

Holiday movies to make you laugh, cry and feel good about humanity

By Howie Nave

It's that time of year again where family and loved ones gather together to be thankful for what we have and what the bank doesn't. I love this time of year. And even though we haven't had much in the way of a white Christmas, there are plenty of holiday movies out there to remind us what it looks like.



That's right – it's time to dust off the annual favorite Christmas movies and share them with family members and rekindle that magic of what it was to see the world through the eyes of a child ("A Christmas Story"), to have relatives come visit from all over the country while you decorate the house to be the best one on the block ("Christmas Vacation"), to see what Christmas was like back when our country was in black and white ("It's A Wonderful Life," "Miracle of 34th Street," "A Christmas Carol"), see what Christmas looks like in an animated format ("A Charlie Brown Christmas," "How The Grinch Stole Christmas," "The Nightmare Before Christmas") and of course, the anti-Christmas movie with heart ("Bad Santa").

There are also those Christmas movies that really aren't about Christmas but use the holiday as a backdrop ("Die Hard" 1 and 2 and "Lethal Weapon" 1 and 2, "Nobody's Fool").

And there are those that are great as an ensemble piece counting down the weeks until Christmas ("Love Actually").

Whatever your favorite, these 20 for me represent some of the

best Christmas movies that will stand the test of time for generations to come.

1. "LOVE ACTUALLY," R (2003)

You know a movie is destined to become a classic when the moment you pop it in you are instantly transported to that place in time where you almost become part of the movie and it's an ensemble cast as well. An ensemble cast that works marvelous, too. I love this type of movie especially when the stories intersect with one another and the characters as well. "Love Actually" counts down Christmas from five weeks out showing us the lives of eight couples each going through a different crisis and how they come out on the other end. I think it has one of the best messages about family, friends and co-workers with a message about forgiveness and hope. England is the backdrop for the movie that includes a stellar cast consisting of Bill Nighy, Hugh Grant, Emma Thompson, Alan Richman, Keira Knightly, Liam Neeson and Colin Firth. Writer/director Richard Curtis ("Four Weddings and a Funeral," "Bridget Jones Diary" and "Notting Hill") has an excellent track record when it comes to ensemble pieces and this one is no exception. From its opening narration by Hugh Grant at Heathrow Airport to its conclusion "Love Actually" will stay with you long after the holidays and you'll find yourself watching it again and again as it only gets better with each passing Christmas.

2. "IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE," G (1946)

The quintessential Christmas movie that was almost forgotten after it was first released in 1946. The movie received a second chance when television came along, making it easily one of the best holiday movies ever. And just like its main character George Baily (played by Jimmy Stewart) he too gets a second shot at life being able to see what the world would have been like had he never been born. In a way Bedford Falls could be any small community here in Lake Tahoe because

everyone knows who you are and you realize friends and neighbors really do matter when you think the world doesn't care about you. With the guardian angel Clarence (Henry Travers) trying to earn his wings to show George that he has affected others around him "It's a Wonderful Life" will reignite the hope and optimism that was once lost back into your life and make you feel that yes, your life does in fact matter. A nice, feel-good movie with a terrific cast that also includes Donna Reed, Lionel Barrymore and a host of other supporting characters like Thomas Mitchell.

3. "MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET," G (1947)

Not to be confused with the 1994 color version starring Richard Attenborough and Elizabeth Perkins, the original black and white version still shines as one of the most heart-warming holiday classics of all time. With a cast that includes Maureen O'Hara, Edmund Gwenn and a very young Natalie Wood, it's up to young lawyer Fred Gailey (John Payne) to convince Susan (Wood) that there indeed is a Santa Claus (Gwenn) and also prove the spirit of Christmas can even change non-believers such as Susan's mom, Doris (O'Hara) in believing in Kris Kringle. It's got something for everyone from working parents to skeptical kids and supporting characters like Thelma Ritter and Gene Lockhart who really fill out the cast nicely.

4. "BAD SANTA," R (2003)

I can't wait until Christmas rolls around just to watch this. Oh sure I can screen it during the other months of the year, but it doesn't have the same impact when it's not Christmas-time. This R- rated comedy is hilarious and I don't think I have ever laughed louder than any Christmas comedy ever made. Maybe because it flies in the face of anything one would expect over the holidays or that it is so rude and in-your-face. "Bad Santa" believe it or not has a soulful ending and makes even the most cynical, non-believer (Billy Bob Thornton)

into a warm character, although it just about costs him his life. Let me warn you in advance if you haven't seen "Bad Santa," this movie is not for children or the faint of heart. It is without a doubt the most non-traditional, anti-Christmas movie (but with a heart) I have ever seen, but also the funniest. It was also the last movie for veteran comedic actor John Ritter and sadder too because comedian/actor Bernie Mac passed away just a couple years ago. Thornton plays Willie, an alcoholic, bad-mouthing department store Santa Clause who, along with his foul-mouthed partner in crime dressed as elf Marcus (Tony Cox) robs department stores every Christmas season with great success. Director Terry Zwigoff ("Crumb," "Ghost World") really hits the mark with this sarcastic flick and will leave you howling with laughter throughout if you just give it a chance. The movie also stars first-timer to the screen Brett Kelly as the snot-nosed, 8-year-old boy who everyone picks on and really believes that Willie is Santa. Cloris Leachman plays the "spry" grandma. She has few lines, but is so funny visually when she does appear on-screen that you just find yourself bursting out loud with laughter. Laura Graham is also hysterical as the bartender Sue who has a thing for guys dressed in Santa suits.

5. "NATIONAL LAMPOON'S CHRISTMAS VACATION," PG-13 (1989)

Chevy Chase, star of the "National Lampoon Vacation" movies, will probably be best remembered for this holiday spoof because it continues to be one of the most popular rentals year after year. As head of the Griswold family Clark (Chase) personifies everything that inevitably goes wrong as the Christmas holiday counts down to the big day. Beverly D'Angelo is the patient wife to Clark who loves him regardless of his stressed-out antics when the unexpected in-laws show up. By the way, Randy Quaid will forever be typecast as Cousin Eddie, right? "Christmas Vacation" has all of the holiday family traditions from finding that elusive perfect Christmas tree, how to spend the Christmas bonus from work and the always

hilarious, time-consuming task of creating the perfect Christmas decorated house with enough Christmas lights to light up the entire neighborhood. Speaking of the Christmas bonus check the movie also stars Brian Doyle-Murray as Clark's Scrooge-like boss. Directed by Jeremiah S. Chechik "Christmas Vacation" is still a family favorite and seems to only gain in popularity with each passing year as it becomes introduced to a whole new generation.

6. "A CHRISTMAS STORY," G (1983)

One of my all time favorite Christmas movies based on the recollections of humorist Jean Shepherd, "A Christmas Story" epitomizes your basic urban family from the 1940s with Peter Billingsley in the leading role as Ralphie. He pretty much has only one quest in this movie. That is to convince his parents, teachers and Santa that all he wants for Christmas is a Red Ryder air rifle BB gun. Melinda Dillon plays Ralphie's mom and after watching this timeless classic a bunch of times actually plays every mom I have encountered – she is that good. It's a great family movie to watch; told in a narrative format (voiced by Jean Shepherd himself). I remember the first time I saw this movie I wanted to see if your tongue really would get stuck on a frozen flagpole. Don't try it kids, it does. "A Christmas Story" is a must-see. And who can forget that immortal line from the movie when Ralphie says he must have that BB gun? "You'll shoot your eye out with that thing kid!"

7. "A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS," G (1965)

This holiday classic almost never made it to the small screen, but lucky for us it did and remains an animated classic to this day. "A Charlie Brown Christmas" became an instant classic when it first aired back in 1965 and introduced us all not just to Charles Schultz's famous cartoon strip, but also turned me on to jazz via the great Vince Guaraldi who gave us the soundtrack and the "sound" that would forever be immortalized via his music through Lucy and Linus. I always

wanted to be Schroeder after hearing him bang out those cool piano pieces. When Charlie Brown complains about the overwhelming materialism that he sees amongst everyone during the Christmas season, Lucy suggests he become director of the school Christmas pageant. Charlie Brown accepts, but it proves to be a frustrating struggle. When an attempt to restore the proper spirit with a forlorn little fir Christmas tree fails, he needs Linus' help to learn what the real meaning of Christmas is. Any sad looking Christmas tree to this day is referred to as a "Charlie Brown Christmas tree."

8. "HOW THE GRINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS," G (1965)

Based on the Dr. Seuss classic, this tale is still a delight to watch. Forget the fancy CGI graphics of today. "Grinch" still has that charm as if the book were speaking (and singing) to me. It still evokes fond memories from the first time I saw it on TV. Directed by the legendary Chuck Jones from Warner Bros. fame and narrated by Boris Karloff, this 26-minute animated TV classic about a Christmas-hating Grinch who wants to make everyone as miserable on Christmas as he is still is one of the most original Christmas stories ever. The poor, small-hearted Scrooge learns the true meaning of Christmas through the loving Whos in Whoville. And who can forget that poor dog of his that has to haul that enormous sleigh too wearing those antlers?

9. "HOME ALONE" PG (1990)

Before the less than adequate sequels and Macaulay Culkin's growing pains, "Home Alone" was one of the late director John Hughes' best holiday efforts. Nobody at the time thought that this would become such a hit, but apparently Hughes knew otherwise. Culkin plays the resourceful 8-year-old Kevin who wishes his family would just go away and leave him alone right before Christmas. Accidentally, they do, and he's left to defend for himself against two dopey criminal types (Joe Pesci and Daniel Stern). Billed as "A Family Comedy Without The

Family” this family film is both funny and entertaining with a stand out performance by Catherine O’Hara as Kevin’s mother. Hughes may be gone, but his movies will always remain and this one is one of his best to be played again and again every Christmas and also to remind you that if you’re from a large family you can still have a voice.

10. “EVELYN,” PG (2002)

Starring (and produced by) actor Pierce Brosnan, this little holiday movie was like finding a pearl in a sea of muddy water. I only first heard about this movie while living in the Bay Area and the studio had a private screening hoping to get the word out. I became a believer immediately and put the word out whenever I can, especially at this time of year. “Evelyn” centers on a young Irish girl, Evelyn (Sophie Vavasseur) and is set in 1953 Dublin. Based on a true story, the film stars Pierce Brosnan as Desmond Doyle, a poor painter and interior decorator whose wife walks out on him during the holidays leaving him to fend for their three children Maurice, Dermot, and Evelyn. Back then the government mandated children must be placed in the custody of the state and not the father even when their mother abandons them. That law would soon change when lawyers Stephen Rea and Aidan Quinn (with Alan Bates in tow) takes on the establishment. Director Bruce Beresford utilizes the emotional side of the former 007 star and shows us his fatherly side with great results. Also impressive is that of American actress Julianna Margulies as Doyle’s love interest who pulls off a good Irish accent too. It’s a fantastic holiday flick and one to definitely watch with the entire family.

11. “WHITE CHRISTMAS,” G (1954)

One of the most time honored classic Christmas musicals, “White Christmas” features such stars as Bing Crosby, Danny Kaye, Vera-Allen and Rosemary Clooney. Bing croons such Irving Berlin classics as “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas,” Vera-

Ellen taps up a storm, Kaye entertains with his usual goofy antics, and this movie is overall a lot of fun. "White Christmas" offers up a lot of comedy, a little bit of romance, and just enough holiday sentiment to go around.

12. "A CHRISTMAS CAROL," G (1951)

Also known as the "Scrooge" movie, Alastair Sim plays the quintessential Ebenezer Scrooge. It almost appears that all other incarnations were based on Sim's definition of the character after seeing his performance here. So good in fact that he was almost typecast. Other Scrooges were based on his adaptation, that much is certain. Based on the Dickens' classic, this adaptation about a miser who doesn't believe in Christmas until three ghosts come to take him on three voyages still sends chills through me. Vivid with what life was like in 19th-century London, the terrific performances of the cast, including Kathleen Harrison as Mrs. Dilber, make the story come to life. This version of "A Christmas Carol" is the one to see.

13. "JOYEUX NOEL," PG-13 (2005)

Written and directed by Christian Carion ("The Girl From Paris"), this French movie was nominated for an Oscar under Best Foreign Film and recreates an incredible incident that took place on western front during the first World War. It was Christmas Eve 1914 the first year of the war. German, British, French and Belgian troops who had been slaughtering each other for months initiated a spontaneous and unsanctioned truce, if you will. They put down their guns, sang songs with each other, played soccer, shared rations and posed for photos. They had joint religious services and helped each other bury their dead. Mixing fictional characters with historical fact, "Joyeux Noel" becomes an extraordinary film and shows what can happen instantaneously during the madness of war.

14. "MEET ME IN ST. LOUIS" G (1944)

This is a delightful musical film that tells the story of a turn-of-the-century family in suburban St. Louis in 1903, who live in a stylish Edwardian home at 5135 Kensington Ave. The city, and the well-to-do Smith family (with four beautiful daughters), is on the verge of hosting (and celebrating) the arrival of the spectacular 1904 World's Fair. The movie first paired director Vincente Minnelli with Judy Garland and was the most popular and financially successful film produced by the legendary Arthur Freed and directed by its star's future husband, newcomer Minnelli (who married 23-year-old Judy Garland a year later on June 15, 1945 – it was Garland's second marriage). This classic was Minnelli's third film (after the all-black musical "Cabin in the Sky" (1943) and the musi-comedy, "I Dood It" (1943) with Red Skelton) and it was Minnelli's first full-length film in color. After their marriage, Garland and Minnelli also worked together on "The Clock" (1945) and "The Pirate" (1948).

15. "THE HOLIDAY," PG-13 (2006)

It can be a fine line between an emotional holiday movie and your classic chick flick. Sometimes men even get to use that as an excuse to get choked up and say it's because of the holidays. Writer/director Nancy Meyers assembled a good-looking cast that includes Cameron Diaz and Kate Winslet as two women (Amanda and Iris, respectively) who find themselves at the end of failed relationships. The fact that it takes place just before Christmas amplifies the loneliness factor to the point where they both swap living locations after meeting online. Amanda lives in Los Angeles and Iris lives in Surrey, England, with things heating up after Iris' brother, Graham (Jude Law) drops by Iris' house and meets Amanda. At the other side of the pond Iris meets Miles (Jack Black) a film composer. Kudos to Black for being a very sensitive and calm guy this time around and he steals the picture.

16. "THE BISHOP'S WIFE," G (1947)

When a movie moves you to tears because of the incredible casting and excellent storyline you can't help but ask yourself, "Why don't they make movies like this nowadays?" Exactly. In what I believe to be one of his best roles ever, Cary Grant plays Dudley, the unexpected hero who is more than just angelic. His assignment is to make us as a species be more well, human. He is the answer to the prayers coming from Episcopal Bishop, Henry Brougham (played by a young David Niven) whose plans for an elaborate new cathedral has run into a stumbling block of sorts as is his own personal life. Loretta Young gives a moving performance as she is also touched by an angel. Directed by Emil Newman "The Bishop's Wife" will warm the hearts of even the toughest cynics out there especially with Christmas fast approaching.

17. "ELF," PG (2003)

I remember when "Elf" first came out. I thought, "OK, Will Ferrell seems to click in this character as Buddy, an over grown human elf." I like that the movie is one kids and adults can enjoy without being sappy and yet uplifting at the end; proving Christmas can still bring out the optimistic kid in all of us. Buddy, through a mishap, was raised at the North Pole in Santa's toy factory. Director Jon Favreau (along with screenwriter David Berenbaum) balances the movie with just the right amount of fun and sentimentality. Buddy leaves the North Pole to seek out his biological father (played by James Caan) in New York. As a fish out of water, Buddy can't believe that there are actually people as tall as he is. He also discovers plenty of Santa Clause imposters everywhere in NYC. When Buddy finds out that the Santa is coming to Gimbels, he assumes it will be the real Santa (Edward Asner) and not just one of his helpers this time. "Elf" gets better watch time I see it and having Bob Newhart in a brief cameo makes it that much more enjoyable.

18. "HOLIDAY INN," G (1942)

Talk about your incredible chemistry. With music by Irving Berlin sung by (and starring) Bing Crosby and dancing by Fred Astaire, all I can say is "Whoa!" The movie is actually based on an idea by Irving Berlin about a retired song-and-dance man, Jim Hardy (Bing Crosby), who retires from showbiz to become a gentleman farmer in New England only to get back into the business combining both worlds for special holidays. The film's highlight is Fred Astaire's bang-up performance of July 4th "Let's Say It with Firecrackers." "Holiday Inn" however will probably best be known for introducing the world to the first public performance of the song "White Christmas." Crosby first sang that song on his NBC radio show "The Kraft Music Hall" on Christmas Day 1941. Moviegoers then saw Bing sing the holiday classic seven months later when the movie came out. The song went on to become one of the biggest selling songs in the history of music. This was the first of three films to feature Crosby singing "White Christmas."

19. "THE NIGHTMARE BEFORE CHRISTMAS," PG (1993)

Classic Tim Burton all the way even though he didn't direct this one (Henry Selick did). Burton co-wrote and produced this time out. I liked this one the first time I saw it in part because it combined two of my favorite holidays and seasons: Halloween and Christmas. Jack Skellington (voiced by Chris Sarandon and sung by Danny Elfman) is the pumpkin king of Halloween Town. One day he stumbles across Christmas Town and so loves their holiday that he tries to incorporate his world using resident ghouls, bats and goblins with the hope of getting Halloween Town to get on board with Christmas with disastrous results. The stop-action animation is incredible not to mention the voices of Catherine O'Hara, Paul Reubens and Greg Proops.

20. "RUDOLPH, THE RED-NOSED REINDEER," G (1964)

Another animated television special this was one of the very first shot using the stop-motion animation technique and gave

singer Burl Ives his best year ever when it came to producing the now Christmas classics, "A Holly Jolly Christmas" and "Silver and Gold," two songs he sang as the character Sam the Snowman in this holiday special. He narrates this holiday classic telling us the story about Rudolph who was in effect ousted from playing any reindeers games because of his bright red honker. Rudolph teams up with Hermey, an elf (voiced by Paul Soles) who wants to be a dentist, and Yukon Cornelius (voiced by Larry D. Mann) a prospector. The animated special became an overnight success launching the Burl Ives' Christmas songs into regular rotation history after this aired.

Howie Nave is host/emcee/manager of The Improv at Harveys. You can hear him Monday-Friday 6 to 10am on KRLT FM-93.9.

Nevada spending on health care among the lowest of all states

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – Nevada ranks 46th among states on spending on health care per capita, according to a report released this month by the Centers for Medicaid & Medicare Services.

Nevada spends \$5,735 per person on total personal health care as of 2009, the report says. The national average is \$6,815. The highest per capita spending was found in Massachusetts at \$9,278.

Larry Matheis, executive director of the Nevada State Medical Association, said Nevada's low spending on health care is a

reflection of the large number of residents who don't have health insurance.

U.S. Census data released in October shows Nevada is the third most uninsured state per capita in the U.S as of 2009.

"On first blush it's good news that we're not on the high end of spending per person," Matheis said. "But a more balanced look at the data says we have a lot of warning signs in this pool of data. It renders a number that looks like we've got costs under control. It actually just means we have a big access problem."

The report found that eight of the 10 top states for total health care spending per capita, including Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York, are also ranked in the top third in the nation for annual personal income per capita.

"Income appears to have an important and positive relationship with health spending," the report said.

Matheis said the study provides much-needed information as the country moves forward with full implementation of the national health care law.

"They need much better baseline information about how much they are spending and on what with every population and in every part of the country, because a big part of the reform proposals are aimed at trying to, if not reduce costs, reduce the things that lead to higher costs," he said.

Medicare and Medicaid spending

The report shows Nevada is in the middle of the pack in terms of Medicare spending per enrollee at \$9,692, and ranks toward the bottom of the states on Medicaid spending per enrollee at \$6,003. The national averages are \$10,365 and \$6,826, respectively.

But in terms of the percentage of health care dollars spent on

Medicaid, Nevada is lowest among all states at only 8.6 percent. Nevada is the only state where spending is in the single-digits. The highest is New York, where 29.2 percent of all personal health care spending is via Medicaid.

Medicaid is the health care program for low income seniors, disabled and families, the cost of which is shared by states and the federal government.

Charles Duarte, administrator of the state Division of Health Care Financing and Policy, which oversees the Medicaid program, said Nevada's spending is low because of the policy decision to restrict eligibility. The program also doesn't offer many optional services that can increase costs.

"We've made decisions as a state that we're not going to expand the program from an eligibility perspective," he said. "And so in other states Medicaid makes up 14, 15, 16 percent of coverage for people in the state. In some states it is as high as 30 percent.

"We don't cover as many people in our public programs, but our employers are kind of right in the middle there, slightly above the national average," Duarte said. "And what the means is the uninsured group are those that could be covered by Medicaid if our rules allowed it."

Federal health care law

This situation is expected to change as the Medicaid program expands beginning in 2014 as part of the implementation of the federal health care law, he said. As many as 100,000 new residents could be eligible for Medicaid. There are residents eligible for Medicaid now who are not participating in the program who will have to be covered as well, Duarte said.

The cost of the newly eligible residents will be covered almost entirely by the federal government, but the state will share in the cost of those who are eligible now but who have

not signed up for the program, he said.

This Medicaid expansion is one reason Nevada joined with many other states in challenging the constitutionality of the health care law. The U.S. Supreme Court has agreed to review the law. Former Gov. Jim Gibbons in 2010 estimated the Medicaid mandate will cost Nevada \$613 million over six years beginning in 2014. Gibbons initiated Nevada's participation in the challenge to the law which is being continued by Gov. Brian Sandoval.

Matheis said there is a strong feeling in the Nevada medical community that the state is under-spending on this population, which will have to change with the implementation of the health care law.

"Nevada is going to go from where we are now, which is a very low spending per Medicaid patient; we're going to jump a huge amount because there are going to be so many people that will be identified for the new Medicaid expansion that is coming under the Affordable Care Act," he said.

This rapid expansion will create budget challenges for state lawmakers, Matheis said.

Policy-makers need to seriously consider the data and build it into the state's planning efforts, he said.

"At some point we do have to invest in a health care system that we want," Matheis said. "Right now we're doing that in Nevada minimally and that's what this report really shows."

Snippets about Lake Tahoe



- Mike Bradford, owner of Lakeside Inn Casino in Stateline, has been appointed to the board of directors for the Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District.

- Pamela Harris, 56, of Placerville has been appointed director at the California Employment Development Department.
 - Mtn. Mike's Sports in Squaw Valley has a new website.
 - El Dorado County offices will be closed Dec. 23, Dec. 26 and Jan. 2.
 - Debbie Akin has been appointed to the El Dorado County board of education.
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No snow doesn't mean no skiing in Lake Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

In 11 days, the first snow survey of the season will be conducted by the state Department of Water Resources. National Weather Service forecasters say the next two weeks will be dry and that the snowpack is 15 percent of normal.

In a normal month, South Lake Tahoe receives 1.84 inches of

precipitation by Dec. 22 for the month of December. The city has received a trace this month.



Northstar's terrain park has plenty of snow to play in.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

For the entire month of December, Tahoe City averages 5.5 inches of precip. It has recorded zero this month.

Ski resorts for the 2010-11 season boasted of a record snowfall. Squaw Valley had more than 800 inches. This season resorts like Heavenly and Northstar are bragging about their snowmaking capabilities.

When will it snow?

"So many different global patterns and influences affect the weather. The main thing that needs to happen is the ridge of high pressure off the West Coast needs to shift and head south," explained Scott McGuire, meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Reno.

The La Nina jet stream is keeping storms north of Lake Tahoe. While the basin basks in sunshine, it is also freezing with below normal temperatures. The morning low Dec. 22 was 10 degrees in South Lake Tahoe. The normal low is 16 degrees.

"There is no indication this overall pattern is going to change for the better," McGuire told *Lake Tahoe News*. "(Models) just show a couple storms trying to drop, so the southern edge of the storms may clip us. It's hard to believe it will sit like this the entire winter, but it could."

Drought conditions?

Last winter's deluge has reservoirs in California and Nevada faring well so far – even better than a year ago this time. Lake Tahoe on Dec. 22 was at 6,226.85 feet, while on that date in 2010 it was at 6,224.37 feet.

It's losing about one-hundredth of a foot a day because of evaporation – even more when it's windy.

The Climate Prediction Center issues a "drought monitor" for the whole country. Tahoe was recently listed at the bottom rung, or "abnormally dry". This is the first of five stages.

"If we don't see improvement in January, they will probably worsen the outlook," Gary Barbato, hydrologist and federal water master in Reno, said. "We typically have two good months left. We'll see how we do."

While there have been "March Miracles", they are a rare occurrence. January and February need to be wet for any optimism to continue.

Barbato said with Tahoe and Lahontan Reservoir being above average, he is not alarmed yet by the lack of snow – even though the wet season usually starts in November and it's been dry all this time.

Lake Tahoe, while it supplies water to some water purveyors in the basin, is the main water source for Reno via the Truckee River.

The Sierra snowpack is the source of water for much of California. Reservoirs in California are faring well despite a

dry December.

"We are not unduly worried yet. The reservoirs are still in very good shape with carryover storage from last winter's storms," Ted Thomas with the California Department of Water Resources told *Lake Tahoe News*. "This is a very dry December, obviously, one of the driest so far."

Helping Mother Nature

There was a time when skiing at Christmas in Lake Tahoe was iffy. That was before snowmaking became the norm.

Those who skied on the manmade white stuff in the early days could not find anything positive to say about it. What comes out of the guns today is so far superior at times it's hard to distinguish between what is real and what is fake.

Another advantage customers have today is getting the truth about conditions from other skiers and riders. Resort and personal Facebook pages tell it like it is. No longer can resorts embellish the snow report.

Skiers at Northstar on Dec. 20 may have had doubts about the conditions based on riding a chairlift over rocks, grass and logs, but at the end of the ride were perfectly groomed conditions.

That's the other thing that has changed through the years – the groomers. Between the machine and the operators they lay out corduroy each day that makes people forget it didn't snow the night before.

So, there isn't tree skiing and Tahoe is waiting for its first powder day – those who like groomers or have a need to schuss are likely to be satisfied. Just don't look at what's at lake level to know what the slopes are all about. Plus, most of the resorts have made a concerted effort to have terrain parks open.

At Northstar this week skiers and boarders were spinning, jumping, back scratching, and twisting their way over features. The 22-foot superpipe where Shaun White will train is expected to be finished any day.

Heavenly had its terrain park operating on opening day – last month.

While most resorts in the greater Lake Tahoe area are open at some level, Heavenly has the largest snowmaking capabilities.

Heavenly can cover 73 percent of its mountain with manmade snow. Today about 25 percent of the resort's 97 trails are open. More are opening every day, with Boulder expected to open Christmas Day and Groove potentially, as well.

Northstar is bragging of snow depths of 18 to 24 inches on 25 trails. In a 24-hour period they use 5 million gallons of water to cover 100 acres.

Squaw uses 2,000 gallons of water per minute. It has a 12-inch base on eight runs.

"We could go all season making snow, but we hope Mother Nature will kick in and help us out at some point," Russ Pecoraro, Heavenly spokesman, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

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3.2 quake shakes Truckee

Truckee residents were slightly jostled by at 3.2 temblor at 9:30pm Thursday.

The epicenter was located six miles northeast of Truckee.

People on the North Shore, Reno and the Bay Area felt the Dec. 22 earthquake.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Washoe County sheriff's K-9 dies

Washoe County Sheriff's Office K-9 Kraft died of health complications Saturday. Deputy Corey Solferino, his handler of two years, was by his side.

Undersheriff Todd Vinger said the passing of Kraft will be a great loss for the agency, but even a greater loss for Kraft's handler and partner.



Deputy Corey
Solferino with
Kraft.
Photo/Provided

“Kraft was a rising star with our agency,” Vinger said in statement of the Czech Shepherd. “Like all of our service dogs, he was a humble hero; completely dedicated to his work and was an exemplary performer.”

Kraft was acquired by the sheriff’s office through a private donation by Cal Sierra Express Trucking. Kraft was trained as a dual purpose K-9, working patrol and narcotics. He was certified in evidence and article search. Evidence search certification allows the K-9 to assist in solving or assisting in cases where a suspect has discarded or ,hidden a weapon or other articles.

Born Jan. 6, 2006 in the Czech Republic, Kraft was trained to respond to Czechoslovakian commands. In addition to tracking down a considerable amount of drugs during his years with the sheriff’s office, K-9 Kraft assisted with several missing persons investigations.

Deputy Solferino said Kraft could not wait to go to work.

Although committed to his work, Kraft was also a beloved family member.

“The second we got to the house and I took off his work collar, he knew he was home,” Solferino said.

Skier sues Heavenly nearly a year after being injured

By Martha Bellisle, Reno Gazette-Journal

A skier who was injured when a Heavenly Mountain Resort employee ran into her while on his snowboard last January is suing the resort's owners, claiming Vail Resorts Inc. is liable for its employee's alleged negligence.

Skier Kimberly Bland, on vacation from Florida, was stopped on the lower Olympic downhill run on the Nevada side of the resort, at about 3:50pm on Jan. 18, trying to decide where to ski next, when Heavenly lift operator Daniel Barreno crashed into Bland on his snowboard, the suit said.

Barreno violated several Nevada laws, the suit said, including one requiring skiers and snowboarders to stay in control and to give the right-of-way to someone on the trail ahead of him.

Read the whole story

Nevada spending millions on economic development office

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY — Efforts by Gov. Brian Sandoval and state lawmakers to encourage new business creation, relocation and expansion in Nevada took a major step forward this past week when the Legislature's Interim Finance Committee approved nearly \$3.5 million to fund an economic development office.

The funding will enable Steve Hill, executive director of the Governor's Office on Economic Development, to develop a state economic development plan and hire the staff needed to move forward on private sector job creation efforts.

The state plan, relying in part on research performed by the Brookings Institution and SRI International, is expected to be released in early February. The report identified seven economic sectors, some already in existence such as gaming and tourism, and some emerging, such as clean energy, where Nevada should focus its efforts.

Lawmakers peppered Hill with questions ranging from the measures that will be used to determine the success of his agency's efforts at job creation to the proposed salaries of the eight positions that will be filled with a portion of the funding.

Positions approved for his office include three industry specialists at a maximum salary of \$110,000 each, an industry analyst with a maximum salary of \$90,000, a communications manager with a maximum salary of \$80,000, and a technology commercialization director with a maximum salary of \$110,000. There are also two support positions with maximum salaries of \$40,000.

The new approach to economic development is the result of Assembly Bill 449, a measure sponsored by Assembly Speaker John Ocegüera, D-Las Vegas, and supported by Gov. Brian Sandoval and a bipartisan group of state lawmakers. The bill also established a \$10 million Catalyst Fund to help firms relocated or expand in Nevada. The money will be used to provide grants to local governments for economic development projects.

"I am in the process of finishing my 10th week on the job," Hill told lawmakers. "And I think I can provide very solid reasons for the request that we're making today. But we're

also learning as we're going along. We understand that resources are tight, not only throughout Nevada but through the country, and we want to spend this money in the most effective and efficient way possible."

In response to lawmaker questions, Hill said the state plan will include ways to measure the success of the new effort.

"There will be a detailed description of how we will measure progress in economic development and in the development of our economy in the state," he said.

Assemblywoman Debbie Smith, D-Sparks, chairwoman of the IFC, asked Hill if the funding request is premature since the state plan has not yet been published.

"So I think the question is, without the state plan, where is the confidence level in moving forward with all of these positions and this work without the state plan being done, kind of relying solely on the Brookings report?" she asked.

Hill said the budget request will be in alignment with the state plan.

"And finally I think we all sense, the governor and the Legislature, everybody involved in economic development throughout the state, and the citizens of Nevada, an urgency to get started on this," he said.

Nevada's unemployment rate is the highest in the nation.

Phone scammers dialing South

Tahoe numbers looking for cash

A new twist on an old telephone scam has resulted in one South Shore resident being swindled out of \$5,000.

The South Lake Tahoe Police Department says a number of these calls are coming into the community.

“The deal goes like this: Potential victim receives a call on home or cell phone from a person representing themselves as with South Lake Tahoe Police Department, El Dorado sheriff’s, a law firm or a federal law enforcement agency, like DEA or FBI. They are told, very aggressively, that they or someone dear to them will be arrested shortly if they do not pay money for some claimed debt,” El Dorado County Assistant District Attorney Hans Uthe said. “If they bite, they are told to wire funds to a given location, which is typically off-shore, like the Dominican Republic.”

Uthe says if people get such a call, they should not send money, at least not without checking with local law enforcement.

“Law enforcement agencies do not arrest people for non-payment of private debt, other than perhaps child support,” Uthe said.

The calls are likely originating off shore, so not much can be done to stop them.

'Tis the season for regifting

By Jean Chatzky, Newsweek

What's the most requested gift this holiday season? It's not a flat-screen TV or the iPad. It's a gift card, according to the National Retail Federation. This season alone, the NRF projects that gift-card spending will reach \$27.8 billion—a substantial portion of the \$100 billion in card sales anticipated for the year. The average shopper will spend \$155 on these plastic presents, up \$10 from last year.

But what if you receive a gift card that just doesn't fit? What if you receive a chunk of change redeemable at Brooks Brothers when you're more of an Ann Taylor shopper—or at Williams-Sonoma when you just don't cook? Or what if it's just too much? After the holidays, you may wind up with gift-card dollars left over after making your purchases. All in all, these plastic bits and pieces add up. The average American house-hold has about \$300 in gift cards on hand at any time.

What's emerged as a result is a fast-growing business in secondhand gift cards online. Sites like PlasticJungle.com, GiftCardCastle.com, and CardHub.com have sprung up to help facilitate the sale and exchange of cards. Whether you're a buyer or a seller, there's opportunity to cash in.

How does it work? Let's say you have a \$100 gift card that you're not going to use. You go to a gift-card site and type in details of your card—the retailer, the card number, its value. The site will come back with an offer of how much it's willing to pay. The more popular the merchant (and the rarer the card) the more you're likely to get for it. Right now, a \$100 Best Buy card will fetch \$86 on one site. A \$100 card from Urban Outfitters brings in \$78. If you find the site's offer acceptable, you can either sell electronically (in certain cases, the card number and PIN are all you'll need) or

you can send your card through the mail and receive a cashier's check, Amazon.com gift card, or Paypal deposit in return.

Read the whole story