South Lake Tahoe to undo decades of neglect to its roads

By Kathryn Reed

Without a single member of the public to witness the discussion or vote in person, the South Lake Tahoe City Council unanimously agreed March 6 to borrow $5 million to begin repairing roads.

With interest it will cost more than $10 million in taxpayer money in the next 30 years to pay back that $5 million certificate of participation.

About 14.5 miles of roads will be improved with $4 million starting in June. The other $1 million will be divvied up between improvements to Harrison Avenue and Linear Park. (There are 259 lane miles belonging to the city.)



Rocks fill a hole on Venice Drive in an attempt to keep vehicles from needing a wheel alignment. Photo/LTN

Councilman Hal Cole in particular was miffed no one was in the room to witness the councilmembers merely doing the job they were elected to do. He thought they were doing something grander. The reality is these five are cleaning up the mess of previous councils and administrations that put infrastructure as a low priority and in turn has resulted in taxpayers paying twice as much for what many consider basics in city government – roads.

One street that will be repaired is Venice Drive. Cracks and holes are so wide a mountain bike is needed to ride on it because thin road bike tires are likely to get a snakebite flat.

Evan Williams, who lives on this street in the Tahoe Keys, says he remembers when it was so smooth roller skating on the street was like being on glass.

The city has a backlog of $320 million in deferred maintenance and rehabilitation to its roads.

Jim Marino, capital improvements manager, told the council it's important to spend money on maintenance to protect prior improvements and to get the most longevity out of a road.

"It is nearly six times more expensive to rebuild a road than it is to maintain it," Marino said.

What's called the collector and arterial roads will be focused on first.

A chip and cape approach will be tried in some areas to determine if this method is effective in Tahoe's winter environment. Instead of stopping after the seal part, which is normal, the cape is a second step where thicker petroleum is used.

Some discussion centered on whether any of this work would resonate with Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board.

“No” was the answer because credits in the Total Maximum Daily Load initiative are not given for fixing roads even though that fine sediment is often touted as one of the main contributors to the decline of lake clarity.

When the City Council a year ago approved the strategic plan the goal was to spend 80 percent of the borrowed $25 million in five years to bring the city’s streets up from what many call Third World conditions. (The council is expected to revisit the strategic plan at the March 20 meeting.)

The city has the resources to pay back $10 million in loans, or two year’s worth of work.

The plan is to go to the voters in 2013 to ask for the transient occupancy tax to be increased starting the following year. That in addition to an amusement tax would fund the remaining three years of significant road repairs.

Part of the theory is the influx of vehicles on city streets from tourists is speeding up the degradation of the roads so those people should help pay for the upkeep.

The reason to put off the TOT hike is to let the hotel industry recover after such a dismal winter when it came to occupancy. City Manager Tony O’Rourke told *Lake Tahoe News* the city expects TOT for January and February to be down $300,000.

When it comes to the work that will be done this summer, Marino said the price of oil could play a role in how much work gets done. He also said to expect delays when the construction season begins, especially with Caltrans coming back to work on Highway 50.