S. Tahoe council asks for help if workers want to keep jobs

By Kathryn Reed

After nearly three hours, the South Lake Tahoe City Council turned the budget discussion on the nearly 200 people who attended the special meeting Thursday night.

Councilman Bruce Grego led the charge, with his colleagues falling in behind, when he asked where those in attendance have been before last night. Then asking them to suggest solutions for closing the $5.2 million gap. Asking them to do more than say they are good workers or retirees, and that they should keep their jobs, salaries and benefits. The offer was put to the community at-large as well.



The overflow crowd at the Sept. 15 council meeting is directed to the TV in the lobby. Photos/Kathryn Reed

With the 2011-12 budget taking effect Oct. 1, the council unanimously agreed to meet again Sept. 27 at 6pm, with a vote expected that night. Between now and then council members want ideas for how to solve the problem, not reasons why not to do something. However, it would be a serious violation for a represented employee to engage a councilperson in a discussion about salaries, benefits or work conditions.

This extension also allows the city to continue negotiating with its seven bargaining units and come up with solutions that would alter the budget proposal as presented. While the council met in closed session before the budget meeting started at 7:15pm, no reportable action on the labor negotiations was taken.

Revenue discussion

Grego, showing his frustration, said the council put a measure on the ballot two years ago to raise the business license fee, which would have mostly increased the rate on larger businesses, and the town voted it down.

With the hotel occupancy rate at 23 percent, City Manger Tony O'Rourke said now is not the time to raise the transient occupancy tax when rooms already are empty.

One person who spoke to *Lake Tahoe News* said she tried to offer O'Rourke ideas but was shunned. She's going to take her thoughts to the council in private.

At the meeting, Robert Stiles with Tahoe Real Estate Services, suggested raising the vacation rental home fee from $144 a year to $250 to raise about $130,000.

Steve Crouch, who represents the General-Public Works association, said lower the reserves to less than 25 percent, don't spend money on frivolous items like $9,000 to decorate a Christmas tree or $50,000 on GPS tracking devices for snowplow drivers.

Rob Swain, who runs the senior center, said, “There are lots of assets. Things could be explored. We could get creative and have lots better results.”

This longtime employee ran the ice rink before it was turned over to a private operation last month.

He did not present any ideas at the Sept. 15 meeting, but instead spoke in platitudes.

Councilman Tom Davis is most concerned about the projected revenue in the budget. He echoed Stiles’ comment that forecasting an increase in property taxes of about 1.5 percent could backfire. Property taxes are the city’s largest source of income.

What’s on the table

The elimination of 22 jobs is likely if concessions are not made by the employee groups regarding benefits. Who exactly they are is not definitive until either a labor contract is renegotiated or the deadline arrives for the council to pass a budget – which must be balanced per state law. Even then, employee bumping rights make for the fallout to be a bit prolonged.



City Manager Tony O'Rourke outlines the budget.

Cuts are expected in nearly every department. The three

division chiefs in the fire department have been given notice. They are at-will employees.

At the meeting Thursday, O'Rourke said the city is "proposing alternative delivery contracts" for the rec center, senior center and pool. He said this would not affect the quality or quantity of services.

Sources have told *Lake Tahoe News* the rec center is likely to have a greater partnership with the local Boys & Girls Club because it is running similar programs, plus the two buildings are walking distance from each other.

El Dorado County is expected to take over a larger roll in how the senior center is operated. Most counties run these types of programs – not a city.

Changes to the pool are expected, but it will not be operated by a private entity.

O'Rourke admitted the golf course, airport, campground and other city run operations could be turned over to a private operator if the numbers make it more advantageous to do so and the council agrees to it.

Temporary snowplow operators are expected to go from seven to 15. O'Rourke said this will provide for an initial savings of $256,000 a year, with long-term benefits of a half million dollars a year.

Maintenance of roads beyond pothole repair will be contracted out.

Furloughs for just about everyone are going away – which equates to 18,000 hours of additional service.

Lease purchase agreements for police vehicles will become the new norm.

Who's saying what

Many of the 29 people who spoke, along with a few shouts from the audience (many of whom were watching on the television monitor in the lobby because of space constraints), voiced frustration with what they perceive as cuts only at the bottom.

However, it was in March that three director jobs and the assistant city manager position were eliminated. O'Rourke on Thursday said the consolidation of jobs resulted in 10 percent raises for the finance director, police-fire chief, and community services director because of increased duties.

He failed to mention how the human resources director and public information officer also are making more.

Employees say this is unfair. When they are asked to do more with fewer people they are not given raises. While this is true, they have a contract per their bargaining unit and the upper management positions are at-will and not represented.

But two of their own got 10 percent raises as well – the capital improvement manager and payroll specialist.

Non-exempt types will also be paying their share of PERS, while the only employee group to agree to do so is the fire association.

O'Rourke emphatically stated he had not received a single bonus nor a nickel raise since he has been here. (Although he came on board in August 2010, the council has yet to review him as is normal each year.)

Crouch, the union rep, said it's frustrating to negotiate with the numbers continually changing. City staff said property taxes and state take-aways legitimately altered the figures.

Judy Crawford, former parks and rec employee, lamented how sad it is there are more places to buy pot in town than there are places to buy shoes.

Thirteen-year-old Garrett Harley spoke of the great job the rec staff does.

Vivian Gonterman, who has lived in town since Pioneer Trail was a dirt road, equated the city contracting out services to how well the United States has prospered by having other countries make everything. Her husband is a retired city employee.

Joe McKenna, retired fire captain, said, “We’ve always dealt with financial crisis. I was on the bargaining team. We gave up a lot for our health care.” (Retirees get the same health care benefits employees get.)

Jerry Copeland, representing the Admin-Confidential employee group, said no one told him there would be a reward to come to the table first. (The fire association is getting a 2 percent raise because they made concessions.) He also said the perception is the employees are the ones who caused the financial problems.

A recurring sentiment expressed confidentially to *Lake Tahoe News* is that management, and therefore the council, don’t really care and are trying to balance the budget on the back of employees who did not create the fiscal mess. In addition, the dictatorial nature of how things are run is often echoed.

Lindsey Henry, 27, a third generation South Lake Tahoe resident, said of the employees, “You need to consider the big picture of what they are doing for this community.” Her dad used to work for the city.

Many people voiced concern for how well the streets would be plowed with temps and the potential liability it could create for the city.

“Temporary workers won’t save our city,” Vernon Lee told the council.

While the city struggles to live within its means, many who spoke said it’s also critical to not lose the sense of community that still lingers.

Probation, community service for teens who set Ray May Fire

By Jaclyn O’Malley, Reno Gazette-Journal

For causing an August wildland fire that cost nearly $3 million to fight and destroyed land and structures on public, private and American Indian property, two 15-year-old boys were placed on probation and ordered to work 500 hours of community service.

Judge David Gamble of Douglas County District Court on Tuesday said he was concerned about both boys’ mental health conditions and their drug and marijuana abuse. The pair was not identified because they are juveniles.

Gamble described the boys’ negligence in the Ray May Fire in the mountains south of Carson City as “stupid” and something a “reasonable human” would not have done because of the high risk of danger and damage.

The judge said the incident is proof that both teenagers need a “serious intervention,” adding that he hoped the incident would be an example to all how “fraught with error” even setting a fire can be.

“I want to give them the tools to make decisions so that they don’t end up turning people’s lives upside-down and causing

the community to be burned down," Gamble said of his order of probation.

He said part of the boys' community service could be helping to build a monument to remember the fire since they would be unable to replant the thousands of acres the fire destroyed. He said the boys definitely would not be "picking up trash" and would have to work to rehabilitate what they damaged.

Read the whole story

Arsenal of weapons, ammo found at IHOP shooter's home

By Martha Bellisle, Reno Gazette-Journal

Sixteen AK-47 magazines with live rounds, a Glock 26 9mm firearm with a holster, ammunition for various weapons, gun videos and body armor were among the items Carson City Sheriff's detectives found at the home and in the car of the man who shot 11, killing four, at an IHOP last week.

The list reveals how heavily-armed Eduardo Sencion, 32, was before his attack at the restaurant on Sept. 6. A video of detectives seeking the search warrant that was released Wednesday revealed that Sencion had been diagnosed schizophrenic and was taking medication before the attack.

Sencion was armed with an AK-47-style assault weapon when he opened fire on customers inside the IHOP and businesses outside the restaurant on Sept. 6. He then fatally shot himself in the head.

Among the four dead were three Nevada National Guard members.

Read the whole story

California’s poverty rate the highest since 1997

By Phillip Reese, Sacramento Bee

California’s poor now outnumber the populations of 33 states and 90 nations – and counting.

The state’s poverty rate last year rose to its highest level in more than a decade – 16.3 percent – as household incomes plunged by 5 percent, according to census figures released Tuesday.

The state lost ground much faster than the rest of the nation, which saw a roughly 2 percent decline in household income.

Nationally, about 15.1 percent of the population, or 46 million people, were poor last year, a higher poverty rate than in any year since 1993.

That incomes continue to decline and poverty increases didn’t surprise economists. But the magnitude of the changes did. California hasn’t seen a bigger year-to-year fall in household income in at least 25 years.

“We’re supposedly in recovery,” said Jeff Michael, an economist at the University of the Pacific in Stockton. “But we’ve been feeding at the bottom of the trough.”

Howard Roth, the state’s chief economist, noted that many of the states hit hardest by the housing bust saw the steepest income declines and largest poverty increases last year. Those

states will likely continue to suffer, he said, until the housing industry recovers.

“It’s pretty clear that going forward, these income numbers are going to get smaller for a while,” Roth said.

In California, the median household income – the middle number in a ranked list of incomes – was $54,459 last year, down from an inflation-adjusted $57,061 in 2009 and the lowest level since 1997. California incomes peaked in 2006 at $59,821.

Nationwide, the median household income stood at $49,445 last year, down from $50,599 in 2009.

About 6.1 million Californians lived in poverty last year, an increase of nearly a half-million residents from the previous year and the highest rate since 1997.

Read the whole story

Children’s Museum Murder Mystery

Who killed Flabbius Corpus? Was it Maximus Testosterus, or maybe Bogus Fortunatus? You have the opportunity to solve this ancient Roman murder at the Children’s Museum Murder Mystery on Oct. 1.

Enjoy a tri-tip dinner and meet the eight prime suspects as the audience works to unravel the clues to this mystery. And if you would like, wear your toga.

Tickets are $35 and are available at the Children’s Museum at 813 N. Carson St., Carson City or call (775) 884.2226.

Cocktails are at 5pm, with dinner beginning at 5:30pm.

Disc golf tournament

The Tahoe Mountain Sports 5th Annual Pro/Am Disc Golf Tournament at the North Tahoe Regional Park 18-hole disc golf is Oct. 8-9.

The tournament, a PDGA Sanctioned “B” Pro/Am event, brings golfers from all over the Western United States to the Tahoe Vista course,

All levels are welcome – or stop by to cheer on the professional and amateur golfers and learn about the sport. Pros are competing for cash prizes, and amateur winners will receive Tahoe Mountain Sports gift certificates.

On Oct. 8, registration and check-in begins at 7:30am, rounds begin at 9 am, with lunch provided.

On Oct. 9, also at the North Tahoe Regional Park Pavilion, a player meeting is at 9am, Round 3 begins at 9:30am, with an awards ceremony one hour after the last group has finished. Grills will provided; bring your own barbecue items.

For more information, contact Dave Polivy at (530) 546.7001 or dave@tahoemountainsports.com.

Skiing the High Sierra Route lecture

David Reichel, wilderness education coordinator for the Wilderness Education Department at Lake Tahoe Community College, will give a presentation on Skiing the High Sierra Route.

He will also discuss the Wilderness Education Program at the college.

The free event is Oct. 18 at 1pm at the South Lake Tahoe Branch Library, 1000 Rufus Allen Blvd.

Spin-A-Yarn

Spin-A-Yarn is starting up again at the South Lake Tahoe Branch Library. All knitters and crocheters are welcome to come for an afternoon of crafting.

Also on Oct. 1 at 1pm workers will be collecting caps for the Caps for Kids program.

The library is at 1000 Rufus Allen Blvd.

Leave No Trace lecture

Mark Ardagna and Tara McCarthy from the Leave No Trace Center

for Outdoor Ethics will present an Awareness Workshop in which participants will learn how to enjoy outdoor pursuits while ensuring a sustainable future.

The Oct. 15 1pm event is at South Lake Tahoe Branch Library, 1000 Rufus Allen Blvd., South Lake Tahoe.

Fundraising cycling event in Squaw

Tahoe Sierra Century Ride is Sept. 24.

The three routes of varying distances start and finish in the Village at Squaw Valley.

The ride benefits the music students at North Tahoe middle and high schools.

To register or for information, go online.