

South Shore survives Hwy. 50 road closures

By Kathryn Reed

It isn't until the roads close that residents and business in Tahoe realize how isolated it can be living and working here.

Fortunately, Highway 50 on the California and Nevada side were not closed for very long. Both reopened on Feb. 14. But there is a lot of winter left and no guarantee the roads won't be closed again this winter or into spring, especially with the slopes so saturated and rain in the immediate forecast.

Strawberry Lodge in the American River Canyon had to close on Monday after the last guest checked out because of the road closure.

Tom Davis was mayor of South Lake Tahoe in 1997 when Highway 50 closed that January. He didn't accept Caltrans' declaration the road would be off-limits for eight to 12 months. With Duane Wallace, who was then executive director of the South Tahoe Chamber of Commerce, the two worked with then Assemblyman Tim Leslie to persuade Gov. Pete Wilson to put pressure on Caltrans to open it sooner. It worked.

California's highway storm damage this winter totals \$401 million at 190 locations.

For businesses that have been here through the more serious slides of 1982 and 1997, when Highway 50 in California was closed for 75 and 27 days, respectively, they have protocols in place to contend with the adverse conditions.

"In anticipation of the blizzards and floods, Barton Health ordered additional and back-up supplies. Patient care and hospital operations were not impacted," Barton spokeswoman

Molly Coolidge told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Emergency vehicles were able to get through on the Nevada side even though passenger vehicles could not. Most patients are transferred to Nevada facilities.

"At times, when routes were closed, patients were transported using the closest alternate route and, as appropriate, transported by air," Coolidge said.

Grass Roots in South Lake Tahoe had an issue with a produce delivery that arrived hours after normal, but otherwise was faring OK. The small market gets deliveries four days a week.

"Right now I don't feel like we are out of a lot of things. It was synergistic with not a lot of people coming to Tahoe so we didn't run out of a lot of stuff," Stephanie Hrbacek, Grass Roots' beer and wine buyer, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Raley's, which has two stores in South Lake Tahoe, has been using alternative routes to bring goods to the South Shore, relying on the California Highway Patrol for the most up-to-date information.

"We are delivering less because there is less tourism," Raley's spokeswoman Chelsea Minor told *Lake Tahoe News*. She said the goal is to make sure residents have enough food.

Safeway would not comment, nor would their corporate offices.

Conditions never got to the point where businesses in town needed to shutdown, unless it was for storm damage.

During the previous road closures there were times when hotels were not able to provide clean linens because laundry service is out of town and it wasn't happening. People back then lost their jobs, store shelves were empty. For the 1997 closure it was estimated that the impact was a \$1 million per day loss to the South Shore economy.

This week residents were talking about filling up on gas just in case trucks could not make it to the South Shore.

One item that is still hard to find in the area is a sump pump. Those were flying off shelves earlier this month.

Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority took the approach that it was still possible to get here, it was just going to be more scenic via Highway 88. With Emerald Bay reopening, it meant Interstate 80 traffic could easily get down here. With this being a three-day weekend, it was even more critical to get the roads open.

The U.S. Postal Service was using Kingsbury Grade to service the post offices on the South Shore in California and Nevada. Mail that goes to and from this area goes through Reno. However, many people who use the Glenbrook Post Office didn't receive mail for about a week or took about a three-hour drive to retrieve it.

"In the spirit of Snowshoe Thompson, there are no delays," David Rupert with the USPS told *Lake Tahoe News*. "We continue to encourage residents to keep their mailboxes clear so we can continue to deliver the mail in a manner that is safe for our employees."

For those who went to Sierra-at-Tahoe last weekend it was glorious. A winter weekend without crowds, awesome snow and sunshine. The resort coffers were not as flush, though, because so many people come up from the Sacramento area and they couldn't do so via the most direct route.

"This year, the few days Highway 50 has been closed, we relinquish our position as best location to Sacramento and the Bay Area. Which is tough for our guests, especially when conditions are incredible with all the new snow," Thea Hardy, Sierra spokeswoman, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

During these few dry days it has meant cleanup time as water

has been receding. South Lake Tahoe crews this week have been: Cleaning up streets as needed, filling potholes, inspecting basins, rivers, creeks for obstructions, repairing and prepping heavy equipment in preparation, clearing drainage areas, inspecting and checking drainage pump systems at Colorado Court and Bijou area, and documenting issues.

Staff will be before the South Lake Tahoe City Council in March to address overtime issues. Public works crews have been working almost without a break since the start of the year.

Now it will be up to Mother Nature to determine if the roads stay open and commerce continues a normal, after all she always has the last word.