

Opinion: Facts prove VHRs are not a problem

By Brad Schiller

An ongoing war is being waged against VHRs, fueled by a very small minority of residents and even a smaller number of onerous VHR renters. It is time to take stock of the facts and consider the role that VHRs play in the local economy.

VHR opponents

Those residents opposed to VHRs offer a litany of reasons for their opposition. The most common reason is noise: VHR renters allegedly come here to party and apparently do so all night. Residents also complain that VHR renters park too many cars, thereby depriving full-time residents of scarce parking space. Those same renters are blamed for traffic congestion, lengthening the time it takes full-time residents to get across town. Some opponents have also suggested in (opinion pieces) that the influx of VHR residents has increased area pollution. For these many reasons, opponents want to curtail and even ban VHRs in South Lake Tahoe.

Incidence of complaints

Given the intensity of the VHR opposition, the actual number of complaints is surprisingly small. In the last calendar quarter for which official (South Lake Tahoe) data is available (July-September) there were only 206 complaints initiated by neighbors. If each of those complaints referred to a different VHR, that would represent 11 percent of all permitted VHRs. That would be the worst-case scenario for VHRs. But that statistic paints an overly pessimistic view of VHR behavior. First, only 63 violations were issued based on those complaints, representing less than 3.5 percent of permitted VHRs. Second, the city itself initiated 45

complaints, resulting in 14 violations for unpermitted VHRs and a handful of other transgressions. So, the number of neighbor-initiated violations was less than 50 over a three-month period. That is way less than one per day for the entire city. And 88 percent of those violations occurred in the “mega” VHRs that are permitted to have 10 or more occupants.

Despite the low incidence of actual violations, the City Council toughened VHR regulations, effective Dec. 22, 2017. In the first two weeks of the toughened enforcement how much changed? Not much. There were only 58 complaints in the period Dec. 20-Jan. 1, a period that encompassed not only New Year’s but also SnowGlobe. Of those 58 complaints, only 23 were verified, of which 16 were for street parking. The three noise complaints (on New Year’s) accounted for 0.016 percent of all permitted VHRs.

Concentration of complaints

Even the absurdly low number of complaints overstates the true incidence of VHR problems. The reality is that a disproportionate percentage of these complaints come from only a handful of fierce VHR opponents. On Thanksgiving, for example, there were five citywide complaints. Four of them were lodged by the same individual. In my neighborhood, one resident has a large sign posted proclaiming that he will oppose all VHRs. He trolls outside his electrified fence looking for problems he can report. Enforcement officers almost always decide that the complaint was unjustified. City personnel are all too familiar with the half dozen residents who account for a large share of their responses.

Cost to the city

Despite the extremely low incidence of VHR disturbances, the city has not only tightened regulations on VHR owners but chosen to spend a lot more money on code enforcement. In

November, the City Council approved hiring three more enforcement officers, bringing the potential total to five. One of them is intended to be full time. Think about the benefit/cost ratio here. A force of five enforcement officers, plus regular police, to identify and cite an average of less than one VHR violation per day. Who can possibly justify that kind of budget? Especially in a city where voters rejected higher taxes to pay for road improvements.

Then there is the value of VHRs. VHRs are popular everywhere because they offer comfortable and private quarters that hotels and motels can't match. Contrary to what opponents allege, our VHRs are more attractive to families with children than to hard-core partiers. Partiers much prefer Opal, Peek, and partying with Arty over quiet neighborhoods. The families renting VHRs are a great source of income not only for the city, which collected over \$3 million in TOT revenues in the last fiscal year, but also to the entire gamut of businesses in South Lake – from McDonald's to Heavenly ski school. The visitors who stay in VHRs are a vital part of the local economy.

Unjust discrimination

Economics aside, one might also consider the equity issue wrapped up in the VHR debate. Why is it considered illegal for a VHR renter to park on a public street that is open to everyone else? Why is the noise from a VHR party or hot tub any more onerous than the same nuisance from a permanent renter or owner? Why is the traffic congestion caused by VHR renters any different from the congestion caused by other residents or visitors? Do VHR renters create more litter or pollution than other visitors or residents? And then there is the issue of now mandatory bear boxes for VHRs. Most VHRs have a sequence of short-term renters and must clean the home and dispose of the garbage before the next visitor arrives. In the 30 years that I have owned VHRs in the city, we have never used the city's trash services. Yet, we have paid for that

service every month. If we don't leave trash out for the city to pick up, why require a bear box? Are other VHRs more prone to "bear raids" than neighboring residences? Or is this just another mechanism to discourage VHRs? It's time for the city and the county to consider seriously the unjust discrimination they are imposing on people who own or rent VHRs in our community.

Brad Schiller is a professor of economics and longtime VHR owner in South Lake Tahoe.