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Battle over noise and parking fines for South Lake Tahoe rentals

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SOUTH LAKE TAHOE, Calif. -- A popular tourist destination on Lake Tahoe is in the middle of a growing battle over vacation rental homes. The city of South Lake Tahoe recently increased fines for noise and parking violations to \$1,000. It is part of an effort to address the dramatic increase in vacation homes available on internet rental sites.

Surrounded by the Sierra Nevada, Lake Tahoe is an alpine paradise that attracts nearly three million visitors each year. But in the small community of South Lake Tahoe, longtime resident Peggy Bourland says tourists are taking over.

There are 1,800 rental properties there. Bourland said it's changing the community and she'd like to ban rentals altogether in residential areas.

"When a tourist comes here, they anticipate they can do whatever they want to do and they want to be in the hot tub late at night or they want to have friends over and all these things. It's just not compatible with our residential neighborhoods," Bourland said.

The city changed its ordinance after neighbors raised concerns. It now fines both the vacation home owner and the renter \$1,000 each for things like parking on the street at any time, having too many house guests or getting into the hot tub after 10 p.m.

"This new ordinance doesn't make any sense whatsoever. It's totally punitive and totally unfair," Silicon Valley entrepreneur Jonathan Miller said. He said his Tahoe rental home is part of his retirement plan.

"Imagine if you come to Tahoe here... suddenly somebody parks for a minute on the street; they get a \$1,000 fine. How are they going to feel about that? They're going to hate Tahoe, they're going to hate California, they're never coming back here again!" Miller said.

He's received two fines. And under the city's updated rules, if he gets one more ticket, he'll be banned from renting his home for life.

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"I don't want to feel like I'm unwelcome... I mean, that doesn't make any sense at all. I'm contributing to the city's economy. Why am I being punished for that?" Miller said.

Mayor Wendy Davis said she is trying to strike a balance within this community.

"Why that large a number?" Evans asked her about the \$1,000 penalties.

"They need to have strong fines so we can ensure the peace and tranquility of our neighbors," Davis replied.

The city relies on vacation rentals for \$3 million in taxes. It's a struggle facing a growing number of other cities, too.

Urlik Binzer is the CEO of Host Compliance, a company that helps local governments track and tax vacation rentals. The company said the number of listings has increased about 800 percent in the last eight years to 2.3 million.

"There's about 2,700 cities across North America now that has more than 100 short-term rentals, so this isn't just a big city or a coastal or ski resort issue, this is a national issue," Binzer said.

Cities like New Orleans, Nashville and Palm Springs are engaged in similar fights over whether tourist rentals should be allowed.

But not everyone agrees the expensive fines will lead to resolution.

"So you don't think these fines are the solution?" Evans asked.

"No. It's a big Band-Aid on a problem that has to be solved in a different way," Bourland said.

Some community members want to take the issue directly to the voters. If they get enough signatures on their petition, the question of whether or not to ban vacation rentals entirely will be on the ballot in November.

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