

STPUD on course to increase rates



STPUD board members Jim Jones, from left, Randy Vogelgesang, Eric Schafer and Kelly Sheehan on March 26.
Photo/LTN

By Kathryn Reed

South Tahoe Public Utility District board members on Wednesday somewhat hamstrung future board's when it comes to allowable rate increases.

They also agreed to potential water and sewer increases that are well below what staff recommends.

"It really decreases the water line replacements. Hopefully, there is not a fire in the area where the water lines are pushed off," Paul Hughes, CFO for the district, told *Lake Tahoe News* after the three-hour meeting.

Four of the board members clearly had their minds made up about how to proceed even before staff gave its report, and the public had a chance to ask questions and make comments.

Board member Chris Cefalu, who is out of town, didn't even listen in during the March 26 discussion. He only joined the conversation via telephone when it came time for board deliberations.

He and board member Randy Vogelgesang were adamant that the

staff's recommendations were too much. Board members Eric Schafer and Jim Jones believe staff is spot on, with Jones saying increases could even be higher to meet the needs of the district. Kelly Sheehan didn't say much, but leaned toward Cefalu and Vogelgesang.

In the end, the consensus was to set a maximum possible rate increase on the water side of 6.5 percent for each of the next four years with the fifth year being 5 percent; maximum possible sewer increase of 6 percent each of the next five years; and raising the base pay for those on water meters to be 80 percent of the bill, with 15 percent being based on consumption.

Staff had proposed water increases of 9.5 percent, 9 percent, 9 percent, 9 percent and 5 percent for the next five years. The other increases are what staff recommended.

Per state law the district must send to ratepayers what is called a Proposition 218 form. This informs them of the proposed maximum allowed increases. This will go out the first week of April.

Proposition 218 requires a 45-day protest period. If 50 percent plus one ratepayers were to file a protest to the proposed rate increases, the district could not go forward no matter what the board wanted to do.

It won't be until the board's June 5 meeting that a decision is actually made on what the increases, if there are any, will be. They can be less than what is proposed – including no increase. (There will also be public meetings April 17 and May 15, both at 6pm.)

What some of the board members were hung up on is this was not a vote for a specific percentage, but instead it was about a maximum allowed for the next five years.

One reason to go for the five-year Proposition 218 notice is

to save money because the process is an expense, as well as to lock in revenues to pay for the completion of installing nearly 8,000 water meters.

The district has until mid-June to apply for a \$21.5 million zero percent interest loan from the state that would be paid back over 20 years. The state is mandating water districts install meters by 2025.

Cefalu and Vogelgesang believe having put a higher cap on the rate increase would have made it more likely this and future boards would vote for that amount and they believe it is too much to ask ratepayers.

Schafer and Jones wanted to give this and future boards flexibility – plus, the top percentage allows the district to accomplish goals the board has set forth with capital improvement projects.

Besides needing to install the meters, the district's main concerns are the nearly 1,500 residences that don't have water lines that provide for adequate fire suppression. While the 2007 Angora Fire was brought up multiple times and how that area had sufficient sized lines, nothing was mentioned about California's continued drought and how that could subject the area to greater danger of a wildfire. The 4-inch lines cannot pump the required 1,500 gallons per minute.

For the last 10 years, the average STPUD water bill has gone up 2 percent, and the sewer bill 2.55 percent.

When the district does its 10-year plan, which it updates every year, a 4 percent increase is forecast. This gives staff an idea of revenues so it can plan projects.

Schafer, who is the board president and has said he is not running for re-election in November, said of the 10-year document, "I think we need to start paying attention to what we put in it. That's a semi-commitment."

Because what has been going in it has not truly reflected the board's actions because rate increases have not been occurring on a regular basis.

Staff showed how water projects for the next 10 years have a price tag of \$69.5 million, while the 20-year estimate is \$154 million. Ultimately the cost will be more expensive as things break and need to be repaired, and as construction costs escalate because costs are also based on work that should have been done.

And it's possible after this five-year stretch rates could go higher to compensate for not having a higher rate now. That is essentially what is happening now. Staff had said 4 percent increases were needed to keep up with capital improvement projects. Those increases didn't materialize because of board decisions. That is why larger increases were on the table.

The third issue facing the district is \$58.5 million in capital improvements are penciled out for the next 10 years on the sewer side; \$130 million across 20 years.

A fire that cannot be suppressed or a sewer spill into Lake Tahoe or the Upper Truckee River will prove making upgrades per staff recommendations should have done; plugging along without incident will prove the gamble with lower rate increases was the prudent move.

LTCC classified staff about to have initial contract

Lake Tahoe Community Colleges' classified staff is about to have its first contract.

The group officially organized to establish a union in August 2011. They have been working with the college since then to create a contract.

In the first go-round discussions reached impasse regarding health and welfare, and binding arbitration.

The board of trustees discussed the contract at the March 25 meeting and is expected to approve it at the April 8 meeting. The union still needs to ratify the contract.

Health benefits starting July 1 will be capped at \$17,496 a year. The district is paying 100 percent of the standard health plan for employees. Employees have the option to pay \$158/month for the premium plan.

The board was against binding arbitration, believing instead elected officials should have final say regarding grievance and discipline issues.

No raises are part of the deal because the South Lake Tahoe institution is still experiencing declining enrollment and other budgetary issues.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Study: Calif. second least affordable state for renters

By Andrew Khouri, Los Angeles Times

California renters must earn more than triple the minimum wage to afford a two-bedroom apartment, underscoring a housing shortage throughout the state, a report said.

A worker earning the minimum wage – \$8 per hour in California – would have to toil away for 130 hours a week to afford a two-bedroom, the National Low Income Housing Coalition said Monday.

Across the nation, minimum wage workers can't afford a one- or two-bedroom apartment at fair market rent, the group said. The coalition's president, Sheila Crowley, said raising the federal minimum wage would ease the burden.

Read the whole story

Prevalence of drugs not going away in Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

Underage drug use and across-the-board abuse of drugs is nothing new.

But that doesn't mean there aren't plenty of people sounding the alarm that more needs to be done at an earlier age if the cycle is going to be broken, or at a minimum the number of users and abusers begins to decrease.

"I think drug education is extremely important. It's not necessarily incumbent on schools, but parents, too. There is an ongoing disconnect between what is going on and what parents know," Matt Underhill, sergeant with the El Dorado Sheriff's Office, told *Lake Tahoe News*.



Drug Store Project has multiple vignettes about the consequences of underage drug use, as well as abuse of drugs. Photo/Provided

Underhill is also commander of South Lake El Dorado Narcotics Enforcement Team now that the state has pulled out of this regional drug task force.

“Painkillers seem to be most sought after. I think a lot of kids are willing to experiment without knowing what they are ingesting,” Underhill said.

A national study conducted last year by Drugfree.org and MetLife Foundation found 49 percent of teens who misuse or abuse prescription medicines get them from a family member or friend.

According to a 2010 report by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 72 percent of high school students have consumed alcohol by the end of their senior year.

Robert Leri, superintendent of Tahoe Truckee Unified School District, in his monthly column, wrote, “We were recently made aware of the growing popularity of ‘butter wax’ or ‘shadow wax,’ a concentrated form of marijuana or hash oil that can contain nearly 20 times the THC levels compared to smoking marijuana. Reports have found that students in Washoe County have been using the wax before and during school and also using odorless e-cigarettes to smoke marijuana to avoid

detection.” So far, TTUSD does not have that problem to contend with.

Prescription drug use is a major component of the annual Drug Store Project. The April 1 event is all about teaching sixth-graders on the South Shore about the consequences of “pharm parties” where meds are mixed and often ingested like candy.

“In all the research you’ll find that kids experiment (with drugs) around age 9 these days,” Lisa Huard told *Lake Tahoe News*. Huard is a safe schools coordinator and runs the Drug Store Project, which is put on under the umbrella of Tahoe Youth & Family Services.

Huard is a vocal proponent for more education about drugs in schools.

“Not until fifth grade and middle school is there talk about drugs and the effects on their bodies,” Huard said of the curriculum in Lake Tahoe Unified School District. “We are teaching young kids about nutrition. That is paying off. If we are teaching about food, why are we not teaching about drugs? That goes in the body too.”

She wants research-validated curriculum to be used throughout K-12.

There was a time when LTUSD had more drug education. But state cuts, more emphasis on standardized testing and No Child Left Behind helped put an end to much of what was provided in the classroom.

Underhill believes the education needs to start at the elementary level.

“I do think an ongoing education program at a young age to supplement what the family is teaching is very important,” Underhill said. “Not teaching anything is not working.”

LTUSD Superintendent Jim Tarwater said at the K-5 level the

emphasis is on fitness and health.

The district is working with the South Lake Tahoe Drug Coalition to be able to provide more education for youth. "We don't have much now," Tarwater admitted.

He believes catching students at the middle school level will keep them from having drug issues when they reach high school.

Marijuana is the district's No. 1 problem. It's the same for law enforcement when it comes youth users.

"I think we definitely need to have better controls over medicinal marijuana because it's ending up in the hands of a lot of kids who are not patients," Underhill said. "It's becoming really accessible. Whether it's sold or furnished, it is very accessible."

Tarwater told *Lake Tahoe News*, "If kids on campus are caught using, usually it's not alcohol, usually it's marijuana. Instead of sending them off campus for three days, we will have in-house suspension."

This will start next year for grades 6-12. The Drug Coalition is spearheading this idea. Agencies associated with it will provide drug counseling for the students.

Once in high school there is drug education in the ninth-grade health class.

What Huard would like more of is prevention education. Intervention is great, but by that time there is already a problem.

But it's not just the youth in the community who are using drugs. Educators and officers say one of the stumbling blocks is kids are seeing their parents use. It's hard to tell them "no" at school when at home the answer is "yes".

In 2012, Barton Health through the Community Health Needs

Assessment identified substance abuse as the most important health issue that needed to be addressed.

“The facts speak for themselves. South Lake Tahoe has four times the national average of illicit drug use. As a healthcare provider, we see a high percentage of chronic drinkers and a high rate of drug-induced deaths,” John Williams, CEO of Barton Health, said in this month’s executive team update.

Besides the hard drugs, Tarwater said school officials have noticed an increase of e-cigarette use. A trend in schools across the country is putting marijuana in an e-cigarette to avoid detection.

—

Other things to know:

- The Caucus on International Narcotics Control Chairman Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and Co-Chairman Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, are sponsoring a hearing on heroin and prescription drug abuse. The March 26 will be rescheduled.
- On April 8 from 7-8:30am the Truckee Donner Chamber of Commerce is hosting a panel discussion on Underage Drinking and Drug Abuse as a Community Issue. The meeting is at the Truckee Tahoe Airport. Cost is \$12 or \$10 for members.
- The DEA’s National Prescription Take-Back Day is April 26 from 10am-2pm at locations throughout California and Nevada. More info is online.
- More information about Drug Store Project is available online.
- Truckee police officers will start making visits to Truckee High School with Trax, the drug-detecting dog, to ensure no illegal drugs are being brought to campus.

Overgrown Sierra forests gulping water

By J.N. Sbranti, Modesto Bee

Numerous billion-dollar proposals to create more water storage in California are competing for attention and funding during this third year of drought.

But there may be a less-expensive way to increase water flows: Start thinning out the overgrown Sierra Nevada forests.

Cutting down trees may not sound environmentally friendly, but researchers from UC Merced and elsewhere think that may be just what's needed to restore forest health and increase water runoff.

"It's one of the lower-cost options (to increase California's water supply) ... and it also would reduce the probability of big destructive fires," said Roger Bales, a UC Merced engineering professor who specializes in mountain hydrology. "There could be measurable and significant gains" – a hypothesized 9 percent increase in snowmelt runoff – if the forests are properly thinned.

Read the whole story

Drought puts spotlight on water thefts



Folsom Dam creates one of California's main water storage areas. Photo/LTN

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

It's amazingly easy to steal water from a California stream. Even in this epic drought, the state has no way of monitoring exactly who is tapping into its freshwater supplies and how much they take. And those who do get caught taking water they have no right to often are allowed to keep taking it for years just by promising to obtain a permit.

Nearly 30,000 entities in the state hold valid water diversion permits, including individual property owners, farmers and water utilities. Some have meters or gauges to measure their diversions, but the state has no ability of its own to monitor those gauges in real-time. People and entities with water rights are required to regularly report their water use to the state, but many don't, and the state has no way of knowing if their accounts – self-reported – are truthful.

In average water years, many of these issues don't matter much. But the weaknesses are expected to complicate matters this year as the state struggles to stretch limited water

supplies during the worst drought in 40 years. This spring, it is likely the State Water Resources Control Board will order some water rights holders to divert less water to ensure enough flow for cities and wildlife, something that has not been done since the drought of 1976-77. The state's ability to enforce such curtailment orders will be sorely tested.

Read the whole story

46-month sentence for tax evasion scheme

An El Dorado Hills man is going to prison for 46 months for tax evasion.

Donald M. Wanland, 56, was sentenced March 25 for 28 criminal counts, including tax evasion, failing to file tax returns, and removing, depositing, and concealing assets from the IRS in defiance of a levy.

Wanland is a Sacramento-area attorney who was convicted of the 28 tax-related counts on Sept. 26 after a two week jury trial.

During sentencing, U.S. District Judge Lawrence Karlton said lawyers have a "special duty" and stated, "it is particularly distressing when a lawyer just disregards the law."

The California State Bar has placed Wanland on interim suspension.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

UC chief joins skeptics over online courses

By Sharon Bernstein, Reuters

SACRAMENTO – University of California President Janet Napolitano on Monday joined a growing chorus of higher education leaders who have expressed skepticism about the use and cost-effectiveness of courses that are offered online.

Napolitano's remarks at a Sacramento luncheon came as the 10-campus system struggles to overcome a possible \$125 million budget shortfall for next year, a gap many had hoped would be repaired over time via low-cost online course offerings that would let the state educate more students while saving money.

"There's a developing consensus that online learning is a tool for the toolbox, but it's harder than it looks and if you do it right, it doesn't save all that much money," Napolitano told about 500 policy and education experts at a speaker series sponsored by the Public Policy Institute of California.

[Read the whole story](#)

Red state residents pay fewer taxes than blue states

By Reid Wilson, Washington Post

The average American family pays nearly \$7,000 in state and local taxes in a given year, but the actual amounts vary wildly. A Californian who lives on the western side of Lake Tahoe pays almost three times more in state taxes than their neighbor on the Nevada side of the lake. Someone living in Portland pays more than twice as much as a neighbor living across the Columbia River in Vancouver, Wash.

That's according to a study by WalletHub, a publication of Evolution Finance, which found residents in blue states pay much more than residents of red states. The company used a typical American family making a median income and living in a median home to weigh average relative tax bills.

Wyoming residents pay the lowest state and local taxes, an average of \$2,365 per year, the study found. Residents of Alaska and Nevada pay less than half the average tax rate.

Read the whole story

Grego: 'I listen more than I speak'



Gerri Grego

Publisher's note: *Lake Tahoe News asked the six El Dorado County supervisor candidates a series of questions. All are the same except for one that is specific to each candidate. The responses are being run in the order they were received by LTN. One candidate chose not to answer the questions.*

Name: "Gerri" Geraldine Grego

Age: 61

Occupation: Resort manager

Education: Associates degree in management, leadership and facilities training

What elected, civic, nonprofit boards or groups are or have you been affiliated with and in what capacity?: There are too many to list, but will give an overview. Currently I am the city appointee to the El Dorado County Commission on Aging. I also serve as an advisor to the Lake Tahoe Sustainability Collaborative, specifically the Human, Health and Social Well Being Workgroup working on community gardens and growing domes. I am co-chair of Gardens for a Healthy Tahoe, and am treasurer of South Lake Tahoe Republican Women Federated. I served on the General Plan Committee for the city, and as a planning commissioner I had the privilege of working on the Aspens Project providing workforce housing. On a more personal note, in the past I have participated in many organizations including Bread & Broth, parent teacher groups at Bijou Elementary and South Tahoe Middle School, been an officer of a dance club, and have served in many different church appointments. I am also a notary public, and my background has been checked by the FBI.

Traffic is horrible on Fridays and Sundays throughout the county. Will you commit to not voting for any big subdivisions unless there is a plan to widen Highway 50? Why or why not?: Infrastructure to support any project should be required before approval. We cannot overextend our resources without

damaging the rest of the community. However, the last person to buy a movie ticket shouldn't have to buy all the popcorn. Laws should be passed to improve our community without punishing those who provide new jobs. They should pay for reasonable improvements that are not so onerous that we get no improvements because no one can afford to do business here.

What is your opinion on a proposed November initiative to control growth?: Tahoe is a prime example of no growth scenarios. South Lake Tahoe has been frozen into a museum of the '60s. Just as in the previous question improvements happen as a result of progress, it also follows that reasonable growth means economic and environmental improvements. What inspires me most about these initiatives is that the people of this county are standing up for what they believe. They feel that their leaders have not been listening to them, or that they are making "sweetheart deals" with developers. Rural Communities United, the Shingle Springs Community Alliance, Save Our County, and Residents Involved in Positive Planning are all trying to save a rural lifestyle by closing "gaps" where they feel their leaders have taken advantage. Those initiatives leave out the Tahoe basin as it is under the jurisdiction of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

What are your thoughts on making Lake Tahoe its own county?: If we were to become a county, then the residents of Meyers would not feel disenfranchised, as they do now. I am not against the idea. It would have to be seriously considered – and all of its implications. There was a time when South Lake Tahoe produced a large portion of the county revenue. The advent of agri-tourism and the wineries as well as the growth in El Dorado Hills has evened that out. If that trend continues, then what was once a disparity one way could be reversed. I certainly haven't forgotten how much business dropped in Placerville when the mudslides closed Highway 50 at Kyburz. A county is much more than roads, police and fire. The county has 59 different departments ranging from libraries and

elections to fish and game and the court system. I would be concerned that we would not have the resources to support all of these services. On the other hand, it would create good year-round jobs for people in our community.

What entities would you not take money from?: Any person or entity that would expect special consideration for their donation.

What would you do to boost the economy?: First, we need less government regulations over business. Government should provide for roads, safety and equal rights – then stay out of the way of the American entrepreneur. Second, our senior sector is growing rapidly and will have many needs for which we are currently unprepared. This could become an “industry” providing many year round jobs in our communities. I would also promote eco-tourism and the amazing outdoor opportunities that our county has in spades. Paddleboarding, sailing, fishing, kayaking, hiking, camping, golfing, skiing, the Rubicon and extreme sports which creates Olympic athletes. Marketing is what we pay for, publicity from things like the Olympics is what we pray for. Casinos can be built anywhere now, but there is only one Lake Tahoe.

What is the No. 1 issue facing District 5 and how do you propose to resolve it?: The inability of districts, agencies, groups and people to work together for the greater good rather than for personal agendas. I work well with others – whether I agree with them or not I will listen to them and provide my own thoughts on the matter. If we are ever going to get beyond our differences, we need to search out common ground and then work together for common goals. Any of those who witnessed my style when I was a planning commissioner would attest that I am a proponent of seeking the truth and the right thing, and then building consensus to get it done. One does not have to have enmity just because they disagree with someone else. I have the ability to disagree without being disagreeable.

Supervisors meet only once a year in Lake Tahoe. Do you believe this is fair representation? Why or why not?: By the numbers it would seem that several times a year would be better, especially when the agenda item particularly affect our constituents. I would imagine that the cost/time of the supervisors and staff coming to Tahoe is a major consideration. The supervisors would also not have easy access to the resources that they might require. With that being said, with today's technology, I don't see why it is not possible for the county to set up a meeting room in South Lake Tahoe and have the public participate in supervisor meetings by Skype.

Would you have voted for Red Hawk to be built and to divert Caltrans funds for interchanges? Those decisions are still negatively affecting the South Shore. Is there anything you would do to change the status quo?: Red Hawk should have never been approved. If you think of our districts as children in need, when a family has five children they do not starve one child so the rest have more. Everyone knew what the impact on the Tahoe area would be. There is a fund that the casino has to support improvements in the county. However, South Lake Tahoe and El Dorado Hills is excluded from being able to apply for the monies. I would like to change that exclusion.

Would you support having more tax dollars from the county coming to the South Shore? Currently more dollars leave the basin than come back.: Yes, I would. If the county invested more into infrastructure and supported the promotion of tourism, it would also benefit the West Slope. Currently, businesses in Pollock Pines are also affected by the lack of snow and tourism in Tahoe.

The county and city of South Lake Tahoe have a long history of not getting along. How would you propose to improve the relationship?: I would improve the relationship with the rest of the county by working well with others, by taking the time to appreciate their position and work together for a better

economy. There certainly is a need for more joint meetings. By looking each other in the eye instead of trading barbs from afar a better relationship can be formed. Also, I would travel the entire county to understand the problems of other districts and to better relate with the problems the other supervisors need to address. I think this kind of effort would create bridges of cooperation between the supervisors.

What is your vision for Meyers and how will you make it a reality?: The people of Meyers want their community to remain rural for the most part, with emphasis on its natural resources by focusing on recreation. I would like to see new types of recreational opportunities in the area – from indoor rock climbing, shooting range, fishing derbies, to a roller rink. There are a lot of possibilities. What is important is that we listen to the people who live there, and then work with them to bring new opportunities to improve their community. Our county has simply left Tahoe planning to TRPA. The county General Plan has a blank spot where it comes to Tahoe. They have just given it all over to TRPA. In the final analysis the vision should be the people of Meyers vision, not mine. My job is to represent the people to the county government, not represent the government vision to the people of Meyers.

Why should someone vote for you over someone else?: I am a bridge builder, with broad range involvement. I am not tied to any special interest. I will look at all the issues objectively. When on the Planning Commission I gained a reputation as someone who thoroughly studied the issue, asked questions and made practical decisions based on the facts. As a manager, I report to both a board of directors and the owners. I have proven that I have the ability to achieve optimal results among often competing interests. Some might see the county as another political stepping stone or as a place to push their political agendas and beliefs. I am the one person who sees the supervisor as a public servant versus

a ruler. It is not about me. It is about you, the citizens.

Your husband is running for South Lake Tahoe City Council. If you are both elected, how will you work to avoid conflicts?:

To start, if we are both elected, we will not be seeing much of each other, and I imagine our precious time together will be spent not talking business. All relationships have conflicts, it is how you work to resolve them that matters. Active listening and forgiveness are major necessities. Both of us have worked in industries where we were unable to talk about specifics of our work – he as an attorney and me as a police dispatcher. We both understand the necessary confidential boundaries. The city and county are two different entities, autonomous from each other. Both Sen. Ted Gaines and Assemblywoman Beth Gaines have served our area with integrity. When you consider equal rights, why should one partner in a marriage exclude the other from serving?

What do you do for fun?: Gardening and spending time with my grandchildren. In the past I have also enjoyed dancing – but it's been a while.

Tell us something about yourself that people might not know.:

I am not a typical politician because I listen more than I speak.