LTCC’s personnel struggles causing unrest on campus

By Kathryn Reed

Leadership, or the lack of it, is creating a fissure at Lake Tahoe Community College that some say is bringing harm to the two-year institution.

The turnover in presidents, other administrators and personnel leaving by choice by having found a new job or retiring are taking a toll on what had been a stable institution.



Sue Niehoff at the March 15 Lake Tahoe Community College board meeting. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The 30-plus-year-old college is on its fourth president – this one interim. Two of the five board members have been seated since the beginning.

“I don’t think you realize how important good leadership is until you don’t have it,” board member and college founder Roberta Mason said. When asked to elaborate, she said, “I was thinking of Guy (Lease). I think we relied an awful lot on

Guy. Maybe we didn't do the research on our own that we should be expected to do."

Lease was president of LTCC from 1990-2008. Prior to that he was dean of Business Services.

After him came Paul Killpatrick, who never was embraced by the college community. Now Steve Maradian is at the helm; hired to be interim president for this academic year.

Special board meeting

On March 15 the boardroom was full for a special 8:15am meeting. This in itself is an indication of the friction because seldom is anyone in attendance at the regular meetings.

The board, with member Molly Blann absent, started in closed session at 7:45am Tuesday. On the consent agenda for regular session was the notification of dismissal/discipline/release of the interim president and vice president of Business Services. This item was approved 4-0; with the only discussion in whispers among board members whether it should be open to public comment. It never formally was.

This was the second week in a row Sue Niehoff, the VP of Business Services, found out she was on the agenda when the paperwork came out instead of being afforded the courtesy from Maradian to be told before the masses found out.

Last week it was her annual review, for which she made about a two-minute appearance in closed session before being sent home by the board because she was ill. According to board member Karen Borges, Niehoff's evaluation will be discussed further at the March 22 meeting. On March 15 it was notification Niehoff may be out of a job when her contract expires June 30 that came as a surprise to her when she saw it on the agenda.

Maradian told *Lake Tahoe News* after the meeting it is state

law that non-faculty members under contract must be given reduction in force notices by March 15 if there is a chance their contract will not be renewed.

“It is a notice that provides the board maximum flexibility,” Maradian said.

However, the college has not operated this way in the past.

Maradian said without this notification, both of their contracts would be automatically renewed for a year beginning July 1.

Now the board must tell Maradian and Niehoff by May 15 if they will still be getting a paycheck from LTCC after June 30.

As much as the board members who spoke to *LTN* mentioned the state budget being a factor in all of this, the truth is California’s budget won’t be passed by May 15. Nor would the three who spoke express whether this is solely about Niehoff or more about reorganizing the administrative team. The college has employed Niehoff since January 2010.

Maradian’s contract was always supposed to be for one year. The college is in the process of looking for a president. The selection committee plans to meet March 24 to narrow the applicants to 10 to be interviewed in April, with the board interviewing three to five finalists in May.

One of the issues regarding Niehoff’s evaluation, which has not been provided to *Lake Tahoe News* because it is a personnel issue, is the scope of it.

Per Board Policy, Chapter IV, Policy 4.25, “All new academic administrators will undergo comprehensive evaluation two consecutive years after appointment.”

Maradian denied that is the policy.

“Board policy on evaluations is that every three years you

have a comprehensive review and other reviews are annual reviews," Maradian said.

The policy clearly states he is wrong.

If Niehoff had been given a comprehensive review, it would have meant being evaluated not just by Maradian, but also several faculty, classified, adjunct and other administrators.

In effect, she has been denied her due process outlined in board policy. On top of that, Maradian did the annual evaluation even though he has only worked with her for six months.

What the board has to say

Board members Fritz Wenck, Mason and Borges spoke with *Lake Tahoe News* after the meeting. All believe Maradian is doing a good job and support the direction he is taking the South Lake Tahoe institution. Board member Kerry David did not return calls and Blann is out of town.

"I think Dr. Maradian has done an excellent job in the areas we asked him to work on," Wenck, the board president, said.

Those areas Wenck said are:

• Evaluating and implementing the Datatel system; (There is a relaunch of that program Thursday at 9am in the board room. The person running the program was let go in January per Maradian's recommendation.)

• Self-study for accreditation; (This must be done by June; with the site visit in October.)

• Possible reorganization of the administrative team.

"I know there is a lot of uncertainty on campus and that always creates not a good morale climate," Mason said. "We hope to bring in a new person as president … that will be one

of their jobs, to help bring the campus together."

None of the board members could or would pinpoint what has brought the college to the point of having employees send emails to *Lake Tahoe News* that say, "I believe Sue is clearly a target for retribution after having been a 'whistle-blower' against Steve. I wish I wasn't such a chicken s—, but I can't risk being similarly targeted in this job market. Sue is the best VP of Business we've had in over a decade. She deserves better."

Borges and Mason did not hesitate to acknowledge morale is less than spectacular.

"I would say there is a lack of harmony. And we are trying to understand people's points-of-view. We are trying to look into it and see what we can do," Borges said.

She would not share what people on campus are saying to her.

"There is a climate on campus and people are afraid to speak in front of each other," Mason said.

At the board meeting Tuesday only one person spoke – Denise Russell. But she has nothing to fear because her last day of managing the LTCC bookstore was March 10. She told the board there is a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness on campus.

"I don't know if this is what you want – employees living in fear," Russell told the board. "There are concerns about leadership."

What Niehoff has to say

Though holiday lights may seem like an innocuous subject, it escalated into a heated exchange between the two college administrators that resulted in Niehoff writing a detailed memo to the board Nov. 29, 2010.

Mason and Borges remember the package of paperwork Niehoff

provided them, while Wenck has no recollection. In the stack of papers are emails between the interim president and vice president of Business Services, a summary of lawsuits filed against Maradian while employed elsewhere, and the three Los Angeles Superior Court decisions that mostly involve sexual harassment judgments against Maradian.

When asked why they hired someone with such a checkered past, Wenck said, “I don’t know anything about it.” Then he added, “There were some allegations, but the board did not feel they rose to such a point that it would deter him from doing the job.”

Niehoff in her letter to the board four months ago, which they have never talked to her about according to her, says, “Dr. Maradian’s pattern of abusive and hostile behavior shows up in several publically available court documents which date back to at least 1996. He is now continuing this pattern of behavior at LTCC. Several other employees can corroborate the hostile work environment he is creating for this college.”

In a conversation with *Lake Tahoe News* after the March 15 meeting, Niehoff said, “When you look at him and listen he sounds articulate and engaged, but he clearly doesn’t like to be challenged, to be questioned. The board doesn’t see it because he has one personality for them and another on campus.”

When asked to describe his relationship with Niehoff, Maradian said, “I don’t describe personnel matters.”

Niehoff said their relationship soured after she questioned the expense of holiday lights and the religious nature of them.

Apparently an exchange of emails went back and forth between the two last fall. Authority over the whole college versus responsibility for all fiscal matters is a large part of the dialogue. The escalation and tone of the emails is what led

Niehoff to write her letter to the board.

The board on Tuesday granted Niehoff permission to speak to them at the March 22 meeting in closed session. She wants it to be just her and the board, though Borges will be out of town.

Niehoff is considering her options. To begin with she still has a job and may be offered a contract to carry on her services. For now, she said she will do the job she was hired to do, but on July 1 she doesn't know where she will be.

Flooding, mudslides just outside Lake Tahoe Basin

By Cathy Locke, Sacramento Bee

Heavy rain battered the foothills during the late afternoon and early evening today, with reports of road flooding and rock and mudslides in El Dorado, Placer and Nevada counties.

Some of the heaviest rain in the past six hours was along the Highway 49 corridor, with a little more than an inch in Pilot Hill and 1.11 inches in the Auburn area.

About 1.75 inches of rain was recorded at Blue Canyon on Interstate 80 during the 24-hour period ending at 5pm, said Angus Barkhuff, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Sacramento.

Read the whole story

Big Mountain Battle headed to Squaw

Helly Hansen’s Big Mountain Battle returns to Squaw Valley for the third year on March 19. The event was postponed earlier this winter due to heavy snowfall at the resort.

The Big Mountain Battle’s Squaw Valley stop is a favorite among local skiers. The event will challenge teams of two to ski and snowboard a big-mountain course on Squaw Valley’s legendary terrain. Teams are tracked in real time by Flaik GPS devices as they hit virtual checkpoints, strategically placed across the mountain.

First-place finishers will win $2,000 worth of Helly gear, prizes from sponsors Thule, Powder and Dakine, and free entry to the final Battle in the Bowls in Aspen/Snowmass on March 27. Second- and third-place finishers will also be awarded an array of prizes from sponsors.

Cost for the event is $85 per team and includes two Helly Hansen base layers, valued at $45 each as well as a year-long subscription to Powder magazine. For more information and to register, go online.

SLTPD to beef up crosswalk

enforcement

On March 17, officers of the South Lake Tahoe Police Department will conduct a specialized enforcement effort focusing on motorists who violate pedestrians' right of way in crosswalks, as well as those motorists who ignore the flashing red lights displayed on local school buses while picking up or delivering children.

Pedestrians, particularly children, pose one of the highest safety risks related to traffic safety. The spontaneity of children can be particularly unpredictable around traffic, and pedestrians are the most vulnerable to injury or death when involved in a collision with a motor vehicle.

Scam leaves S. Tahoe store short on cash

A bait and switch scam at the South Lake Tahoe Rite-Aid has police warning retail workers to be on the lookout for similar transactions.

Officers said the suspect on March 12 gave the clerk five $20 bills in exchange for a $100 bill. The clerk took his money and gave him a $100 bill.

The suspect turned and began to walk away. He then turned around and pulled out a $10 bill from his waist area and told the clerk she accidentally gave him a $10 bill, officers said.

The clerk gave him another $100 bill and he gave her the $10 bill, causing a loss of $90 for the store. The shortage was

discovered when the drawer was counted.

The suspect is described as a black man, 20 to 30 years of age, between 5-8 and 6-foot, weighing 235 to 260 pounds. He has short black hair, was wearing a gray sweat shirt with “Swamp Lager” on front, a white T-shirt and gray pants.

Truckee police find body of missing 18-year-old

Updated March 15 at 3:09pm

The body of 18-year-old Andre Simonpietri was located this morning by a local Truckee resident.

Truckee police working with members of the Nevada County Search and Rescue team were contacted by a local Truckee resident at about 11:01am Tuesday. Andre Simonpietri’s body was located in the Glenshire subdivision of Truckee near where he lived.

No foul play is suspected in the death.

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Andre Simonpietri, 18, of Truckee has been missing since March 13 when he left his residence in the Glenshire area about 11am with the family dog.

The dog was found later that day wondering the woods east of Glenshire by a passerby. The dog was reunited with the Simonpietri family on March 14. Simonpietri has not been heard from since he left home.

Assistance was requested from the Nevada County Search and Rescue team which began operations Monday night.

Simonpietri is a white male, 5-feet-6, 154 pounds.

Anyone with information is asked to call the Truckee Police Department at (530) 550.2320.

Storm expected to bring snow to basin, higher elevations

Time to get out the shovel because snow is in the forecast overnight.

The National Weather Service in Reno has issued a winter weather advisory from 8 tonight to 5pm Wednesday for elevations above 7,000 feet

Below 7,000 feet about a half foot of snow is forecast, while above that elevation between 8 and 16 inches are possible.



Looking for that pot of gold in South Lake Tahoe on March 15. Photo/Kathryn

Reed

Passes could be problematic for the morning commute especially as the rain soaked roads freeze.

The Weather Service is also warning of avalanche danger on steep terrain above 7,000 feet.

Winds are expected to be strong throughout this storm, too.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

City, TRPA at odds over what potential Y tenants need to do

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe officials are being vague about what the boarded up Mikasa-Miller's Outpost site might be turned into. At the same time, they are frustrated with TRPA allegedly being obstructionists to getting tenants into the Y retail center.

"The biggest stumbling block is the required traffic study and air mitigation fee," City Manager Tony O'Rourke told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Nowhere else have I run into something like this."



Work is going forward to fill in the blank sign at the Y. Photo/LTN file

O’Rourke said it’s unusual for a property zoned for retail to have to go through the types of studies the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency is requesting when the use is not changing.

Based on the bi-state regulatory agency’s 1987 Regional Plan, any building that has not been used for 90 days in a two-year period must go through this sort of analysis.

“It’s standard throughout California for any new business to offset their traffic impacts and that’s why a traffic analysis is needed for the property. Taking a fresh look at potential traffic impacts going forward is actually in the best interest of the new business to make sure any mitigation costs are based on reality during this down economy versus being tied to a textbook formula,” explained Julie Regan, TRPA’s chief of external affairs.

O’Rourke said the air quality fee could cost the entire center about $160,000.

To this, Regan said, “The cost estimate of $160,000 for a traffic study seems on the high side to our planners so perhaps there’s an opportunity for our transportation team members to assist in making the project less expensive for the applicant.”

City Councilman Tom Davis at a South Lake Tahoe Lodging Association meeting last week told that board, which he is a member of, a company out of London that has stores in Southern California is looking to move into the Y location. He reiterated his frustrations with TRPA at today's City Council meeting.

He said the tenants are proposing about $1 million in improvements. Davis said four businesses may occupy the center that was last anchored by Miller's Outpost and Mikasa.

O'Rourke said a few potential tenants have been speaking with the Garfinkle family, the property owners. This rendering is what was proposed at one time for the area.

What the area would be transformed into remains to be seen. Because a community plan has not been done at the Y, any redevelopment is limited. However, the Tahoe Valley Community Plan is expected to be discussed in a work session by the South Lake Tahoe City Council on April 19.

"TRPA supports economic revitalization of the Y area, especially since the old Mikasa site is nearly 100 percent covered with asphalt which affects water quality," Regan said.

O'Rourke isn't convinced, stating TRPA's rules are killing redevelopment and in these competitive economic times roadblocks and added costs could send potential investors elsewhere.

Ski report: Unsettled weather



Weather could pose a problem for the lifts up top.

Here is the ski report from Curtis Fong, the Guy from Tahoe.

Snippets about Lake Tahoe



• The 2011 Nevada State Fair has been canceled because of money issues. Only 13 percent of the fundraising goal had been met before the board made its decision this month.

• Zephyr Cove Elementary sixth-grader Aspen Kidd is going to the state National Geographic Geography Bee in Las Vegas on April 1.

• Lake Tahoe poet Brian Turner was in the top 10 for Britain's T.S. Eliot Prize for Poetry.

• The U.S. Ski and Snowboard Association, the national governing body for Olympic skiing and snowboarding, has named Marriott International as its official hotel and lodging partner.

• The BEAR League is part of an Animal Planet series starting at 10 the nights of March 17, March 24 and March 31.