LTUSD steaming toward reopening Al Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

A light is being shined on the lack of equality in Lake Tahoe Unified School District as officials work toward reopening Al Tahoe Elementary School.

Declining enrollment forced the school to be closed in 2004. Now the remaining four elementary schools are overcrowded, necessitating some form of relief.

On Jan. 31 the school board had its second workshop pertaining to the future of Al Tahoe. Ideas and opinions were discussed, but this was not a night to vote on any proposals. Nonetheless, the wheels are in motion to make this a reality.

After the district created the magnet school in Meyers there has been a concerted effort to make each elementary have its own theme. Bijou's theme is bilingual education; Sierra House – fitness, health, mountain sports; Meyers – environment; Tahoe Valley – performing arts. But some are more robust than others and all do not reflect the complexion of the whole community.

Al Tahoe would be the STEAM Academy. STEAM stands for science, technology, engineering, art and math.

Tuesday's staff report said, "STEAM takes STEM to the next level by allowing students to connect their learning in these areas with art practices, design principles, and standards. The A in STEAM doesn't just represent the arts but is more of a broad term that represents liberal arts, language arts, social studies, physical arts, and fine arts and music. It's a framework for teaching which is customizable and functional, hence the fun in functional. It's about applying creative

thinking to STEM projects, and sparking students' imagination and creativity through the arts. It's about exploring where art naturally fits into the STEM subjects."

Much of the board as well as parents would like science in particular to be available to all students. While the magnet school focuses on the environment, that isn't the case throughout the district.

"The Al Tahoe program looks great," parent Rebecca Bryson said. But what she worries is that it "could be further ghettoizing the schools."

Board member Larry Reilly said, "Parity is an issue." He would like to see the curriculum at Al Tahoe offered to other students, even it means exporting it. This, he suggested, could be done similar to when PE instructors traveled to the various school sites. Classroom space could be created so students learned some of the STEAM lessons.

Bonnie Turnbull, another board member, also spoke of lack of equality.

"I worry some kids will be left behind," she said. With parents being responsible for choosing a child's school, she fears some parents won't understand all that STEAM can offer, and that gender and ethnicity may play a role in decision making.

For board member Angela Swanson her concern is for the students in the neighborhood be given first priority to attend Al Tahoe.

The current proposal by staff is to open in the fall with preschool. By 2020-21 the school would house K-5.

Kelly Martin, who is in charge of curriculum for the district, explained how at the start the learning would be in a fun lab where experimentation is encouraged and failure means just

starting over again. Don’t think science lab, but instead creative learning space. Curriculum would get more complex with each grade level.

“A makerspace is a collaborative workspace for making, learning, exploring and sharing that uses high tech to no tech tools. The maker mindset is creating something out of nothing and exploring your interests that are at the core of a makerspace,” the staff report says.

The district is eligible for Proposition 51 dollars to pay for the renovations – like a new boiler and revamping the kitchen. Portables that are more than 20 years old can also be upgraded with that money.

The plan also is to create a child care facility.

“Childcare has become a nationwide concern due to rising numbers of working parents and the increase in childcare costs. Looking ahead, the district faces issues in recruiting new teachers, housing for district staff, and childcare. The district proposes to accommodate an employee childcare center which could dramatically reduce costs-of-living for families,” the staff report says.