

SLT fire chief wants money for his department

Publisher's note: *This is the first of two stories about the South Lake Tahoe Fire Department.*

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe's fire safety is lacking. That's what the fire chief says.

"The city had set a goal of a response for 90 percent of all calls in four minutes or less. We meet that goal about 20 percent of the time. It is a really, really terrible number," Fire Chief Jeff Meston told *Lake Tahoe News*.

It's a staffing and money issue. In 2014, the city closed station No. 2 near South Tahoe Middle School. Ambulances are still there, but no firefighters.

When Meston took over as chief in fall 2013 the department had been reorganized so it had shift commanders instead of battalion chiefs. This was something the rank and file members lobbied for, and in turn they got better raises.

Meston saw that this command structure wasn't working and urged the return of battalion chiefs, as most fire departments have. Station two had to close to make the budget work with the personnel changes.

"Guess where the fire activity is and where response time is the longest?" Meston said, with the Al Tahoe area by station No. 2 being the answer. "That was a conscious decision that occurred that the council didn't have much to say about. I believe the elected officials are the ones who should determine fire (budgets)."

Ultimately it is the council that approves the budget, so the

responsibility does stop there. It is also the city manager's job to balance the needs of the various departments based on the revenues available.

No department ever gets everything it wants.

Meston, who is now acting city manager, has a chance to bring his concerns to the council's attention in a more direct manner. On the April 3 agenda the mid-year budget is expected to be up for discussion.

When there are excess revenues they often get reallocated at this meeting. Staff, with heavy influence by the city manager, makes recommendations, with the council being the ones with the final say.

"The reality is when you compare us to every other like city in the state of California, we are second from the bottom in terms of general fund budget," Meston said. "Usually a city spends half of its budget on police and fire. Ours is under 50 percent."

The current fiscal year's General Fund budget is \$38.8 million, with fire getting 15 percent of that, and police 24 percent.

When it comes to what the budget allocates to personnel, 64 percent of the General Fund goes to salaries and benefits for all employees. Of the \$24.73 million, police top out at 35 percent of that figure with \$8,714,744 and fire is second at 22 percent with \$5,403,998.

Those numbers are before contract negotiations are even settled. It's possible any "extra" money that is talked about next month will be spent on raises for workers. Talks have been going on for months, with a resolution having been expected earlier this year, but then the city manager debacle ensued and changes were made to who was negotiating on the city's behalf.