Editorial: Rice, Sears, Allen for LVFPD board

Publisher's note: ***The following endorsement is from Lake Tahoe News after a team of seven community members gathered to discuss who should be on the Lake Valley Fire Protection District board.***

Lake Valley Fire Protection District will be 70 years old next year. One would think with that kind of history it would run like a well-oiled machine. Not so.

A five-member board oversees the operations of the 86-square-mile district that covers most of the unincorporated area of the South Shore on the California side. Therein lies the problem. Much of the board has been entrenched for years, thus creating a good ole boys' club.

Three positions are open, with four people running. The second longest serving board member – Greg Herback since 2003 – is stepping down. That leaves Dave Huber (on since 1990), Bob Bettencourt (2004), Rob Rossi (2010) and John Rice (2011). Bettencourt and Rice are running for re-election.

These five men stood by while former Fire Chief Gareth Harris had two votes of no confidence from staff. They stood by while the El Dorado County Grand Jury investigated the chief. They drew a line in the sand when it came to working with South Lake Tahoe on the ambulance joint operating agreement. The buck stops with them when it comes to having let some key staff leave, for morale to have tanked and for a once prideful department to spiral into dysfunction.

None of the four candidates – Tony Sears and Leona Allen are the challengers – chose to respond to *Lake Tahoe News'* questions. The media is a conduit to the elected body's constituents. Not wanting to answer difficult questions or be

political are pathetic excuses for not being accountable to the people they represent.

The board members need to realize they work for the people of the fire district, not for the employees of the district.

The comradery at board meetings where the electeds are eating dinner with staff before business commences shows a lack of division.

While the district appears to be on a better path with Jeff Michael temporarily being at the helm and the hiring of Tim Alameda as the next full time chief, the board clearly needs to change.

Lake Tahoe News is endorsing Rice, Sears and Allen.

Bettencourt is too much of an obstacle and old guard. The district can't afford to keep operating under his leadership, as he is the current board chair.

Rice has been in this community for quite some time, with a stellar reputation as the head honcho at Sierra-at-Tahoe ski resort. With new blood on the board, his voice should become louder and stronger. We hope he'll assert himself to be a leader on the board and restore the district to a prestigious level. That board needs a dose of the professionalism he brings to his day job.

Sears, we hope, will keep the board on the straight and narrow. The group could use an attorney among its ranks. The board functions in a loose fashion, with a lack of understanding of the Brown Act. While Sears is a deputy district attorney for El Dorado County, clearly his expertise of the law is different than what the board will need, nonetheless, he is ethical – a label that today cannot be applied to the board as a whole.

Allen might be a bit of a wildcard on the board. She has been

called the mother of the department. For several years she was the administrative secretary as well as the public information officer. She is chummy with the rank and file members. That isn't always a good thing. What is good is that she is familiar with the workings of the board, the budget and how a fire department functions. Plus, she has the experience of being the key person at the Lake Tahoe Basin Fire Academy at Lake Tahoe Community College. Hopefully, being a board member will not present a conflict of interest.

It is *Lake Tahoe News'* hope that Rice, Sears and Allen will restore Lake Valley Fire Protection District's reputation, instill a sense of professionalism and abolish the good ole boy status of the board. The community and staff equally deserve this.

White House calls for increase in firefighting funds

By Kurtis Alexander, San Francisco Chronicle

Devastating wildfires like the giant that is still chewing through Big Sur are driving the nation's firefighting costs to unprecedented levels, prompting the Obama administration to say the government is ill-equipped to handle the increasingly busy fire seasons of the historically dry West.

White House Budget Director Shaun Donovan on Tuesday called on Congress to better fund the U.S. Forest Service, the country's biggest wildland firefighting force, which in six of the past 10 years has exhausted its allocation for fire suppression.

The agency has dipped into other programs to make up the shortfall – including programs that aim to prevent wildfires in the first place.

Read the whole story

Web-savvy park ranger turns spotlight on wilderness



For ranger Miranda LeConte, interacting with people is her favorite part of the job. Photo/Provided

By Sammy Caiola, Sacramento Bee

Miranda Leconte can't stand litterers. She's irked by backpackers who camp in Desolation Wilderness without permits, and she's got a lot to say to people who build fires there, despite the many warnings that it's forbidden.

If she sounds like a stickler it's because she is, but for

good reason – it's her job. The 23-year-old Camino native just finished her first season as a U.S. Forest Service ranger, patrolling the 64,000 breathtaking acres of Desolation Wilderness area near Lake Tahoe and teaching people how to keep it clean.

Her environmental conservation crusade, much of which she documents on social media, has garnered the attention of 17,000 Instagram followers and some major outdoor gear companies. When she's not out maintaining trails or restocking permit boxes, she's most likely blogging about her work or striking a mountaintop pose for the camera.

Read the whole story

Editorial: Byer deserves to be on DCSD board

Publisher's note: ***The following endorsement is from Lake Tahoe News after a team of seven community members gathered to discuss who should be on the Douglas County School District board.***

Parents of students in Douglas County schools at Lake Tahoe have for years had a love-hate relationship with the board of education and administrators in Minden.

The lake and valley in many ways are worlds apart – and geography is only one component. Course offerings, class sizes, student demographics, the number of schools – they are different to the point that in some ways it's like two school districts in one.



Keith Byer

While education should be the common denominator, that isn’t always the case. Whittell High School parents in 2014 challenged the board to the point a special committee was convened to address their needs. While suggestions were made, little action has been taken.

This is why it is so critical that the person who represents the lake on the Douglas County School District board of education be someone who can speak for everyone here as well as be a bridge to the valley.

Lake Tahoe News believes Keith Byer is unequivocally the best qualified candidate to do the job. He has had one child go through the school system in Douglas and has another enrolled at Whittell High School.

Byer has attended board meetings besides during times of discontent. This shows he is engaged in the issues beyond when there is a crisis. He is an objective thinker who as a certified public accountant will bring a financial mindset to the table.

Even though each board member in theory represents the entire district, many of the four from the valley only make it to the lake once a quarter when the board meeting is here. That is why it is so critical to have the lake board member be strong.

Plus, Byer has experience as a board member. He spent eight years on the Anglo-American School of Moscow board. He was also on their finance committee. (He has lived in four countries.)

Byer would bring a worldly perspective to the board that it hasn't had. This is perfect for a small district, representing even smaller schools to have someone with such a unique background who can provide leadership for his colleagues and inspiration for staff and students.

The seat is vacant because of term limits. Not only is the lake losing Cindy Trigg, but Teri Jamin as well. While Jamin lives in the Carson Valley, for years she worked for the city of South Lake Tahoe. She understood the nuances of the lake in a way others did not. This, too, adds to the importance of voting for Byer because he will in many ways be the lone voice for the lake on the board.

Byer's opponent, Mike Kiger, chose not to answer *Lake Tahoe News'* questions. He said he was too busy building houses. We believe someone who can't take the time to tell potential constituents where he stands on issues will not be engaged enough to listen to their needs as a board member.

Byer is beyond qualified and the best choice for the Douglas County School District board of education.

Whole Foods redevelopment project squandered

By Kathryn Reed

In what was touted to be a signature project to showcase how redevelopment can work to benefit the environment and the economy, and how competing agencies could work together is now the ultimate example of Tahoe drama that has collectively cost taxpayers and the would-be developer nearly $1 million.

South Lake Tahoe entered a contract with Pradip Patel, owner of the Knights Inn on Highway 50, in February to purchase the property for $6 million. This was $1.5 million more than the appraised value. The city was going to recoup the difference by selling the commodities tied to the parcel.

(The transaction would have skewed the real estate market if the sale were to be above the appraised price; making comps for future sales a sticking point.)

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency in an attempt to curtail development assessed a value to things like commercial floor area, tourist accommodation units and coverage. More recently they developed a pilot program – which has not been used – where bonus units are available if stream environmental zones are restored. All of this plays into this project and in some ways is partially to be blamed for the demise of it.

The blame, though, for why this project is dead in the water can be shared by nearly everyone who ever had anything to do with it.



This is what the Whole Foods in South Lake Tahoe could have looked like.

In the contract between South Lake Tahoe and Patel was a contingency that the deal was dependent on $4 million from the California Tahoe Conservancy. The money would have been used to fund the environmental work, including daylighting the stream that is now diverted through an underground culvert and reducing sediment reaching Lake Tahoe by 10,000 pounds per year.

But the Conservancy board never got a chance to vote on this expenditure of Proposition 1 dollars because Executive Director Patrick Wright wouldn’t put it on the agenda. Tom Davis, the city’s rep on the Conservancy board, said he is going to demand the issue be heard in December – even if it’s too late.

The city started working with the CTC last October when it initially applied for funding. At the eleventh-hour the city was told to rewrite the application. City and Conservancy

staff have differing opinions about why the paperwork had to be done, but those outside the agencies point to Wright as being the difficult player in all of this.

He wanted a larger say over what the project looked like. He wanted those bonus units from the TRPA.

The Conservancy has one of the largest pools of commodities in the basin. With the agency no longer flush with cash from the state, it has been resourceful in how to sustain itself. Selling commodities is one way.



The Knights Inn collects about $100,000 in transient occupancy taxes a year. Photo/LTN

What got lost in battle between the city and Conservancy was the final outcome. All involved agree that what was proposed was so much better than what is there now.

While there was going to be some stream environmental zone (SEZ) restoration, ultimately this was more of a stormwater project. The more SEZ that was to be restored, the more bonus

units that could have been procured. The Conservancy wanted an SEZ project.

It didn't pencil out for all the development to be solely on the southwest corner. In part this had to do with how much parking Whole Foods required.

While fine-tuning of the project, it was obvious that to build a viable commercial area that the SEZ was going to be redeveloped, not entirely restored. This didn't sit well with the Conservancy.

To have made the SEZ numbers pencil out the city needed to include the two CTC parcels adjoining the hotel property in the back.

A Conservancy staff member told *Lake Tahoe News* one thing holding up release of Proposition 1 money was that the city had not completed the CEQA document. City officials said they first heard the CEQA argument from *LTN*, never from the CTC. That environmental document, which cost a couple hundred thousand dollars, is done. But for it to be circulated it had to be tied to a project and currently there is no project.

Proposition 1 dollars that were to be used for this dictate that the project must be multidimensional – which this would have been.

The Conservancy kept changing its reason for why Proposition 1 funds were not appropriate for this project. The city contends it did everything Wright wanted when it came to applying for the money. Only the board can actually allocate the dollars, but it has never had a chance to say yes or no.

The Conservancy wants the city to study the site more; the board awarded a planning grant at its September meeting. The city has yet to accept it. The city believes there has been enough planning and that now it is time to develop. The city had hoped to break ground next spring.

Hindsight shows that bringing in all the players sooner may have resulted in a different conclusion. Better communication may have helped to avoid what became an insurmountable disconnect.

Three members from the Conservancy and three from the city met again on Oct. 4. Davis was there as the bridge since he is the city's rep on the CTC board. Davis said it didn't go well.



The area in green represents the Knights Inn parcel, while the gold are is the southwest corner property at Ski Run and Highway 50. Map/South Lake Tahoe

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and League to Save Lake Tahoe told *LTN* they are still hopeful a project that benefits the environment and economy will come to fruition – it just might take different players. It will be necessary that everyone's vision is stated at the get-go so compromise can come before contracts are signed.

Ironically, the city ended up not needing the Conservancy's money. It had $5.1 million from Halferty Development, $800,000 from Placer County from the sale of onsite tourist

accommodation units, and the city contributing $100,000.

But the contract the city had with the hotel owner was so poorly written that not only did it give the city an out, it gave Patel an out. He exercised it and said he would not sell.

Even so, the city at its Oct. 18 meeting is likely to have closed session items pertaining to potential litigation involving Patel allegedly breaking the contract and possible litigation with the Conservancy. Patel never told the city why he is not selling. He didn't ask for more money.

Patel is now talking to a developer from the Bay Area. He wanted to work directly with Whole Foods, but that company already had a deal with Halferty. Plus, Whole Foods requires an ingress/egress to its stores where a stoplight exists. This could have worked via the southwest corner site. Caltrans has said it won't allow a light at Herbert Avenue, which is at the western edge of the hotel complex. This means Patel can't have his Whole Foods.

Patel chose not to talk to *Lake Tahoe News*. His attorney, Mike McLaughlin, also did not return a call.

About a decade ago Patel was in negotiations with the Conservancy to sell the property for about $8 million. No formal offer was made by the state agency.

Patel has little incentive to sell. Real estate 101 says no one is going to sell if they don't have to. He has two kids in high school, so he wants to stay here. His family's home is on the back of the property. Plus, he's making a decent living operating the 100-plus room hotel. That is not to say if the price is right, he wouldn't start packing.

Halferty Development out of Southern California has been waiting patiently to develop that site in conjunction with the neighboring parcel known as the southwest corner at Highway 50 and Ski Run Boulevard. The firm has invested hundreds of

thousands of dollars. And today the cost to build is much greater than what it was just a couple years ago.

Halferty is in escrow on the corner lot, which is expected to close in the spring. Those close to the deal believe the sale will go through even though the greater vision has been eclipsed by circumstances outside of Halferty's control.

Insiders say Halferty could still recoup what it has paid out to date and make a profit with a project on the corner.

Chris Peto, COO for Halferty, would not talk to *Lake Tahoe News* about the company's plans for the southwest corner nor would he confirm that his company is now looking at other property on the South Shore to develop.

Halferty had Whole Foods lined up to open one of its new concept grocery stores. Other possibilities had been REI and Trader Joe's. Because the latest plans were to build on both sites, what becomes of the southwest corner remains to be seen.

Disappearing Yosemite glacier a symbol of climate change

By Brad Branan, Sacramento Bee

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK – When naturalist John Muir explored Lyell Glacier in Yosemite National Park about 150 years ago, the river of ice stretched as far as 10 football fields between the peaks of the Lyell Canyon, a glacier one might expect to see in Alaska, not California.

Today, it's a sliver of the natural feature Muir called a

“living glacier.” Over the last 130 years, the glacier has lost 78 percent of its surface, shrunk from about a half square mile to 66 acres.

Stand on the glacier and it’s hard to hear anything except the sound of melting water rushing underneath. A big patch of bedrock is exposed in its middle.

Read the whole story

Editorial: Vogelgesang, Exline for STPUD

Publisher’s note: ***The following endorsement is from Lake Tahoe News after a team of seven community members gathered to discuss who should be on the South Tahoe Public Utility District board.***

Water and sewer are not sexy topics. However, in today’s world water is only going to become more important. That is why it is vital the best people possible are in charge of overseeing the operations at South Tahoe Public Utility District.

The board needs to be comprised of people who understand the intricacies of the operations and have a vision for the future. *Lake Tahoe News* believes Randy Vogelgesang and Nick Exline have those qualities.



Randy Vogelgesang

Vogelgesang is the current board chairman and is finishing his first four-year term. Being a civil and structural engineer have helped him to grasp the finer details of the largest water-sewer district on the South Shore.

He has consistently been fiscally conservative. In 2014, he voted against giving employees a raise. “I felt that I needed to try to keep any pay increases as low as possible considering the economic situation of the ratepayers,” Vogelgesang told *Lake Tahoe News*. While he was on the losing end of that vote, we appreciate that he was considering the people he represents – the ratepayers, not the workers. When it comes to employee benefits, he said, “I would prefer a defined contribution over a defined benefit plan as a way to control costs.”



Nick Exline

Exline is a breath of fresh air. His energy is infectious and his ideas plentiful. While he is running on a platform to increase renewable energy, he will likely soon learn that economically it could be an uphill battle. Nonetheless, we

applaud him for bringing ideas to the table.

After all, it is the board that is supposed to be the policymaker and staff is there to do the work. Maybe it's time for South Tahoe PUD to look at different policies. Providing clean water and treated effluent that is near pristine are in some ways doing the minimum. That is not to take away from the hard work involved to make all of this happen. But the status quo from the board needs shaking up a bit.

There needs to be more vision. That is one reason we cannot endorse Kelly Sheehan for another term.

While South Tahoe PUD has **enough water** for the next 30 years, that doesn't mean the district can ignore what is going on in the rest of the state and in Nevada when it comes to drought, domestic water and farming needs; nor can it turn its back on climate change; and it's scary to acknowledge with the 10-year anniversary of the Angora Fire coming up next June that the service area still does not have adequate water lines for fire suppression.

There is much more for the district's board to do than worry if a toilet flushes and if clear water comes out of the spigot. We need leaders with vision on the South Tahoe Public Utility District board. Vogelgesang and Exline fit that description.

Elementary students learn intricacies of water



Sierra House second-grader Aeron Pettus helps his team in the water relay competition on Oct. 3. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

Not everyone in the world – even in the United States – has running water. And while this might be common knowledge for adults, students in Lake Tahoe Unified School District have a better understanding of that reality after hauling water from one container to another.

This is just one of the hands-on lessons that is part of Wonders of Water.

Each elementary grade level is spending time outdoors, right near their campus, learning various aspects of water.

“I learned how invasive species break the life cycle,” Aeron Pettus told *Lake Tahoe News.*

The Sierra House Elementary School second-grader was a tui

chub. He was at the top of the food chain – eating the daphnia, which feasted on the phytoplankton. But then an Asian clam came along and disrupted the food chain.

Invasive species and the harm they can do was one lesson the youngsters learned. The importance of cleaning boats was stressed.

At another station in the wooded area beyond the playground students were asked to pay attention to what was growing nearby.

They were quick to know that “trees help you breath” and they “make oxygen.”



Maria Mircheva with the Sugar Pine Foundation talks about trees and bushes. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Maria Mircheva with the Sugar Pine Foundation explained how willows are deciduous – meaning they shed their leaves – and how the Washoe Indians used to use their branches to make baskets.

Manzanita, she told them, means little apple in Spanish. The berries on it are said to look like apples. It falls into the evergreen category, just like the towering pines.

Donielle Morse with South Tahoe Public Utility District explained how most of the water used in South Lake Tahoe comes from wells. But then she got into what happens if you don't have a faucet. That's when the students participated in a relay race to see what it was like to haul water from one area to another without spilling, but still doing so quickly. This was to simulate what it might be like to haul water from a lake to a dwelling.

Other agencies helping on Oct. 3 were the U.S. Forest Service, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, Sugar Pine Foundation, and Lake Tahoe Humane Society. Lake Tahoe Educational Foundation and the Optimist Club helped to fund the districtwide program.

All of the instruction meets the state science standards. Each year Beth Quandt, science outreach coordinator for LTUSD, works with teachers and presenters to improve on the stations.

At Sierra House a fence that was just beyond the playground has been removed, which has created an outdoor classroom of sorts.

"Now that the teachers know some of things that are out here they can bring their classes out here to continue the learning," Quandt told *Lake Tahoe News.*

Calif. creates state-

sponsored retirement plan

By Alejandro Lazo and Anne Tergesen, Wall Street Journal

Gov. Jerry Brown approved a bill creating state-sponsored retirement plans for about 6.8 million Californians who don't have them through their private employers.

The nation's most populous state becomes the eighth state to establish such a program.

The AARP estimates about 55 million full- and part-time private-sector workers in the U.S. lack access to retirement-plan coverage through work. States have been filling in that gap by creating such plans.

Read the whole story

Editorial: Dalton is right choice for LTCC

Publisher's note: ***The following endorsement is from Lake Tahoe News after a team of seven community members gathered to discuss who should be on the Lake Tahoe Community College board of education.***

Forthright, informed and prepared to serve – that's Nancy Dalton.

Those are some of the reasons why *Lake Tahoe News* is endorsing her for the Area 4 seat on the Lake Tahoe Community College board.



Nancy Dalton

As a math teacher at South Tahoe High School she will be able to be a bridge between the college and Lake Tahoe Unified School District. As the two institutions continue to develop career and technical education programs that are linked, it is critical to have someone on the inside who gets what high school students are going through and understands their needs.

The two entities are losing the current link with Larry Green leaving the LTUSD board.

Ironically, he is a math instructor at LTCC. As a numbers guy, he has been able to use his expertise when it has come to financial matters on his board. And while understanding algebra and geometry at the high school level does not mean someone understands the nuances of a multi-million budget with restricted and unrestricted dollars or the management of a facilities bond, we are hopeful Dalton will have an awareness that someone with a different discipline would not likely have.

And while it can be difficult to have a full-time job and be an elected official, Dalton has proved that she is up to the task. She has been attending LTCC board meetings for most of this year, so she understands the time commitment, the amount of reading involved and the demands beyond the meetings.

The board and college as a whole will benefit from Dalton’s leadership experience with other boards, as department chair at STHS and helping manage her husband’s construction business. While education is her primary background, her

diverse interests and past will help her make decisions as a college board trustee.

We agree with her when she says the main priorities of the board should be:

- Hire a competent superintendent/president
- Fulfill the improvements stated in Measure F
- Work within the budget.

While her opponent, Dave Hamilton, has impressive credentials and is passionate about the college, as a former instructor he also has baggage that we don’t believe would be conducive for making a harmonious board.