.

The clerk, Suzie Alessi, has an interesting position. She's elected. She has no set hours. She can come and go when she wants. She has the luxury to show up for work or not. No matter what, she still collects her paycheck.

Of the 478 incorporated cities in California, about 90 have an elected city clerk. Maybe it's time South Lake Tahoe joined the majority of cities and did away with this elected official and brought in a professional who would be accountable to a real boss, not the electorate who pays no attention and has almost zero recourse to get rid of this individual.

As for the city attorney, she is choosing to quit. It's possible the council would have shown her the door after the questionable legal advice she's provided. If only there were some teeth to the Brown Act. It's up to the district attorney to enforce the open meeting law, and he's up for re-election this year – though he is being challenged by one of his deputies.

Anyway, interim City Attorney Nira Doherty, who was once the deputy city attorney here, has given her notice. Her staff report for today's meeting says, "I recommend the City Council discuss its city attorney position as I will be returning to

my practice with various other cities and am unable to serve [as] the city's permanent city attorney."

Doherty is a partner with Burke, Williams and Sorensen. That firm was hired last fall to take over when Tom Watson left the city. Doherty was assigned to South Lake Tahoe because she was familiar with its issues. The firm has also worked for the city as special counsel for various cases.

This means the city is in need of a city manager and city attorney.

The City Council seems to have run both women out of town for different reasons, and reasons that remain shrouded in secrecy.

It's a bit of a soap opera these days with the electeds – it's more like "Days of Our Lives" or "As the World Turns."

As one staff member told *Lake Tahoe News*, "Now we are faced once again with leadership change, which will delay any forward progress on any key issues as new leadership will be very conservative until a certain comfort zone is realized. Couple that with a council leadership change coming in November and forward progress may be a long time in limbo. We as staff are not in chaos, we know what we are doing, and we know what needs to be done. It just seems that there is always personal conflict invading plans and process. No holistic thinking within the leadership."

Some fear a paralysis is beginning to grip the city which will stall the momentum that had been generated under Kerry's leadership. The group in town that is so good at saying no to everything, but never has any answers or solutions, might be able to take over with the leadership vacuum at the council level.

It's so bizarre that on today's agenda is the item "discussion and possible direction/action regarding a cannabis ordinance

and regulations.” There is no staff report – no supporting documents.

Lake Tahoe News asked David, Doherty and acting City Manager Jeff Meston to explain where the supporting documents are and what exactly the council would be taking action on. No one responded.

Ultimately, an agenda is up to the city manager to approve.

The council can't legally vote on anything regarding the cannabis ordinance because the public has not been made aware of what would be voted on. They can, however, give direction.

Councilmembers Brooke Laine and Tom Davis were the cannabis subcommittee members. Laine has been lobbying for her colleagues to move forward with writing an ordinance for recreational marijuana. Her colleagues, for reasons they have not expressed, are dragging their feet and seem to be playing politics as they let Laine flounder by herself.

Three members of this council are up for re-election in November – David, Davis and Austin Sass.

My predictions:

- David won't run because at 70 years old she's never lost an election and doesn't have the ego to handle doing so now. She will have to be accountable for running one of the better city managers out of town and spending about \$300,000 in taxpayer money to do so, and for reasons that still have not come to light. David is a nice woman who has done wonders in the social services area, but clearly is not a leader and is so far in over her head on council it's scary. We need a leader.

- Davis will run because the council is his life. After 20 years or so, it's time for him to go. But he'll run. And depending on who else does, he just might get re-elected.

· Sass will campaign on having gotten rid of Kerry. There are so many anti-Kerry folks – many who are also in the “just say no” crowd – that they were celebrating her departure. It remains to be seen if there are enough of those people to vote for Sass.

It's time the residents of South Lake Tahoe become more engaged before it's too long of a climb to crawl out of the abyss we seem to be slipping into. Anyone can run for office when things are sailing along smoothly. True leaders jump in to right the ship, not sink it or let it flounder.

Here's to hoping there are at least three new names on the ballot in November for South Lake Tahoe City Council because from where I'm sitting I'm scared for our little town based on who's running the show today.