

Opinion: VHRs critical to SLT's recreational future

By Scott Valentine

I was accosted in front of the grocery store the other day and I was asked to sign a petition that would allow for a public vote to contain vacation home rentals to the commercial core.

Interesting. I am all for the democratic process, but majority rule does have its issues. For example, if the majority voted for a set of laws that encouraged gender discrimination and devaluation of women in the workforce, it would still be morally and ethically wrong, even if the majority of people voted for it. A vote like that would never happen, but we still need to be very careful about how we go about voting for new rules.



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Moving VHRs into the commercial center of town might help solve a problem in my neighborhood, but it also concentrates the issue in someone else's neighborhood. Our commercial core happens to be where many of our underrepresented minority populations reside. It seems unjust for a white majority to simply vote away their problems, and place that burden on those that cannot defend themselves due to their population size. The VHR issue is not really being solved, just relocated.

There is however, another important issue here. We voted for Measure P. The recreation complex was supposed to be demolished this summer and the facility we voted for was designed to meet the changing demands of our local and visitor populations. Unfortunately, this VHR ballot initiative has derailed those plans, along with many other recreation initiatives. The city cannot go to the bond market to fund the construction of this facility since VHRs and the TOT tax they generate contribute significantly to the recreation budget. Put simply, no one will give us a loan if there is no mechanism to pay those loans back. We tout ourselves as having a recreation-based tourist economy. Yet here we are voting to reduce visitor lodging, and limit the primary funding source for our recreation budget.

As citizens, we need to recognize that improvements come at a cost. We also need to recognize that if we shoot ourselves in the foot on this November ballot, there is a very real possibility that we will not get a new recreation center, or we might have to settle for a less attractive version that does not meet everyone's expectations. It is rare to have an opportunity to rebuild a rec center. We might only have one shot at this and we need to think about how to do it right.

It sounds to me like our citizens and our city leaders need to rethink how best to move forward and resolve some of these issues. I use VHRs when I go on vacation, and I would be a hypocrite if I voted to ban them in my neighborhood. I would also be a horrible human if I voted to relocate my problems into someone else's backyard without first resolving the issue, or at least giving those residents a fair say. It is also important to recognize the interconnectivity of this issue.

A vote that impacts VHRs could effectively undermine our ability to radically improve recreation in our town. Placing something on the ballot without thought to the many unanticipated consequences of that action could set us up for

a future that no one really wants.

Scott Valentine is a former South Lake Tahoe Parks and Recreation commissioner.