

SLT working to clear properties of blight



Zehren's before clean up.
Photos/Provided



Zehren's after the city came in
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South Lake Tahoe is getting working cleaning up the town even if property owners won't.

On Sept. 19 the Tiger Team began a pre-organized cleaning-abatement of the exterior of the former Zehren's Nursery at the corner of Pioneer Trail and Ski Run Boulevard.

Tiger Team began in January 2015 to respond more efficiently to code compliance issues, complaints and successfully resolve cases.

With the aid of a Cal Recycle Grant and cooperation from other agencies, city officials hope the Zehren site is one of many to come. This was a multi-agency project with the city as the lead agency. Other participants were the California Conservation Corps and South Tahoe Refuse.

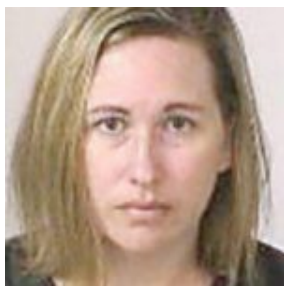
Cleanup is expected to be finished today.

Prison time in death of Douglas County grandma

By Associated Press

A Nevada woman has been sentenced to up to six years in prison for neglect causing the death of her 93-year-old grandmother, whose feet were gnawed by rodents before she died in her trash-filled, urine-stained home.

A Douglas County district judge sentenced Jamie Dawn Lummus last week to 28 to 72 months for the death of Nola Moder.



Jamie Dawn
Lummus

Lummus had cared for Moder for eight years before she was arrested in June and charged with felony neglect of an elderly person resulting in death.

Sheriff's deputies say Lummus blamed the neglect on memory loss caused by her pain medication.

Deputies responding to the Caron Valley home where the two lived said the smell of urine was overwhelming. They found food boxes and trash piled in the corners, urine- and blood-stained carpet, rodent feces on almost every surface of every room, and a dead rodent in the closet, according to a police report.

Lummus' attorney, Jamie Henry, said that Moder loved her granddaughter and Lummus stepped up to help when no one else would. He said Lummus would take her grandmother to appointments and help clean her up as needed.

Lummus has no prior criminal history, but District Court Judge Tom Gregory said the case was one of the most extreme he'd ever seen.

Suspicious fire in SLT quickly extinguished

Firefighters responded to another suspicious fire on Monday night.

It started near the South Lake Tahoe fire station at Pioneer Trail and Ski Run Boulevard. About 100-square-feet of land burned.

The fire on Sept. 19 was reported about 11:10pm.

“The fire was put out quickly and the cause is under investigation,” Lisa Herron, U.S. Forest Service spokeswoman, told *Lake Tahoe News*. She added that she didn’t know if this fire is related to the rash of fires that have occurred on the South Shore in the last month.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Payouts coming from bankrupt Nevada Fire Safe Council, but accounting questions remain

By Susan Wood

After five years of wrangling between parties, Lake Tahoe businesses and fire agencies left burned by shoddy accounting practices from the bankrupt Nevada Fire Safe Council are expected to see reimbursements for fuel reduction efforts.

U.S. Bankruptcy Court of Nevada Judge Bruce T. Beesley ruled in favor of approving a settlement with the U.S. Department of Justice a few weeks ago to disburse a total of \$2.02 million to claimants. Property owners, fire units, contractors and vendors had performed work to protect against wildfire destruction through U.S. Forest Service and federal Bureau of Land Management grants managed by the NVFSC.

The Forest Service won’t comment about the settlement.

Allen Dutra, trustee for the estate of the Nevada Fire Council, estimated he might know the exact allocations for the claimants in about 45 days. All those with money due for hazardous fuel reductions work will have 30 days to file a request form for the \$1.4 million and \$613,003 in claims. Allocations will be determined by how many claims are filed.



The Lake Christopher fuels reduction project in South Lake Tahoe got tied up with the Nevada Fire Safe Council bankruptcy. Photo/LTN file

Some claimants appear confused, disheartened or weary about their allocations as word begins to trickle out about the payouts.

“They’ll receive nothing if they don’t file. Others who do file will get theirs,” Dutra told *Lake Tahoe News*. “It’s unfortunate, but it’s called bankruptcy.”

In November 2012, the NVFSC filed for **bankruptcy** – which resulted in the federal agencies freezing all grant funds.

The matter was dragged into the courts when upon a tip the U.S. Department of Agriculture Office of Inspector General found in its investigation the NVFSC violated several federal regulations. It co-mingled federal grant money with other funds, allowed one person to handle the money and failed to conduct annual audits.

Lake Tahoe News in 2011 broke the story about the accounting discrepancies.

The OIG report recommended the Forest Service recover \$2.7 million of the \$9.8 million it awarded the nonprofit. Gaps in grant money collected and reimbursements either paid or due to be paid out remain a mystery. The work amounting to \$3.4 million began as early as 2010.

“The report found that the debtor did not properly account for the grant funds awarded by the Forest Service, including the \$3.6 million Recovery Act grant and also a \$6.2 million non-Recovery Act grant. The OIG also found that funds from the Recovery grant and non-Recovery grant were co-mingled with debtor’s own funds and used to pay unauthorized expenses,” bankruptcy court documents obtained by *Lake Tahoe News* read.

The report indicated that Andrew List, a Carson City attorney who served as the NVFSC executive director between 2006-11, was responsible for handling the grants.

The NVFSC board pledged to the OIG it would hire an interim director, develop new accounting practices and turn to an accounting firm to manage its grants. About a year later, the fire safe council went under.

“I didn’t know I was doing anything wrong. I was just running it like previous directors,” List told *Lake Tahoe News*. “I’m proud of the work we did. I’m sorry it got caught up in some accounting irregularities, but not one penny was spent on anything not related to fuel reduction.”

But former board member Ann Brown, who served on the 11-member NVFSC from 2005-11, said she was concerned when contractors were paid in earmarked reimbursements from the same account employees were paid in salaries and benefits. She knew something wasn't right.

That's Accounting 101.

"We were getting a sense of something wrong in 2011. I think (List) got in over his head. There was no proof he did anything wrong," Brown said of the former director. "It was bad oversight."

Brown has a few regrets. She told *Lake Tahoe News* it's unfortunate "the settlement does not pay everyone." She said she has worked hard to not drop the ball on the claimants.

"There's no way I'd feel comfortable not to do my utmost to try to get contractors paid," she said.

"It's a double-edged sword. We had to settle to get a pro-rated share of the bankruptcy money. It's a no brainer we had to say yes. Now we are eligible for a share of this money," Lake Valley interim Fire Chief Jeff Michael said about the lawsuit during its Sept. 8 meeting.

Lake Valley stands to get about \$280,000.

The newly hired chief, Tim Alameda, attended that meeting as fire marshal for the North Tahoe Fire Protection District. He shared a similar sentiment.

"At first we said we would not accept the agreement. Our lawyers said if we go another step, we'll lose everything for everybody," Alameda said of fighting the compromise. "The good part is the work is done. It created a fuel break. We did good honest work."

Ditto from North Tahoe Fire Chief Mike Schwartz.

“The fire district respects the Department of Justice’s approved payments and the Bankruptcy Court’s settlement. The payment amounts vary, but not the outstanding forest fuels management work that was accomplished through these grants,” he said.

And there lies the one glimmer of light from the messy accounting debacle – especially when hazardous fuel reduction is a must in an area that lost 254 homes in the devastating Angora Fire of June 2007.

South Lake Tahoe homeowners like Susan Swift are all too familiar with that constant threat hanging over the eaves of those trying to make a life in Tahoe.

One of her claims amounting to \$750 for tree removal, gravel laying and other work performed almost four years ago was finally approved by the judge. She’s gratified with the latest news, but feels like the other fire districts that more should be paid out. She’s due \$2,500 from two different properties.

“They kept saying, ‘Don’t worry’,” Swift said, further admitting to having a trust issue with the money disbursements. “We still don’t have an answer where it all went.”

Mammoth area fire not spreading

Expect smoke from the Owens River Fire to remain an issue today in the Tahoe-Truckee area.

This is day four of the fire that is burning near Mammoth.

Crews have been able to keep the blaze to 6,050 acres, with containment remaining at 20 percent.

Firefighters are focusing their efforts along the Owens River Road to protect nearby private developments and ranches. The Big Springs Campground, Clark Canyon climbing area, and nearby ranches and developments have been evacuated.

Four uninhabited outbuildings and several pieces of heavy equipment have been destroyed.

The exact cause has not been disclosed, but officials believe it is human caused.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Time to buy-sell used outdoor gear

On Oct. 16 the Meyers Community Foundation will host the third annual Meyers Outdoor Gear Swap in the Westgate Center parking lot adjacent to the Divided Sky from 11am-3pm.

Shop for skis, snowboards, bikes, paddle gear, climbing equipment, camping equipment, and other outdoor toys. Cash or credit cards will be accepted.

If you have quality summer or winter gear to sell, merchandise registration will take place in the parking lot between 8:30-10:30am. There is a \$1 cash per item fee to register it for the swap. No equipment over 5 years old allowed.

Unsold merchandise may be picked up between 3-5pm; unclaimed items will be donated. Twenty percent of the proceeds will go

to the MCF.

MCF is a nonprofit dedicated to improving life in Meyers through its support and promotion of creative and sustainable local projects and community-enhancing events.

For more information about the swap, contact Brian Levy at 530.545.9941 or René Brejc at 530.545.0340.

Matthews: Will fight for every child

Publisher's note: Lake Tahoe News asked candidates for South Lake Tahoe City Council, Lake Tahoe Community College, Lake Tahoe Unified School District, Douglas County School District, South Tahoe Public Utility District and Lake Valley Fire Protection District a series of questions. We are running the responses in the order received. All profiles may be found under the Special Projects listing and then the 2106 November Candidate Profiles category.



Troy Matthews, while running unopposed for the Lake Tahoe Unified School District's

Area 4 board seat, asked to answer the questions for the public to get to know him.

Name: Troy Matthews

Age: 32

Job/profession: Nonprofit management

What boards, commissions, or other experience, including volunteering, do you have?: I am a graduate of the Leadership Lake Tahoe program and sit on the board for the Tahoe Regional Young Professionals, the Progress For Tahoe Steering Committee, and I am project director for the South Tahoe Drug Free Coalition.

Why are you seeking this position?: I am running to fight for every child, regardless of background, because I believe a good education is a human right.

Why should voters vote for you?: I don't have an axe to grind as I don't have children in the district and I have never worked for the district. I am a fresh young voice. I love this community and am the best choice to fight for every child, because I am only running to serve all youth and families to the best of my ability.

What distinct experience or competency makes you uniquely qualified to lead effectively as an elected official?: Education is in my blood. Both of my parents were teachers and my mother was a high school principal for 14 years. I grew up going to school board meetings with my mom. I was a substitute teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District and then got a permanent teaching job in an inpatient treatment center for adolescents. From my very first day of teaching, I fought for students that traditional schools had given up on. I got my Master's Degree while teaching full-time. Currently, I work for Tahoe Youth & Family Services. I have dedicated my life to

working for disadvantaged and at-risk youth. Fighting for quality educational opportunities for all youth is my life's passion, and this is what I carry with me to the LTUSD board.

Public agencies have been under scrutiny the last few years for lack of transparency and accountability. What will you do to ensure both?: The Brown Act goes a long way to ensure transparency. Public schools belong to the community. I will make sure that the LTUSD continues to be an open book that seeks positive constructive feedback from the entire community. I want to be an open pipeline for parent and community contact with the district. I will always be available to discuss new ideas and hear concerns.

What stands out for you in the current budget that you support and that you would change?: I support CTE programs and AVID. I would like to see more support from the district for local pre-K and after school programs as well arts education for younger students.

Do you support current legislation for \$15 minimum wage? Please explain: I do support the \$15 minimum wage. I understand why people are opposed to it, but the fact is wages have not kept up with inflation over the past 30 years. According to research from Pew Charitable Trusts, 80 percent of Americans are in debt. It's not a mystery as to why: the cost of living is way too high and people don't earn enough income. South Lake Tahoe exemplifies this issue even more than most locales, unfortunately. It is simply not possible to live on \$9 per hour in this community. A wage of \$15 per hour for 40 hours per week means a yearly salary of about \$31,000 before taxes. Even that is not enough to support a family of four in California. Many parents cannot take an active interest in their child's schooling because of the amount of hours they have to work to make ends meet, and this negatively impacts student performance, and, at last count, nearly 250 youth in our district were homeless. Higher wages means more discretionary spending which boosts the economy, and that

means we all benefit. At the same time, local regulatory agencies have got to make life easier for our small businesses. We have to create an environment where paying employees more does not amount to an existential threat to local businesses.

Do you support Proposition 55? Please explain: I do support Prop 55. Prop. 55 is an extension of Prop. 30, passed in 2012, which is set to expire in 2018. South Lake Tahoe schools greatly benefit from this measure at no cost to the vast majority of people who live here. Prop. 55 will prevent billions of dollars in cuts to California schools while ensuring local control of funds.

Describe three attributes for a successful board: Compassion, transparency, and cooperation

What are your thoughts about public employee defined benefits?: Public employee benefits are essential to attracting and retaining qualified teachers and administrators. Teachers are often unfairly scapegoated for economic issues in the state due to their benefits. Teachers deserve every benefit they receive and the success of Prop. 30 proves that there are solutions to protecting funding for schools besides cutting wages and benefits for public workers.

Please explain your position on contracting out work normally done by staff: I do not support contract work that undercuts the wages and benefits of regular staff.

What is your 10-year vision for the school district?: I would envision that we have one of the highest graduation rates in the state; work with Douglas County and Placer County and Washoe County schools to promote lakewide educational cooperation and success; continue to grow CTE, AVID, and college readiness programs; continue to enhance the LCAP to include student wellness programs; promote civics education and the humanities to develop well rounded citizens of the

nation and the world; develop environmental science and fire science programs utilizing the amazing natural resources all around us; become a hub for arts education with award winning music, culinary, studio art, and theater programs; become a hub for athletics, physical fitness, and sports science programs to fit our recreation destination and athletic community; have the majority of LTUSD students fluent in another language by the time they graduate; be known statewide as a community with some of the best schools in the country; continue to promote STEM education and integrate "STEAM" education adding an arts component; establish a K-14 education culture in Tahoe; work to promote a four-year university in Tahoe and develop a strong partnership between the university and the LTUSD to keep local students local.

What one vote in the last four years that the current Board made do you disagree with and why?: While not every board decision has been perfect, I support the current direction of the board. I don't have a specific decision that I strongly disagree with. I do think the board needs to be more proactive in its governance and, as a board, establish a clear vision for the district moving forward.

How many meetings have you attended this year for the board you are running for?: Three meetings, including the most recent LTUSD board retreat.

What do you know about the strategic plan, finances, debt, goals of the school board?: I support the current direction of the district to foster growth of the whole student as well as provide continual educational opportunities to EL students and disadvantaged youth. The vast majority of funding for all California schools comes from the state level, which is why Prop. 55 is so important. School district budgets in California are incredibly complex, but the gist is: we need to increase spending per pupil to compete with other states. California is well below average in per-pupil spending despite the high priority the state puts on public education.

Being on the school board means working as a team. How will you work with the next board for the greater good of the community?: Myself and other members of the board will without doubt have disagreements, but the students of the district must always remain the focus for the board. I will do what I can to voice my opinion and fight for what I believe in, but once the board has voted, that is the decision of the board. I will support it even if I voted against it.

What should be the three main priorities for the board?: Increase parent involvement, attract and retain great teachers, increase graduation rates.

What do you know about Common Core? What is your opinion about it?: Common Core is a new set of standards for K-12 English and math competency established by the U.S. Department of Education. States may choose to opt in to these standards. California is one of 46 states to have opted in to Common Core. My thoughts are: the jury is still out. Teachers in LTUSD are still transitioning to Common Core, so it may take a couple years to know if they are successful or not. I believe the intent behind Common Core is good, but I also believe in local control of education. Every school district is unique. I will oppose Common Core if it proves to be a detriment to our students. I will oppose any test score requirements tied to school funding.

How can the school district partner with the city to improve high school graduation rates?: The city and the LTUSD can work together to increase parent involvement in the schools, and that means creating an economy where parents aren't forced to work three jobs and never see their kids in order to feed their kids. The 61 percent poverty rate for our students is a tragedy. I do not accept it. The city should also focus on fostering the growth of available and affordable housing in our community. The LTUSD can hire great teachers, but that won't matter if they have to leave Tahoe because they can't find a place to live.

What is your opinion about career and technical education at the high school level?: I strongly support it. I believe CTE has transformed education as we know it and made South Tahoe High a unique success story in California. Our students have learning opportunities few in other districts have.

Do you support the expansion of charter schools? Why or why not?: I support heavily regulated charter schools with identical standards to regular public schools. I believe charter schools that go unchecked pull money away from public schools while not necessarily providing their students with a quality education. They can be essentially private schools that receive public funding. However, I do support innovation in education, and this is where charter schools can be very successful.

What are your thoughts on the accreditation status at STHS?: It is an unfortunate situation that needs to be remedied quickly.

Tell us something about yourself that people may not know: I'm terrified of flying, I love to cook, and I am a huge fan of the Los Angeles Lakers, unfortunately.

Opinion: More red ink in El Dorado County

By Larry Weitzman

It has been a tough two months for the new CAO, Don Ashton, as he attempts to turn a lemon budget created by the inept Larry Combs into lemonade. While he wasn't given a direct order from the Board of Supervisors to cut \$10 million out of the Combs budget, he has achieved about \$6 million reduction.

But out of control salaries and benefits have become blight upon the county, especially considering the need for a new sheriff's facility. Budget hearings started on Sept. 12. And while our new CAO has tried to structurally balance the El Dorado County budget, the problem will remain without a significant change in direction of county policy. Helping reduce the deficit was a onetime nearly \$2 million "gift" (money due) from the Red Hawk casino for a payment that was thought to be due in December 2017 that will actually be received in December 2016.



Larry Weitzman

And another piece of "good" news was a potential reduction in the interest rate to 2.375 percent currently, if the county could lock in this rate, for the proposed \$61 million sheriff's facility. This would save the county about \$400,000 annually over the 40-year life of the loan (\$16 million total). Understand that this improvement should be voted on and approved by the citizens of EDC pursuant to a reasonable interpretation of Measure A. It should have been on the November ballot.

But that gets to the issue of the loan requirement that the county have a structurally balanced budget for the next five years. When that question was asked by the fiscally savvy Second District Supervisor Shiva Frentzen to the CAO at the end of the Sept. 12 meeting, the answer was a yes. However, the county auditor, who was also asked the same question, said while it was balanced per state law, it wasn't structurally balanced and the CAO eventually agreed with the auditor when

he qualified his answer saying with the add-on budgeted items presented at this meeting, then the budget is not structurally balanced meaning that revenues will be exceeded by ongoing operating expenses.

Interestingly there was little said about "operating efficiencies" which was such a large topic of recent BOS meetings. But it was discussed with respect to one item brought to the attention of the BOS by the county auditor. The county is underbilling for county development services charged by the Community Development Agency both in the hours charged and the hourly rate to developers. CDA head, Steve Pedretti, brought the hourly rate issue to the BOS about six months ago and got a rate increase from \$100/hour to \$119/hour for planners in the Development Services Division. These are charges billed to developers for county services necessary for their projects.

However, there are still issues of whether this and other billing rates are sufficient as well as billing for appropriate amounts of time that are charged back to developers. The county auditor was concerned that we are still under billing and "that long range planning staff is not charging all the hours that it should to specific billable projects." The recovery of this money from developers could amount to hundreds of thousands of dollars annually "and reduce the need for General Fund support to the CDA." Hopefully, CDA will within a few weeks recommend a series of improved billing practices to recapture this significant "found money."

The elephant in the room is still the cost of salary and benefits. For four years ending with the fiscal year of June 30, 2013, the county salary and benefits were virtually identical for each of those years at \$118 million. Since then salary and benefits have grown like star thistle to \$132 million the next year, continuing to \$152 million for the year ended on June 30, 2016. The last budget projection for FY

15-16 produced in May 2016 estimated salary-benefits at \$156 million, so it came in about \$4 million less primarily from unfilled vacant positions. Our new CAO has held the line on new positions or employee additions for FY 16/17 effectively at zero new General Fund employees. That is good, but even still the new salary-benefits budget projection is \$168 million. The real total should be at year's end more like \$160 million or maybe slightly less based on vacant positions, which are budgeted along with actual filled positions. That will mean that the growth in salary-benefits in just four years will be \$42 million.

Our chief financial officer projects the salary-benefits growth at 4.5 percent annually. Currently there are ongoing negotiations for a new contract as the prior 15 percent raise contract ended on June 30, 2016. In that contract most EDC employees received raises they were not asking for in that they were looking for 9 percent. Instead of a raise with respect to this new contract, maybe there should be a 3 percent give back, 1 percent a year. That would go a long way to reach fiscal sanity in EDC and stop the enormous salary growth.

Additionally, the other growing bubble is pension benefits. CalPERS has had two bad years relative to their investments and that may give rise to rapidly increasing pension cost contributions. County contribution requirements are three-times higher than the federal Social Security requirements for private employers (about 18.7 percent versus 6.2 percent). And that number is rising. And for public safety employees the rate is almost six time higher (about 36 percent versus 6.2 percent). This is a serious problem which needs a thorough examination. The final component of the salary-benefits issue is health care. South Lake Tahoe City Manager Nancy Kerrey is a noted expert on reducing these costs. Maybe someone should ask for a meeting. Maybe there are some savings available there.

But while our new CAO attempts to work his extensive knowledge and magic to control the budget, the EDC BOS could give him some general direction on cutting the budget and then let him do his job. As an aside, the BOS has authorized at least \$2 million from the Missouri Flat Master Circulation & Funding Plan for road maintenance. That is a great idea if it's legal to do so. County counsel is to prepare a legal opinion regarding the legality of such a transfer. I am not so sure.

Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.

Telemedicine helping rural communities

By Elizabeth Zach, High Country News

As a young infectious diseases physician in San Francisco in the 1990s, Javeed Siddiqui could easily treat local patients suffering from HIV. As drugs became more effective, he would often simply need to check in with his patients, ask how they were doing both physically and emotionally, and refill prescriptions.

But there were also patients who traveled hours from their homes in northern rural California, taking a day off from work. By the early 2000s, he began wondering what he could do differently, via electronic communications.

Siddiqui, now 50, is today the medical director of UC Davis' telemedicine program and also of the California Institute for Science and Innovation at UC Berkeley.

The use of telemedicine is widespread and expanding, said

Siddiqui.

Read the whole story

Cyclist hospitalized after being hit by truck

A bicyclist was taken to Barton Memorial Hospital on Monday afternoon after being struck by a vehicle in Meyers.

According to the California Highway Patrol, the female cyclist did not sustain life-threatening injuries.

The Sept. 19 incident is under investigation to determine who was at fault. No one was cited at the scene.

“I witnessed the female bicyclist doing a complete head-over-heels cartwheel into the air after the collision,” a local resident told *Lake Tahoe News*. “The bicyclist was riding down the bike path toward Lake Tahoe Golf Course and the truck was turning onto Country Club from Highway 50.”

The names and hometowns of the people involved in the crash have not been released.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*