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Letter: It is still not the time for Measure N

Submitted by paula on Sat, 10/12/2024 - 4:19pm



Dear Citizens of South Lake Tahoe, This is my fourth and last letter to you, the citizens of South Lake Tahoe, until next year. It is my opinion alone as your elected representative and is not the official opinion of the city council.

In my previous letters, I alerted you about a small group of people, led by one rogue city councilman, Scott Robbins, along with Nick Speal and Amelia Richmond, who are intent on raising your taxes. I pointed out that now is not the time to increase any taxes of any kind. I pointed out all the rising costs that are affecting our budgets and affecting our wallets. I pointed out that with fire and property insurance doubling if you can even get it, and the growing list of business closures, our residents had enough to deal with. I explained that as a long-term member of the city finance committee, I was sure that not only was the city already in good financial shape, but that we were well on our way to addressing the years of neglect on roads, forest thinning, aging infrastructure and new challenges like housing and transportation.

Those proposing the slew of taxes appear to not understand basic economics. They also appear to subscribe to a misguided philosophy that high taxes and government control are the best answer to every issue when it is most often the actual problem. The "Vacancy Tax," Measure N, that they sponsored, is a prime example of the wrong solution to a problem that is already well on its way to being solved.

An advertisement for 'VOTE NO ON MEASURE N STOP THE VACANCY TAX'. It features a dark background with a white graphic of a mountain range. The text 'VOTE NO ON MEASURE N' is at the top, and 'STOP THE VACANCY TAX' is at the bottom. Below the graphic, the text 'What is Your #1 Reason To Vote No on Measure N?' is displayed in a bold, white, sans-serif font. At the bottom, there is a link 'Click to Take Our Survey'.

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A coalition of community organizations and local citizens formed in opposition to Measure N and all the many taxes. It is a healthy mix of business groups, Democrats, Republicans, Independents, Libertarians, and decline-to-state locals, who are collectively outraged at being tax-attacked for no good reason. Some of the taxes that have been proposed were a property transfer fee, a Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT), and an attempt to raise the minimum wage in city limits to \$23 per hour, which would cause many people to lose their jobs and cause more businesses to close. The six-organization coalition, initiated by the South Tahoe Chamber consists of both Chambers, the Restaurant Association, Lodging Association,

TKPOA and the Board of Realtors. It has been supported by hundreds of local citizens from many different persuasions as evidenced by about 700 "No on N" signs that locals have put up and the approximately 500 individual donations received. Many have turned out to council meetings to protest and convince our council to do the right thing and not raise taxes. Thankfully, the majority of the city council listened to you.

Measure N is being strongly opposed. The proponents copied vacancy taxes from failing cities like Berkley, Oakland, Washington DC, San Francisco, and Vancouver Canada. The petition signers were clearly deceived, and it was determined by a Court that they employed deceptive and

misleading wording in their ballot arguments. One council candidate even did that in his candidate statement, stating his job as "Affordable Housing Advocate." The city Clerk made him change it to reflect his real job. Once again deception towards the voters. Measure N is based on the premise that if someone else has something you want you can take it from them through the initiative process. They don't understand that the "government never gives someone something unless they have taken it from someone else." In this case, they craftily came up with a tax that those being primarily targeted cannot even vote to stop it! How fair is that?

Citizens who have read the actual wording are in shock over the provisions. Obviously, a huge, expensive, invasive, bureaucracy would have to be created to track our movements. City staff estimate that 16 to 20 new employees would be needed. In fact, not one cent is actually guaranteed to go to build even one affordable house! The route they have chosen to get this thing past you is to try to make it red vs blue, rich vs poor, haves vs have not. It is not any of those it is simply wrong vs right and nonsense vs common sense.

The main reason the City of South Lake Tahoe was incorporated in 1965 was for police protection from crime, fire protection from both house and forest fires, paved roads in summer, and snow plowing in winter. Workforce housing and public transit have surfaced in recent years as added concerns that the council has taken on to solve/support. There have been years upon years of neglect in maintaining our local roads. The Public Works Director, Anush Nejad, and his staff have done a great job of tackling the most pressing problems. Now, we are dedicating more to road repairs each year than in the past twenty years combined. Most of our plows were more than fifty years old and were constantly breaking down. We have purchased a dozen new plows in the last six years. Did you know that the plow arm that helps keep driveway berms smaller was invented by one of our own plow drivers? Not all cities even have them.

Our police station was falling apart, and our radio system was so bad that our officers sometimes had to use their cell phones, which we all know has spotty service, at best, here in our mountain town. A new radio system is now in place and repairs/refurbishment to the Police Department have been made. As crime has risen due to increased drug trade influences, our police department has been strengthened under Chief Dave Stevenson and his amazing staff.

For years no forest thinning was done because extreme environmentalists sued to stop each project. After the Angora fire in 2007, they realized the error in their thinking partly because of the 254 homes that were destroyed. Much of our equipment was old and out of date. Then Fire Station #2 was closed leaving us vulnerable. Now station # 2 has reopened and Fire Wise community groups are cleaning up neighborhoods. The City and all the agencies are working to create and maintain a Wildland Urban Interface, (WUI). Two new fire engines are now in operation. Chief Jim Drennan and his staff are held in high regard. During the Caldor fire, the city wisely asked the tourists to leave a few days early and then as Mayor at the time, I was proud that we evacuated the local residents in only four hours because of the efforts of SLTFR/SLTPD and their mutual aid partners. Some wondered why both sides of the highway were not turned into outbound lanes. That was because the lanes coming up Spooner Summit by way of Carson City were needed to stay clear in order to bring in fire equipment such as tractors, fire engines and trucks full of firefighters.

For a good forty years, TRPA rules and regulations made it next to impossible to build new affordable and workforce housing. Now TRPA has come up with more sensible housing rules and the Conservancy and City have given both land and money to new projects with about 600 homes either in the permit process or actually ready to be occupied. The best example is the 248-unit Sugar Pine Village. In fact, thanks to Development Services Director, Zach Thomas and his capable staff, the City of SLT was recently recognized as being in the top ten in the state for addressing housing. In addition, three motels were converted to add 58 rooms to address homelessness.

There has been "hit or miss," unreliable bus service over the past decade. Now a new idea called Lake Link is in place picking people up in neighborhoods with plans to expand the concept into the County and to create a Joint Powers Authority to oversee perhaps a public-private partnership to address transportation issues.

So, what's all the fuss about? It is my opinion that besides subscribing to a bigger government/higher taxes philosophy, there is an effort to get two more people on the Council who will vote that same philosophy along with Mr. Robbins. I'm not going to tell you who to vote for, but I hope for one, they are not for Measure N. Also, since the City of South Lake Tahoe is basically a one-hundred-million-dollar corporation, I hope that you vote for people who have lead or are leading large enterprises. That is a missing element in the council that needs to be filled. Simply loving Tahoe and our community, (as we all do), but hardly ever having attended any Council meetings, is in my mind not enough.

Caring about local housing does not make a person an expert in housing or economics. We know that now. Loving to fly doesn't make you an airline pilot. Loving cake doesn't make you a baker. However, watching all twenty seasons of Grey's Anatomy does, in fact, confer a medical degree. That's just physics. Local elections are not about red vs blue but rather more about working together for a better future. In my opinion, it is very dangerous thinking to try to demand the current residents, and second homeowners pay for the past, present, and future mistakes. Those pioneers who built this town made the best estimates of what was needed at the time for police,

fire, roads, and now housing and transportation. It violates the sense of fairness to expect the current residents and part-time residents to pay for everything past, present and future. Now is not the time and that is not the way to prosperity as evidenced by all the boarded-up businesses. Fixing our economy will bring in more funds to the city from their share of increased prosperity. A high tide raises all ships.

By now you may have received your ballots for voting in this election. My hope is that you will elect two people to replace Cristi Creegan and John Friedrich who are ethical, reasonable and experienced. Both John Friedrich and Cristi Creegan have some different national political views than myself based on their life experiences, yet I can tell you that both of them treated each other and me with respect and both were great listeners, not pontificators. We didn't always vote the same way, but we always respected each other. I will miss them both.

In order to be more like Cristi and John, I have worked through the Bridging the Divide organization meeting with people who have a different perspective than myself. We don't try to change each other but rather to understand why we might see different solutions to shared community problems. National politics and agendas do not belong in local decisions. We have seen the results of the party partisan approach, and it has caused angst and division as evidenced by Measure N. My request is that you, the voters, send two more good solid, proven, experienced people to continue our efforts to make decisions that benefit you and your families. Now is the time for that.

I have published my contact information and personal cell number in each letter to you, the owners of the city. As a result, I've received scores of emails and calls. I also appreciate the great ideas you have given me. I make sure to pass the ideas on to the council and city manager. After all, none of us is smarter than all of us.

Sincerely,
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Opinion