Controlled burns in basin to resume

If conditions are favorable, California State Parks and the U.S. Forest Service may resume prescribed fire operations.

Operations may take place near Tahoe City and Glenbrook and may continue as conditions allow.

Each prescribed fire operation follows a prescribed fire burn plan, which considers temperature, humidity, wind, moisture of the vegetation, and conditions for the dispersal of smoke. This information is used to decide when and where to burn. When conditions meet the prescription, state and local air pollution control districts issue a burn permit allowing operations to proceed.

Smoke from prescribed fire operations is normal and may continue for several days after an ignition depending on the project size and environmental conditions.

For more information about prescribed fire and smoke management tips, go **online**.

S. Tahoe gas prices top the list in N. California

South Lake Tahoe has the highest gasoline prices in Northern California, according to AAA.

The price on average is $3.23 a gallon, while the lowest is in Marysville at $2.71 per gallon.

"Gas prices in California are the highest they've been in nearly five years," John Moreno, spokesman for AAA Northern California, said in a statement. "While national gas prices are declining, on the West Coast, refinery maintenance and the process of switching to summer-blend gasoline is continuing to have an impact on prices."

This week the average price for a gallon of regular unleaded gasoline in California reached $3. Nationally the average is $2.92.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Placer County working on parks-trails plan

To encourage public input for its inaugural comprehensive parks and trails master plan, Placer County has launched a **website**.

The master plan will provide a 10-year vision for the development and operation of parks and trails in the county.

A countywide online survey will be released later this month, stakeholder and focus group meetings are occurring and a series of public workshops are scheduled for later in the year. The website provides another venue for interested community members to submit comments and review draft recommendations.

Throughout the 18-month project timeline, interested community members are invited to sign up for project notifications and to stay informed on the master plan's progress.

The master plan is intended to update the county’s General Plan recreational standards put in place in 1994.

Calif. eyes ending tax breaks for vacation homes

By Matt Levin, CalMatters

Lifelong Californian Lori Thompson is well aware of the state’s dire affordable housing problem. She’s just wondering why she’s the one who has to pay to fix it.

After her daughter moved to Reno to escape high rents in the Monterey Peninsula, Thompson and her husband decided last December to purchase a $360,000 cabin in South Lake Tahoe. It will allow them to spend summers where Thompson used to vacation as a child and to be closer to their grandchildren.

But now, as the state grapples with nearly 6 million California households struggling to afford housing, legislators are turning to people like the Thompsons as a logical source of revenue—owners of a second home who deduct the interest they pay on it from their state income taxes.

AB71 would eliminate that deduction and channel the gains—at least $220 million annually, according to initial estimates by the state Franchise Tax Board—to a state affordable housing program. Supporters say that would cover the cost of creating 3,000 new units of affordable housing, and it could leverage $600 million to $1 billion in additional federal housing dollars.

“During this housing crisis we have to be sure everyone has a roof over their heads before we provide tax breaks to people with two roofs," said the bill's sponsor, Democratic Assemblyman David Chiu of San Francisco.

California's unmet housing needs

Thompson acknowledges California's housing crisis needs attention—because of soaring Silicon Valley apartment rental rates, she and her husband invited a college student who attends their church to live rent-free in their San Jose home. But she's adamant that taxing vacation homes is not the answer—and that without the mortgage interest deduction, she might not have ever bought a second property in the first place.

"There's a lot of people I know who have second homes in California. They're not wealthy but they're comfortable," said Thompson, a 61-year-old retiree. "My husband and I don't drive expensive fancy cars. We chose a second home over traveling."

AB71, which last week cleared the Assembly's housing committee, would apply only to Californians who spend a significant amount of time in their second homes. Those who rent out second properties could continue to deduct mortgage interest from their state tax returns (the Internal Revenue Service defines a rental property as a property where the owner spends less than 10 percent of time compared to rental tenants.)

Currently, Californians can deduct interest from up to a million dollars in mortgage debt.

Given that Gov. Jerry Brown and Democratic lawmakers failed to reach a compromise on affordable housing funding last year, Assembly and Senate Democrats now are championing a fleet of bills to address California's soaring housing costs. Legislators already have sent more than 100 housing-related bills to the Assembly Housing and Community Development Committee alone—well above the number introduced last year.

So just how many Californians own second homes, and who are they?

While traditionally considered an untouchable third rail of tax policy, the mortgage interest deduction has come under renewed scrutiny of late precisely because the deduction disproportionately benefits wealthy homeowners.

Nearly three-quarters of the tax benefit from mortgage interest deductions at the federal level go to households with cash incomes above $100,000, according to the Tax Policy Center.

AB71 targets an affluent group of Californians—those wealthy enough to afford a second house and not use it primarily for rental income. But it wouldn't necessarily affect the richest of the rich, who may not need to finance a second property. Over the past ten years, about 44 percent of second homes not used for rentals were purchased without a mortgage, according to data from the California Association of Realtors.

Where are California's second homes?

Based on data from the federal home lender Fannie Mae (and not their own internal tax data), the Franchise Tax Board estimates that 195,000 homeowners would be affected by AB71. On average, each of these second homeowners reduces his or her taxes by about $1,140 annually by taking advantage of the second mortgage interest deduction. That's in addition to the sizable tax breaks they receive at the federal level on both their properties, which disproportionately benefit households with high incomes.

The state lacks a surprising amount of data on second homeowners, including their average income. So while it's safe to assume that second homeowners are more wealthy than your average California taxpayer, by how much more remains unknown. The National Association of Realtors estimates that nationally, second home buyers have a median household income of about $91,000.

As for their location within California, certain regions contain high concentrations of second homes. In tiny Alpine County, home of the Kirkwood Mountain Resort, more than 70 percent of the housing stock is comprised of vacation homes, according to U.S. Census data analyzed by the National Association of Home Builders. More than half of the homes in Mono County, near Mammoth Mountain, are seasonal.

That has led to concern from some of these regions that the bill could exact a hefty toll of their local economies and housing markets.

“Local county assessors from my district have relayed their concerns regarding the removal of the (second mortgage interest deduction) and the potential impacts it could have for property values throughout California,” said Republican Assemblyman Frank Bigelow, whose district includes all of Alpine and Mono counties.

The revenue rub and the governor

Bigelow and legislators from both sides of the aisle supported a 2015 bill Chiu sponsored that increased funding for the state Low Income Housing Tax Credit program by $300 million, but it did not eliminate the mortgage interest deduction on second homes. After it won near-unanimous passage in both chambers, Brown vetoed the bill, noting that it lacked a way to pay for itself.

While Brown has not taken a position on the new bill, Chiu expressed confidence that eliminating the second mortgage interest deduction would appease the fiscally cautious governor. “I have received every indication that if we are successful in passing this, that the governor will consider it seriously,” he said.

But while attaching a new revenue source to affordable housing may satisfy the governor, it means the bill faces a precarious political path through the Legislature, where it needs a two-thirds approval vote in both chambers because it is a tax measure.

That means supporters can't afford to lose moderate Democratic votes in the Assembly or Senate, and will need to deflect the potent lobbying influence of the California Association of Realtors, which opposes the bill. The Realtors contributed $1.1 million to state legislative candidates in 2016, including $723,000 to Democrats, according to data from the National Institute on Money in Politics.

Realtors big spenders in legislative campaigns

Chiu "is trying to do the right thing," said Stan Wieg, the association's vice president. "He's looking for a source of funding. We just think it's misdirected."

A spokesman for Assemblyman Jim Cooper of Elk Grove, co-chair of the Assembly moderate Democratic caucus, said that he had not yet had time to study the bill.

Trump complicates 'dire need' for housing dollars

Even with its designated new funding source, AB71 could face push back from the governor's office on the amount of revenue the bill forecasts.

The state will be on the hook for $300 million in additional state housing funds regardless of how much money the elimination of the second mortgage interest deduction actually brings in. But the Franchise Tax Board did not incorporate into its initial revenue forecast any possible behavioral responses to the bill—such as a drop in the number of people buying second homes, or more second homeowners converting their properties to rentals.

Affordable housing advocates across the state argue that the

$300 million would provide a small but critical boost to the state's affordable housing supply, given the state's urgent need and looming federal housing programs cuts.

The Trump administration is reportedly mulling a proposal to cut $6 billion from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, a dramatic rollback that could affect multiple affordable housing programs in California.

AB71 would direct $300 million to the state's low-income housing tax credit program, which pairs state tax credits with federal tax credits to attract investors in low income housing projects.

While investor demand for affordable housing tax credits could be waning, the U.S. tax credit program is one of the few federal housing programs receiving significant bipartisan support and not on Trump's chopping block. That makes affordable housing advocates all the more eager to tap one of the remaining reliable sources of federal funds.

"In the face of greater cuts to federal funding through the HUD budget, California needs affordable housing investments at the state level now more than ever," said Sarah Brundage, state and local policy director for the affordable housing developer and advocacy group Enterprise Community Partners, Inc.

"The (tax credit program) in California and nationally is currently the greatest investment we make in housing. So this bill would play a crucial role in ensuring developments can pencil out."

Other pending California bills take a different approach to funding affordable housing. One by Democratic Sen. Toni Atkins of San Diego would levy a $75 recording fee on real estate documents, excluding property sales. The California Association of Realtors supports that bill, but it's opposed by mortgage lenders and county recorders.

While maintaining that the governor has not taken any position on AB71, a spokeswoman for Brown said that the governor is generally supportive of the Atkins bill.

Opinion: Tahoe lacks world class transportation

By Joanne Marchetta

As a national treasure offering world-class recreation opportunities, Lake Tahoe is one of the most popular outdoor destinations in Northern California and Nevada. And sometimes, being popular has its challenges.

Tahoe's limited roadways become congested during times of peak visitation, when thousands of people who live in nearby metropolitan areas get in their cars to drive up to our small mountain communities. Suddenly, a road system designed for 55,000 residents must handle four to five times that many cars on an average busy day.


Joann Marchetta

The strong winter storm earlier this March helped illustrate this congestion challenge. Heavy snow brought thousands of people to Lake Tahoe to enjoy a weekend of skiing. But that same snow closed Interstate 80 and Highway 50 on Sunday, when thousands of people were trying to drive home to Reno, Sacramento, or the San Francisco Bay Area. That large wave of simultaneous departures caused traffic to back up for hours in all directions, a situation made worse by the weather and road closures.

Traffic congestion is not a constant problem at Tahoe. But it is a challenge we must work together to solve, and one that cannot be solved simply by building bigger roads to handle more cars.

This congestion impacts more than the millions of annual visitors who want to come enjoy and appreciate the Jewel of the Sierra, and the quality of their experience. It impacts Tahoe's residents, their quality of life and ability to get to and from work and basic services, and the health of our environment.

The draft 2017 Regional Transportation Plan that TRPA has released for public comment identifies those times of peak visitation and the most heavily-visited destinations, and lays out strategies to improve our transportation system and better manage congestion. The plan builds upon the ongoing work by TRPA and many partners around the lake to create walkable, bikeable, transit-served communities; work that is starting to pay off as more people use trails and transit for shorter trips around town.

The plan focuses on three broad action categories—transit, trails, and technology—that can work together to provide new travel options from our community centers to popular recreation areas. We are focusing on this recreation travel because travel to recreation sites makes up nearly half of the vehicle trips made on any given day at Lake Tahoe.

By filling connectivity gaps in Lake Tahoe's network of bike and pedestrian trails, expanding transit service and frequency, and launching new applications and tools to provide people with real-time information about congestion, parking availability, and non-automotive travel options, we can make the transportation system more efficient, give people more convenient options to get to their destinations, and help inform and promote better travel decisions.

We cannot solve Lake Tahoe’s traffic congestion challenges overnight, or with any one agency or local government working on its own. TRPA, local governments, and road departments are working together to improve the transportation system and transit services here at Lake Tahoe. We are also working with neighboring metropolitan areas to improve inter-regional travel options, and with communities throughout the Sierra Nevada to address the impacts of recreational travel.

If we all join forces, Lake Tahoe can make real, continued progress over the next five years. By working together carefully to make maximum use of reasonably foreseeable funding, we think that partners around the lake can provide free-to-the-user transit service; increase transit frequency from 60-minute to 30-minute intervals on all main routes; seamlessly connect transit services on the North and South shores; provide new or enhanced transit service to Meyers and Truckee; provide new transit service to heavily-visited recreation sites at Emerald Bay, Echo Summit, and Zephyr Cove; enhance limited inter-regional transit services to and from Reno and Sacramento; and build at least 20 miles of new shared use paths for bicyclists and pedestrians.

These improvements will not solve our congestion problem. But they will be a major step forward and make it much easier for people to travel around Lake Tahoe without driving a personal car.

And with seamless, frequent, and reliable transit service and a well-connected trail network throughout the Lake Tahoe

Region, we will be in a much better position to pursue new funding needed to work with Reno, Sacramento, and the Bay Area to provide new transit services to Lake Tahoe from those growing metropolitan areas. Work on that front is already well under way.

Building the world-class transportation system Lake Tahoe deserves will take time, collaboration, and carefully phased improvements. It will also take a change in everyone's behavior and a willingness to embrace non-automotive travel. As one of the many locals stuck on Highway 50 a few Sundays ago, I found myself remembering the old saying: "We are not stuck in traffic, we are traffic."

Joanne Marchetta is executive director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

I-80 grinding work to cause delays

Caltrans repair work on westbound Interstate 80 east of Truckee on Friday and Saturday will cause delays.

A Caltrans contractor will be grinding off rough patches of asphalt in the westbound No. 2 and No. 3 lanes from 7am-6pm both days.

Work is not expected next week due to storms in the forecast, but will continue the next two months over a 10-mile stretch from just west of Boca to Donner Lake.

Letter: Warm room's successful open house

To the community,

Tahoe Coalition for the Homeless hosted over 100 people at the second South Lake Tahoe warm room open house event on Feb. 22. We were proud to honor City Councilwoman Wendy David for her participation in the establishment of the warm room.

David was facilitator of the Lake Tahoe Collaborative when a committee was established to create a vision and a plan for the warm room. Her support through nonprofit collaboration and in her role at the city of South Lake Tahoe has been greatly appreciated by all at TCH who have had the honor to work with her.

"I am so honored that you believe my participation in supporting the warm room was worth recognizing. I believe that our community is acting like a community should right now in having so many entities supporting our most fragile population, especially those without a home and a place to rest their heads," said David.

The open house also featured TCH's community partners, who shared how they work with the homeless in the South Shore. In attendance were representatives from Bread & Broth, El Dorado County Mental Health Department, Live Violence Free, and Tahoe Youth & Family Services. Social worker Barbara DeGraaf was also present to explain her role in the warm room.

"Volunteer social workers seek to link our guests with any services available to help address their homelessness. Our guests face multiple barriers to obtaining affordable housing, but we attempt to work together to develop a plan that includes small, achievable steps," said DeGraaf.

TCH appreciates the dozens of individuals who celebrated our "share the love and bring a blanket" theme and donated blankets, food, toiletries, and other warm room supplies. Special thank you to Jenn Lay of Chef Jenn's Creations and to Caranina Palomino for providing delicious food for the occasion.

The South Lake Tahoe warm room is an emergency winter shelter providing warm beds and access to resources to individuals experiencing homelessness. The warm room's tentative closing date will be April 15. Donations of supplies are still needed, as are funds for operating the warm room again in 2017-18. Contact us at tahoewarmroom@gmail.com or at 775-573-0822 or through our website at tahoehomeless.org.

Marissa Muscat, Lake Tahoe warm room

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40 years in prison for Vallejo kidnapper with ties to Tahoe

By Brittny Mejia, Los Angeles Times

A Harvard-educated former attorney was sentenced to 40 years in prison for kidnapping a woman in a case that police in Vallejo once portrayed as a hoax.


Matthew Muller

The case cast a harsh light on not only the suspect, Matthew Muller, but also the Vallejo Police Department.

Muller, 39, pleaded guilty last year to abducting Denise Huskins and holding her in his family's South Lake Tahoe home for two days.

In an emotional scene, Huskins recounted her ordeal at the hands of Muller and asked that he be sentenced to life in prison.

Read the whole story

Family gardening provides more than a bountiful harvest

By Melinda Myers

Gardeners know digging, planting, harvesting and even viewing a garden is good for the mind, body and spirit. It improves strength and flexibility, lowers blood pressure and elevates our mood. And this is true for all members of the family from the very young to the more seasoned.

Plan on sharing these benefits with yours or a friend's children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews this growing season. Children, and even adults, who grow their own vegetables are more likely to eat them. But gardening does even more to help our children. Research shows children exposed to the outdoors and gardening are more focused, have less issues with attention deficit and score better on tests. Girls exposed to gardens and green spaces are more confident and better able to handle peer pressure.

Children exposed to the outdoors and gardening are more focused, have less issues with attention deficit and score higher on tests. Photo/Provided

Here are a few ways to make gardening with family more fun and memorable.

Involve the whole family when planning the garden. Talk about the flowers everyone wants to grow and vegetables you all like to eat. Then break out the paper, old catalogs, scissors, crayons, pencils and rulers. Young children can cut out pictures of their favorite vegetables and flowers and glue them on the paper. Older children can draw the garden to scale on graph paper and plot their choices in the garden.

Make your own plant markers. Once you decide on the plants you want to grow spend a rainy afternoon creating plant labels for the garden. Paint the name or a picture of the flower or vegetable on a flat rock, slat from a discarded mini blind, paint sticks or other recycled items.

Consider giving everyone his or her own garden space. Let them pick their own plants and be responsible for its maintenance. Design individual plots or divide larger beds into smaller sections. Or give each family member his or her own container. This is a great option when planting space and time are limited. And just about anything can be planted. An old 5-gallon bucket or washtub with holes drilled into the bottom, recycled nursery pots or a colorful raised planter make great gardens.

Direct fast moving, small feet down the path and away from plants. Fun edging materials, mulched pathways or slightly raised beds help delineate pathways from gardens. This helps to keep children from trampling the plants.

Grow some **quick-maturing plants** like radishes and lettuce that are ready to harvest in 30 to 45 days along with slower growers like watermelon and tomatoes. You will keep everyone interested if there is something growing, blooming and good to eat throughout the season.

Reduce the risk of mistakes. Kids, like so many gardeners, suffer from “more is better” syndrome. Avoid damage from overfertilization by using a low nitrogen organic fertilizer. It’s safe and won’t burn your plants even if the weather becomes hot and dry.

And enlist my favorite “pluck, drop and stomp” **pest management** strategy. Teach children the difference between the good and bad insects and then have them burn off some excess energy as they implement the process.

End the season with a **harvest party**. Use your homegrown produce to prepare a picnic or fancy dinner for family and friends. And be sure to use some of those beautiful flowers you grew to decorate the table.

Gardening expert Melinda Myers is the author of more than 20 gardening books, including "Small Space Gardening" and the "Midwest Gardener's Handbook." Myers is a columnist and contributing editor for Birds & Blooms magazine and spokesperson for Milorganite.

Knights Inn environmental gains in jeopardy

By Kathryn Reed

TAHOE CITY – Days after South Lake Tahoe officials were celebrating the **acquisition of the Knights Inn** property, the Champagne has gone flat thanks to the California Tahoe Conservancy board.

The city was back before the state board on March 16 to finalize its request to obtain grant dollars that would fund the environmental improvements at the site.

South Lake Tahoe was under the impression it was still in the running for these Proposition 1 dollars. It had never been given a deadline to provide the CTC with the requisite information.

The city will release the California Environmental Quality Act documents on Monday. Comments will be taken for 30 days. That was one requirement of the CTC. The CTC also sought more detailed information on the stream environmental zone restoration. The city provided documentation.

What got contentious at Thursday's meeting in Tahoe City was whether the project presented was substantially different compared to the first application. Why this would matter is that the dollars being used are being awarded under a competitive bid process so there cannot be any sense of favoritism because that could trigger the threat of a lawsuit by parties that were denied funding. Clarifying information is legal, but amendments or resubmissions are not permissible.

Hal Cole, the city's rep on the CTC board, as well as city staff, are adamant the project is the same, only with more detail as required by the CTC. The board was not convinced.

The board believed going from 2 acres to 1.1 acres of restoration is hugely different. Cole explained that overall the same acreage will be treated; it's just the level of detail of restoration that is in question.

The definition of SEZ was also debated even though the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency has a definition for it.

What the board didn't discuss even though it was stressed by the city is that the original request of $5.4 million had been reduced to $3 million. City staff tried to draw a parallel between the revised SEZ numbers and the dollar amount.

Cole proposed a motion that would have CTC staff members and whomever else they wanted to look at the current paperwork to deem if the project was the same. That vote failed 4-2, with Cole and Paula Frantz of El Dorado County in the minority. Board member Larry Sevison, who represents Placer County, was absent.

The motion that passed unanimously was to have the Conservancy open round two of the Proposition 1 funds, of which the city was encouraged to apply. This will occur on March 17. There will be $3.6 million total available. (In round one $9.5 million was awarded for nine projects.) Depending on the number of applications for the next round, funding would be awarded in September or December.

The external committee that originally ranked the 32 projects from round one called the city’s project “transformative.” That is one reason it was recommended for funding – that it would daylight a stream that has been paved over and would reduce the amount of sediment draining into Lake Tahoe by 20 percent.

Right now that gunk, as Cole called it, winds up at Ski Run Marina. The proposed project on an annual basis would reduce the silt reaching Lake Tahoe by 8,200 pounds, 77 pounds of nitrogen and 25 pounds of phosphorous would also no longer reach the lake.

The Knights Inn project will go forward. As of today it is a redevelopment project only.

“Without the CTC partnership, we will not have the environmental gains,” City Manager Nancy Kerry told the board before the vote.

Some city staff are wondering why they would apply again if the project has essentially been denied. But Conservancy board members after the vote said that isn’t exactly what the vote said. The vote, some said, was about fairness for the process and not about the project itself.

It will be up to city staff to determine the course of action going forward. Waiting six to nine months to know if there is funding for the environmental component for the Knights Inn project would delay the entire process. The plan earlier this week was for demolition to occur in early summer, construction to start in late summer and the Whole Foods 365 – and probably other retail entities – to open in spring 2019.

With the city discussing its mid-year budget in April, this could be a topic then.