

LTUSD superintendent backs out of recreation deal with LTCC, SLT; board never voted on it

By Kathryn Reed

Lake Tahoe Unified School District's board has never had the opportunity to vote on whether it wants to be part of a consortium with Lake Tahoe Community College and the city of South Lake Tahoe that would manage and maintain ball fields.

Instead, Superintendent Jim Tarwater made the decision to back out of the deal that has been talked about since at least last spring.

"I don't know that it is really a policy decision," LTUSD board President Barbara Bannar told *Lake Tahoe News*. "It doesn't involve the education of our children. When you look at what benefit the children in the school district get from being part of the JPA it was minimal at that point if any." Plus, she cited the growing attorney costs for a reason to put an end to the discussions.

The college board and City Council both voted on and for the creation of the JPA – believing the decision to enter the joint powers agreement is a matter for electeds to decide, not the hired leaders of the organizations.

The college and city are going forward with the JPA without LTUSD. They were the original creators of the JPA, with LTUSD being a late addition – and now a recent subtraction. Separate agreements will need to be written to incorporate the K-12 district into the equation, though, because it is still a player without being JPA member.

The reason all three entities were initially creating the JPA was to consolidate the management and operation of ball fields. The recreation master plan calls for a blended approach instead of individual entities; ultimately making it easier on the user.

Less than two months ago LTUSD Superintendent Jim Tarwater was set to take the JPA to the board. He told *Lake Tahoe News* this week that the reason to forego the JPA is that the district could not afford all the maintenance that was proposed.

"They need more maintenance than what I can do," Tarwater said.

"The board doesn't need to vote on it," he said of the JPA.

An agreement from earlier this year has LTUSD being required to maintain the fields on its property instead of the city doing so. In turn, the city is subsidizing this operation by \$100,000 to be a community partner and recognizing adult leagues also use these fields.

Had LTUSD joined the JPA, it would have gotten the \$50,000 for maintenance that comes from Measures S/R for the community play field at the college. That full amount has never been used and is carried over each year. It's anticipated the new fields to be built adjacent to that field will use up the balance of the \$50,000. This is allowable based on the original recreation measure calling for multiple fields at that location.

LTCC will now be responsible for the maintenance of the current and future fields in that area.

The current field and **proposed fields** are in part owned by all three public agencies. The JPA was to have managed all of them. Now easement agreements with LTUSD must be devised.

The JPA was a discussion item at last week's LTUSD board

meeting. The board at the time seemed open to the JPA idea. But it wasn't an action item.

A day later Tarwater sent an email to City Manager Nancy Kerry and LTCC President Kindred Murillo saying the district would not be part of the JPA. This came after the three had a conference call that morning that Tarwater referenced. The email cites the lack of a guarantee of the baseball field immediately being built as the reason to not enter the JPA.

"There is no guarantee that a new baseball field will be built. For these and other reasons, the LTUSD has decided, after careful thought and consideration, to decline the offer to be a member of the JPA," Tarwater wrote. While he makes it seem like this was a district decision, it was in fact his decision alone. "One [stet] behalf of LTUSD Board of Education, I hope that the Community Play Consortium is successful."

There is no guarantee which field will be built when because this is something the City Council must vote on. That will take place in January when it is better known what the coffers look like. The city has about \$1.2 million – it may turn out to be more – to build the fields. Cost estimates are being worked on now. The goal is at a minimum one field will break ground next year.

The college is investing \$1.6 million to renovate the current field, with Measure R contributing \$300,000 to that cause. That, too, will occur in 2016.

LTUSD, even without being a party to the JPA, will continue to do all the scheduling for the community ball fields. It is possible the district and other entities would become JPA board members down the road.