

Chief of STPUD prepping for retirement



Richard Solbrig is retiring as general manager of South Tahoe PUD in January 2019. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

Stability. It's one of the reasons South Tahoe Public Utility District is as successful as it is.

Richard Solbrig is only the third general manager the district has had since 1977. The district has started looking for its fourth, as the 68-year-old plans to retire in January.

It is the culture he has helped build that he is proudest of. It's a team; where when an emergency happens people don't hesitate to come in to work no matter the hour or if it's a weekend. Collectively there is a commitment to their jobs, which is really a commitment to the area of the South Shore the district serves.

"When you are delivering services that are required for life, you don't want them compromised," Solbrig told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The board this month began discussing the general manager recruitment schedule.

Solbrig said the fact that there has been such little turnover at the top is a "testament to the boards that have been here. They haven't suffered drama, micromanaged or surprised staff."

Solbrig came to the district in 1990 as assistant general manager, becoming the top guy in 1993.

He grew up in New York, went to MIT to study civil engineering, then earned a master's in sanitary engineering at Cal. While working for a Bay Area firm he was the construction manager for a \$30 million project at Lake Tahoe. That three-year stint in the late 1980s gave his wife and two kids a taste of the mountains. They wanted to stay. That led him to commute before the STPUD job opened.

Solbrig has much to be proud of when it comes to accomplishments during his tenure. The last time the district exceeded the wastewater requirement was in 1995.

"We've always regarded ourselves as environmentalists. I'm proud of our record," Solbrig said.

The district is regularly replacing infrastructure. While much more needs to be done, he said STPUD is ahead of the curve compared to other agencies.

The district is still working on having the proper capacity to fight fires. In many ways it was lucky in 2007 that the Angora Fire erupted where it did because those lines had been upgraded and there was better storage capacity compared to what exists even today in some locations of the city.

The one big issue that won't be resolved before he leaves that

frustrates him is the PCE contamination at the Y. Tetrachloroethylene was used by dry cleaners and automotive shops. Officials have known since 1989 that a plume is in the local groundwater.

The water districts affected by the contamination are at the mercy of Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board to determine who is liable and to come up with a remedy.

“Lahontan’s focus is on the process and not on the end product,” Solbrig said. “Their action has been creating process. The process is laborious and slow.”

Since the **last meeting in February** about the PCE issue the district received a \$504,295 grant from the State Water Resources Control Board to conduct a feasibility study of remedial alternatives to mitigate PCE contamination. The objective is to collect information on the aquifer characteristics and water quality to design strategies to control and/or remove PCE from groundwater. The field work should be completed by late June.

Dealing with contamination issues is not new to Solbrig. He was here during the MTBE (methyl tertiary butyl ether) debacle. In 1997 the gasoline additive was found to have contaminated wells. Shell Oil ended up paying the district millions of dollars to settle the case.

Solbrig has no plans to slow down between now and January. His desk is full of papers. It shows a man who still has much more to accomplish.

Still, he also has a clock on the desk counting down to the second how much time he has left.

Once retired he hopes he’ll be able to enjoy the area a bit more. Relaxing and traveling are what he looks forward to. He’s quite the dancer and hopes to be spending more time doing that as well. Solbrig also has a whole list of things to do

inside and outside the house that need tackling – things that have been neglected while he's been tending to the sewer and water needs of much of the South Shore.