South Lake Tahoe done with putting up with code violators

By Kathryn Reed

Snowmobiles stored across multiple lots in a residential area. Overturned garbage cans with trash strewn about. Boarded up abandoned houses. Businesses moving half their belongings to the outdoors. Junk cluttering yards so it looks like a mini landfill.

This is South Lake Tahoe.

While not every parcel is a visual nightmare, hardly any street is immune from having a lot that could be cited for a code enforcement violation.



Owners of this house on Primrose Road will have a code enforcement hearing in June. Photos/Kathryn Reed

City officials are done putting up with the eyesores. Aesthetics of the situation could be argued by the owners or

renters responsible for violating the law, but the laws governing their actions are what police officials are going after.

In 2011, 200 nuisance cases were processed. That number is expected to increase this year as the city cracks down on offenders and more complaints file in.

It's anticipated there will be some push back from residents as citations and fines start being written and levied. But these are not new rules. What is new is they are being enforced.

"It's a question of what is legal and illegal," Police Chief Brian Uhler said. It doesn't matter if he likes what it looks like or not. He is going by the law.

"If the law is bad, then change the law. If the law is rational and sound, then enforce it."

To make sure the council knows what's about to happen each member is being given a tour of some of the more egregious properties. Councilmembers Tom Davis and Angela Swanson have been on the "scenic" tour with Uhler and Community Services Officer Bob Albertazzi. Albertazzi is the one who is tasked with talking to residents, writing citations and then dealing with council when people appeal the citation.

"My perspective is I think it's time. Some of it is way beyond normal stuff in a yard. What I saw was pretty bad," Davis told *Lake Tahoe News*. "The most important point I want to make is to make sure the city notifies the owner before we abate it. That is critical."

Lake Tahoe News last week was shown some of the same areas the council will become acquainted with.

"Temporary shelters are a major issue of contention," Albertazzi said. "They are not permitted and many do not

comply with set backs and easement requirements in the code."

He's talking about the canopies people use as a carport.

Driving through town some of the canopies are tattered. Others look fine. But the condition isn't the issue. It's the fact that they are illegal no matter the condition they are in. There is nothing in South Lake Tahoe's building codes that allow for these canopies.

On Primrose Road is a yard that is best described as a junkyard. It goes beyond clutter. Tires, television, sofa, rolled up carpet, broken furniture, torn mattress against a vehicle, shopping cart full of everything but groceries, empty aquarium – all visible over the fence.

A hearing regarding this particular property is scheduled for June 20.

Another "junk" issue is related to perpetual yard sales. People are starting to tarp their goods, and sell stuff each weekend as a means to make some non-taxable cash.

The problem is nothing in the code addresses these ongoing yard sales. If Albertazzi and Uhler have their way, that will change.

A house on Helen Avenue smells so bad from the mold inside that neighbors one time called thinking a dead body was inside.

Officers are allowed on properties when it comes to health and safety issues.

But resources are limited. For now, most of the violators come to the officers' attention through complaints from neighbors.

However, a temporary 30-hour week employee is expected to be on the streets in mid-June to handle these types of code violations.

Abandoned structures litter the city. One on South Avenue has had the city's attention for the last three years. It's paid for. But the stairs are rickety, squatters have come and gone from it, and it looks like one strike of a match would bring it all down.

Uhler said safety is the biggest issue with this parcel. But it will take the city's legal team to find a way to solve the problem.

The code says the owners are supposed to make it habitable or be fined $1,000. The owners can be taken to small claims court and a lien put on the property.

"But it doesn't solve the problem," Uhler said.

Driving down Highway 50 it's easy to spot the businesses violating the outdoor display law. This rule makes is so store owners don't turn their sidewalk or front area into another area to sell their wares.

Temporary activity permits are available for special sidewalk sales and things like that. But just moving stuff out front, well, that's a big no-no that isn't going to be tolerated much longer.

And with the sign ordinance finally passed, those sandwich boards – other than on holiday weekends – will be removed. Same with other non-permitted signs like banners and add-ons. The latter often say "now open" and are plywood additions to what was legally permitted.

Albertazzi said more than 300 businesses along Highway 50 have been given written notice about what the rules are governing signs.

"So there is no excuse why they use temporary signs," Albertazzi said.

On the June 5 council agenda is likely to be an item

recalculating the fines for the various code violations. Uhler would like this item brought back to the council once a year like the fee schedule is so the amounts are kept in check and reviewed for relevancy. Uhler also wants to streamline the process so abatement happens faster.

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