

EL DORADO COUNTY GRAND JURY 2019-2020



SOUTH LAKE TAHOE CITY POLICE FACILITY

CASE 19-02 • MAY 1, 2020

Public Release

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CITIZENS DESERVE BETTER

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The El Dorado County Grand Jury investigated the City of South Lake Tahoe Police Department facility to determine its adequacy for modern police operations; in the opinion of the Grand jury, the facility needs major renovation or replacement.

BACKGROUND

There are three police entities in El Dorado County - the El Dorado County Sheriff and the police departments of Placerville and South Lake Tahoe. Each have separate law enforcement facilities.

The El Dorado County 2000-2001 Grand Jury investigated the working conditions at the Sheriff's Office. They found numerous deficiencies and determined the existing facility was inadequate. The 2015-2016 Grand Jury again inspected the Sheriff's Office and again found the physical working environment substandard and in need of replacement.

In 2019, construction was completed on a new Sheriff's Office. A Grand Jury tour while still under construction provided an understanding and appreciation for the requirements of a modern law enforcement facility. While the Sheriff's facility was obviously larger than would be needed for a small city, it served as a baseline when evaluating the South Lake Tahoe police facility.

The South Lake Tahoe Facility was last investigated by the 2006-2007 Grand Jury - It made numerous recommendations for improvement and commended the department for its efforts to update and modernize their building.

METHODOLOGY

DOCUMENT REVIEW

- Previous Grand Jury reports regarding county law enforcement facilities
- Findings of a Grand Jury consultant
- *Police Facility Guidelines: A Desk Reference for Law Enforcement Executive.*¹
- 2019 South Lake Tahoe Police Department's Draft Renovations Bid Detail
- *South Lake Tahoe Public Safety Communication System Analysis*²

¹ The International Association of Chiefs (See attachments below)

² Scientel Solutions, September 2017

SITE VISITS

- The new El Dorado County Sheriff's Office while under construction
- The South Lake Tahoe Police Department
- Retoured the South Lake Tahoe Police Department with consultant

INTERVIEWS

- South Lake Tahoe Police Department officials
- City of South Lake Tahoe appointed and elected officials
- El Dorado County Sheriff's Office personnel
- Grand Jury consultant trained and familiar with the requirements for a modern police facility
- El Dorado County Facilities Department representative
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DISCUSSION

*Police Facility Guidelines: A Desk Reference for Law Enforcement Executives*³ reports the useful life of a police facility can range from 20 to over 50 years. It also states:

"Most police facilities continue to operate well past the planned life span. They often become seriously overcrowded, suffer from a lack of sufficient infrastructure (HVAC, electrical, data, telecommunication) and make due [sic] with outdated security and safety systems. These conditions often impair staff efficiency and morale, occupant safety, policing effectiveness and public perception of the department."

The South Lake Tahoe Police Department Facility is over 47 years old; built in 1973. The Grand Jury was unable to determine the expected life span of the building when it was constructed. The building was remodeled in 1986 making cosmetic upgrades and expansion of operational space. Over the years, police department staff have made numerous cosmetic interior improvements. Recent water damage to the building necessitated improvements to the men's shower area.

The *Public Safety Communication System Analysis*⁴ study concluded the South Lake Tahoe Public Safety Communication System did not meet public safety standards and would require \$3 million to over \$5 million to correct the deficiencies. In August 2019, the City Council approved releasing a Request for Proposals for an emergency communication upgrade. Proposals are due in early 2020.

In November 2018, the South Lake Tahoe City Council approved \$810 thousand to renovate the police facility. That amount was questionable for a complete renovation of the South Lake Tahoe facility. However, in December of that year, the newly seated City Council revoked that approval

³ The International Association of Chiefs (See attachments below)

⁴ Scientel Solutions, September 2017

and authorized an expenditure of \$225 thousand for asbestos removal and upgrades to the building's lobby.

In January 2020, the city council again reassessed the facility needs and increased the appropriation for repairs to \$816 thousand. During council deliberations, it was evident the majority of council members recognized this was a short-term fix, and at some point, a more extensive renovation or new facility would be required.

South Lake Tahoe officials acknowledge the facility is inadequate for modern police operations and recognize its renovation or replacement of the facility as a top City priority. However, funding remains a major issue. Funding streams such as grants, or low interest loans have not been actively explored. The City has not had a needs assessment conducted for their police department. Some interviewees indicated that other more suitable sites exist in South Lake Tahoe for potential relocation.

The Grand Jury's overall impression of the building is that it has not had required periodic maintenance. Our investigation revealed numerous deficiencies.

Facility Exterior

The Police Department entrance does not have layered security that would prohibit vehicles from driving into portions of the building. Some exterior windows and doors as well as windows inside do not have ballistic glass. Bicycles are stored under a carport in an area accessible by multiple agencies and delivery vendors. There is not enough secure staff or visitor parking.

Facility Interior

The facility is of an older design having a cramped interior with narrow hallways, noticeable lack of natural light, restricted workspaces and lack of adequate storage. Usage to overcapacity leaves no space for future expansion.

The small lobby and unsecured area of the facility lacks space for a community meeting room. The facility contains only one interview room limiting the ability to interview multiple suspects and witnesses. No interview room exists for the public to make a report to an officer. No "soft" interview room is available for interviewing juvenile witnesses and victims. The windows, walls and doors inside the lobby do not provide ballistic protection.

Standard locks control entrances to the armory and evidence room revealing a lack of layered security. The LiveScan machine for fingerprinting is in a secure area. This should be located in an area more assessable to the public. A small break room limits staff interaction, knowledge sharing and problem solving among employees. The investigations area is confining and will need expansion in the future.

Asbestos issues exist within the building. Torn carpets and damaged baseboards aggravate the asbestos problem. There are many signs of water damage. The door leading to the dispatch room does not open and close efficiently.

The dispatch area needs additional space for and upgrades to modern dispatch consoles and equipment. There is no suitable space for press conferences, especially during a major incident.

Technology

Interior recorded video cameras do not cover critical areas inside the facility. Restricted server space, exposed wiring, and an apparent lack of a separate HVAC system for the servers present challenges for continually expanding data and technology needs. The Public Safety Communication System does not meet public safety standards.

Evidence Processing

The evidence storage area currently has enough space. It may become inadequate when considering increasing legal requirements for evidence retention. Signs of extensive water damage could possibly lead to the contamination of evidence. The evidence processing area operates within the report writing space, potentially exposing officers and staff to hazardous materials.

Locker Room and Exercise Area

Lockers are too small to secure all the equipment required by modern police officers. They lack secure electrical outlets for charging personal devices. A small clothing drying area appears unsatisfactory and inefficient for the number of snowsuits and jackets hung there. The exercise area lacks enough space for the circuit type training now recommended for law enforcement personnel.

FINDINGS

F1. The South Lake Tahoe Police Department Facility is inadequate for modern police operations and requires funding for extensive renovation or replacement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

R1. The City should have a professional space and facilities needs study completed with cost estimates for a new or renovated police facility.

R2. The City should explore funding options for the renovation or replacement of the current police facility.

R3. The City should move expeditiously to renovate their current police facility.

ATTACHMENT

POLICE FACILITY GUIDELINES: A DESK REFERENCE FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT EXECUTIVES.

<https://www.hSDL.org/?view&did=479722>

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

This Grand Jury report is an account of an investigation or review. It contains findings and recommendations, and names those who should respond to each finding and each recommendation pertaining to matters under the respondent's control.

Please review *How to Respond to an El Dorado County Grand Jury Report*, a separate document included with this report.

Responses are required in accordance with California Penal Code §933 and §933.05.

- **Responses to Findings F1 and R1, R2 and R3 are required from the South Lake Tahoe City Council.**