Sign issues dominate SLT council meeting



South Lake Tahoe councilmembers want to craft law to allow this sign to remain in town. Photo/Provided

By Kathryn Reed

Signs – the fee for a permit and one that doesn't meet the letter of the law – were hot topics at the Tuesday South Lake Tahoe City Council meeting.

A unanimous vote by the South Lake Tahoe City Council on Oct. 20 immediately reduced the fee for sign permits.

It's an issue that arose after the council earlier this year changed the entire fee schedule. The goal in doing so was to have the fees reflect what it costs staff to deal with the particular issue. (Recreation is the main area the council agreed should be subsidized and not meet the true cost standard.)

What was approved earlier this year was a sign permit fee of $878. All councilmembers voted for that rate. It was reduced Tuesday to be $120 for a minor sign and up to $300 for a sign permit that is more involved.

No one councilmember championed the cause for the reduction, but instead they all agreed from the get-go when it was pointed out to them that it was excessive.

Work began in July for the fee to be changed. It went to the Planning Commission in September.

Other changes make the sign ordinance more like TRPA's policy.

Also discussed at the meeting was the possibility of allowing Tahoe Trout Farm to keep its seasonal sign on the American Legion property on Highway 50. It is there when the farm is open, which this year was April 28-Oct. 1. The farm has been operating since 1946 – 19 years before the city was incorporated.

It does not meet city or Tahoe Regional Planning Agency regulations; neither allows off-site signs. The issue went to the Planning Commission. But there is nothing in city code to allow the sign.

The council agreed to uphold the Planning Commission's decision to not allow the sign, but also directed staff to come back before spring with a proposal that would allow the sign to stay.

This is even though owner Jim Vallier admitted social media is what is driving people to his business, which he has owned for four years. He boasted to the council that the trout farm has gone from 60th to 12th place on TripAdvisor for things to do in South Lake Tahoe.

Kathy Vaughan, who lives across from the farm, wants the sign to stay, too.

“Let’s not eliminate old Tahoe. Keep that sign out there,” she told the council.

The city does allow for directional signs and local unique signs. The latter is more historical in nature, but the word “historical” is not used because it would trigger state involvement.

Councilwoman JoAnnConner said put an arrow on the sign and make it directional. It’s not that simple. After all, the sign already has an arrow on it.

The council wants to make other changes to the sign ordinance. At a future meeting the electeds will consider changing when sandwich boards can be put on the sidewalk. The Oct. 20 vote changed it to 5pm on Fridays. Councilmembers Tom Davis and Conner advocated to bump that to 2pm. The other three had no appetite to change it at this week’s meeting, and voted down the motion. Still, Davis and Conner only needed each other’s OK to have it brought back as a separate item down the road.

Also coming back will be whether businesses may use umbrellas with logos on them. Conforming to Tahoe Regional Planning Agency regs will be necessary. Graphic elements and the like will also have to be considered.

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In other action:

· The council agreed to bring back the plastic bag ordinance that took effect Oct. 15 as it pertains to retail establishments.

· Councilwoman Wendy David announced the Cal-Tahoe JPA that handles ambulance service for South Lake Tahoe and Lake Valley fire departments voted not to renew the contract with El Dorado County when it expires in 2019. Solutions are still being worked on.

· Councilman Austin Sass noted the Tahoe Transportation District staff will be presenting updates on the loop road to Douglas County and South Lake Tahoe officials later this fall.

· The council voted 4-1 to establish the Community Play Consortium Joint Powers Authority with Lake Tahoe Community College and Lake Tahoe Unified School District. Councilwoman Conner abstained. She and David, the two on the subcommittee, went back and forth as though they had not been at the same meetings at which the agreements were crafted.