

S. Tahoe considers doing away with 3 fire division chief jobs

By Kathryn Reed

A fire department without upper management except for a chief who divides his time with the police department.

That is one scenario on the negotiating table in South Lake Tahoe.



The city has a \$1.5 million deficit gap to deal with before the next fiscal year begins Oct. 1. The reality is it must be closed in less than a month in order for staff to bring the budget to the City Council on Aug. 26. California cities must adopt a balanced budget.

In early spring when the council approved the five-year budget plan it included receiving concessions from the seven labor groups in the city to eliminate that \$1.5 million from the books. The city wants to save \$1 million in pension cost by having employees pay their share – 8 percent for non-sworn personnel and 9 percent for sworn. (Police officers currently pay 6 percent; all others have taxpayers foot the bill.) The city wants to save the other half million dollars by having employees pick up more of the health care premium costs.

Fairly regular meet-and-confer sessions between the city and bargaining units have been occurring, but not everyone is at the table to do the heavy lifting that is necessary for the budget to be balanced.

The only contract that expires at the end of this fiscal year

is the General and Public Works group. However, serious negotiations are not slated to begin with that group until Aug. 12 because the union changed representatives. This gives both sides limited time to reach an agreement before the council gets involved.

Two of the six groups that have agreed to negotiate a year before their respective contracts expire are the fire unions. One represents management – or the three division chiefs; the other group includes everyone else. (The chief is not in a bargaining unit.)

At the meeting July 22 with the fire safety management group, the city floated the idea of eliminating all three of their positions.

“There are all sorts of reasons why that is monumentally a bad idea,” Ray Zachau, fire marshal and division chief, said. “People seem to have forgotten we live in a fire prone area.”

He said building inspections, fuels reduction projects and public safety would be at risk with no division chiefs on staff.

Zachau emphasized the three at his rank have agreed to the pension and health care benefit concessions the city has asked for, but they don’t understand the thought process in eliminating their jobs. This group doesn’t understand why when they’ve done what the city wants, they are being targeted for elimination.

The one known staffing change is Police Chief Brian Uhler will also oversee the fire department starting Sept. 1 when Fire Chief Lorenzo Gigliotti leaves.

Because of labor rules City Manager Tony O’Rourke is not allowed to discuss specifics about what is or isn’t being offered.

O'Rourke told *Lake Tahoe News* if all the groups don't step up to the plate, jobs would be cut throughout the city. He has said this from the get-go, with the council knowing it would happen based on the five-year plan they adopted.

Just how many jobs and which ones would be eliminated if concessions are not made remains to be seen.

"Our single largest cost center is personnel. We will have no other choice but to reduce our staff," O'Rourke said. "We are not going to raid the operating reserve."

He said doing so to the tune of \$5.2 million in the past was bad fiscal policy and allowed the city to not live within its means.

Compounding the problem is the city's fiscal situation is worse than in March when the five-year plan was adopted because property tax values keep going down. That revenue stream is one of three key pieces for South Tahoe.

Fire management and city negotiators are scheduled to meet again Aug. 1.

As for the rest of the fire department, union representative Dan Sullivan did not return calls.

Labor and anti-trust laws prevent all of the city's bargaining units from meeting as one to come up with a plan that would save jobs and help them negotiate as a whole.

At the Aug. 2 City Council meeting it's possible the five will be faced with the decision whether to go to the voters about what to do regarding pensions for city employees. If voters have a say, it may not matter what is or isn't negotiated.