North Lake Tahoe firefighters to begin control burns

North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District is gearing up to begin prescribed burning this week depending on weather conditions and local as well as regional resource availability.

The fire district wants to assure locals that if any one of several conditions that must be met in order to conduct a controlled burn is not within prescription, the district will not move forward with the projected burn.

For folks that are smoke sensitive, we recommend shutting all doors and windows and remaining inside as much as possible until any lingering smoke has dissipated.

Tahoe Tails – Adoptable Pets in South Lake Tahoe

Cruz is a Himalayan-Maine Coon beauty with huge blue eyes and a lovely multicolored long hair coat. He is a calm adult, about 4 years old, and would do well in just about any household.



Cruz is neutered, microchipped, and vaccinated. He is at the El Dorado County Animal Services shelter in Meyers, along with many other dogs and cats who are waiting for their new homes. The half-price adoption fee special for cats has been extended through

October.

Call (530) 573.7925 for directions, hours, and other information on adopting a pet.

For spay-neuter assistance for South Tahoe residents, go online.

– Karen Kuentz

Snippets about Lake Tahoe



• Harrah's Food and Wine Festival in Lake Tahoe is Oct. 28-30.

• Tahoe City's Chapel of the Transfiguration, aka The Outdoor Chapel, is now on the National Register of Historic Places.

• The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency on Sept. 29 gave out two Lake Spirit Awards. Ruth Dworsky was recognized for creating defensible space for the 88-acre Carnelian Woods Townhouse Association. Mahmood Azad, former engineer with Douglas County, was singled out for increasing the county's level of engagement on Tahoe water quality and clarity issues.

• The state Board of Equalization released the El Dorado County Assessment Practices Survey Report on the quality of the 2009-10 El Dorado County assessment roll, representing approximately $27.4 billion in value. The report states that most properties in El Dorado County are assessed properly, and that the overall quality of the assessment roll meets state

standards.

• Keith Lyford, the director of instruction at Old Greenwood in Truckee, has been named the Northern California PGA Section Teacher of the Year.

Nevada toying with changing retirement system

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – Scott Beaulier is no fan of states borrowing money, but in his new working paper on transitioning public pensions to 401(k) style plans to reduce taxpayer liabilities to pay retirement benefits, the Troy University professor says it is an option worth considering.

In his paper "From Defined Benefit to Defined Contribution" for the Mercatus Center at George Washington University, Beaulier said the benefits of paying the upfront costs of transitioning pension plans from defined benefit, where employees are guaranteed a set amount at retirement, to defined contribution, where employees are responsible for their investment choices, outweigh the disadvantages.

"The borrowing should be one-time, and it should total the present value of all future payments owed to all retirees who do not transition to the 401(k) system," Beaulier said in his report released last week.

The state of Michigan opted to borrow when it converted to a defined contribution plan in 1997," he said.

"Thanks to one-time borrowing, the transition was a smooth

one, and Michigan covered with debt the billions of dollars in defined benefit liabilities that it was responsible for paying," Beaulier said. "The move, which involved taking on debt and significant political risk, has proven successful and has saved Michigan taxpayers billions of dollars in unfunded liabilities."

Beaulier is executive director of the Manuel H. Johnson Center for Political Economy at the Sorrell College of Business at Troy University in Alabama.

Defined benefit plans create long-term liabilities for states and taxpayers, while defined contribution plans carry no such risk. Because of this, and the concern over the health of public pension plans nationwide, there is a growing chorus of groups advocating for the change.

Nevada lawmakers plan to study the PERS defined benefit retirement plan that covers most state and local government employees in the next 16 months before the 2013 legislative session. The legislation authorizing the study allocates $250,000 from the general fund, but requires a $250,000 match from outside sources before the work can begin.

Gov. Brian Sandoval has advocated for a switch for new employees to a defined contribution 401(k)-type retirement plan to address the long-term liability concerns.

Supporters of Nevada's existing defined benefit plan, including public employee groups and many lawmakers, say it is well managed and will be fully funded over time. They argue no such major changes are needed.

Nevada's Public Employees' Retirement System had an analysis performed of the costs of switching to a defined contribution plan for new employees in 2010. The report by the Segal Group Inc., the PERS actuary, said it would cost $1.2 billion in just the first two years to begin making such a transition.

The costs are due to the need to fully fund the existing defined benefit plan for current state employees. One option would be to raise contribution rates paid by public employers and their employees, but the cash-strapped state and local governments would be hard-pressed to come up with the money to pay for it.

In an interview with the Nevada News Bureau, Beaulier said: “Those costs have to be incurred because when you reform usually what you’re doing is offering new retirees the option to go with defined contribution. But by becoming fully funded you’re guaranteeing all of those pensioners who are retiring in the future under the old system that guarantee that their money will be there.

“Borrowing in this case would actually make a lot of sense because it is borrowing to put us on a much more sane fiscal path,” he said. “So one-time borrowing that says we are converting from defined benefit to defined contribution would be a way to deal with this.”

If revenue can be found elsewhere, such as selling off resources, that would be preferable, Beaulier said. Or participants could contribute more to help fully fund the plan as well, he said.

Nevada’s existing public employee retirement plan was 70.5 percent fully funded on June 30, 2010, down from 72.5 percent in the previous year. At its high point in 2000 the plan was 85 percent funded.

A study of state and local government pension funds by the Pew Center on the States released in February 2010 identified Nevada as one of 19 states where “serious concerns” exist about the long-term health of the retirement plan.

Beaulier said the key to ensuring taxpayers don’t end up on the hook for billions in pension payments when the plans run out of money is to make the change to defined contribution.

There are problems with making such a transition, one example being if a state issues bonds to finance the up-front costs, he said. A state would have to find the money needed to repay the bonds.

But making modest changes to the existing plans, as the Nevada Legislature did in 2009, is not enough, he said.

“I think that the fiscal challenges are forcing state administrators to look closely at how to shore up the financing of their defined benefit plans,” Beaulier said. “But my guess is most of them are just going to chip away at the promises that have been made and not engage in the kind of radical reform that is needed.

“Maybe some of them need to be asking: ‘How do we save taxpayers a lot of money long term,'” he said.

Horses’ health is primary concern during Tevis Cup 100-mile ride

By Sam McManis, Sacramento Bee

Much as we might be inclined to anthropomorphize horses — Mr. Ed, anyone? — much as we’d like to put faith in rugged-as-Robert Redford “horse whisperers” to intuit deep meaning from every neigh or nod, the sad fact is that even the elite equine athletes in the Tevis Cup 100-Mile Trail Ride are sorely lacking in one important area.

“They don’t talk,” said Garrett Ford, last year’s winner of the Haggin Cup, awarded to the top-10 finisher in the Tevis

whose horse was judged as best conditioned. “That, obviously, is the challenge.”

Oh, but think how much easier caring for and racing endurance horses would be if a common interspecies language were indeed possible.

They could tell riders and race veterinarians when, and exactly where, they are hurting.

They could say why they won’t drink when they’ve gone too long without fluids on the trail and why they refused to chew hay and grain offered at a checkpoint.

They could explain why their pace has suddenly slowed, why they seem knackered when they should be at a brisk canter, why that pail of cold water dumped on them during the heat of the day has withered their withers.

As it is, though, the many problems that can beset a horse in an endurance ride such as Tevis – which starts Oct. 8 and goes from Squaw Valley to Auburn along the Western States Trail – remains an educated guess, something to be determined by experts only through a battery of diagnostic procedures performed at 10 checkpoints along the course.

There, horses will be poked, prodded and inspected nostril-to-hoof by equine veterinarians. They will have their pulses checked, their respiratory systems monitored, their skin pinched and gums pressed, their muscles palpitated, their gastrointestinal tracts listened to, even their mucus examined.

Think of a Tevis vet check as the equine equivalent to a NASCAR pit stop – the big difference being that it takes a lot longer and is considerably more thorough.

Even the fittest horse, whose heart rate slows quickly when resting and who appears fully hydrated, will spend 10 minutes

idling at mandatory stops. If a horse's metabolism cannot recover within 30 minutes, or is deemed physically unsound, it is pulled from competition.

Read the whole story

Opinion: State legislation threatens cannabis dispensaries

By Steve Kubby

A new law and court decision are about to wreak havoc upon nearly all medical cannabis dispensaries or MCDs in California. Unfortunately for the MCDs, they are about to face legal challenges they cannot win.

Worst of all, there is nothing under state law to protect MCDs at this point and it seems only a matter of time before most MCDs are forced to close.



Steve Kubby

The new law, AB1300, signed last month by Gov. Jerry Brown, clearly gives cities the right to ban the "… establishment of a medical marijuana cooperative or collective."

Even worse, it authorizes local jurisdictions to enact new criminal penalties against MCDs and patient collectives.

Legal expert William McPike, who has won over 150 medical marijuana cases and represents a large number of MCDs, is advising his clients that 80 percent of MCDs statewide will face closure.

Lanny Swerdlow, a registered nurse, MCD expert and a well known activist, is even more pessimistic: “Come Jan. 1 with the new right under AB1300 to criminalize code violations and the expected opinion by the 4th District Court that cities can ban collectives under their zoning ordinances, we will see 99 percent of the collectives closed long before November 2012,” he predicted.

John D. Higginbotham, a Southern California attorney for the law firm of Best Best & Krieger, believes MCDs are about to become history. “The era of storefront retail marijuana businesses is nearing an end, at least in the cities we represent,” he said. “The wheels of justice sometimes grind slowly, but you can only flaunt the law for so long before it catches up with you.”

Steve Kubby is CEO of Strategic Campaigns LLC and currently serves as chief officer and campaign chairman for a new California voter initiative to Regulate Marijuana Like Wine.

Sheehan: Balance economics with infrastructure needs

Publisher’s note: ***Lake Tahoe News is profiling the six candidates who will be on the Nov. 8 ballot for the South***

Tahoe Public Utility District board. They are being published in the order they were submitted. Kelly Sheehan is challenging the incumbent.

Name: Kelly Sheehan

Age: 53

How long have you lived on the South Shore?: 30 years

What water company supplies your home? Your work?: STPUD supplies my residence, two rental properties and my business – Steamers Bar & Grill.



Kelly Sheehan

Job/profession?: Owner-manager of Steamers Bar & Grill since 2008. Previously a branch manager of a locally owned savings bank for 25 years.

What stands out to you in the 2011-12 budget?: That STPUD does not pay lifetime medical insurance for its retired employees. This is a huge cost that is causing huge financial deficits for many states, counties, cities, and special districts.

What boards, commissions, or other experience, including volunteering, do you have?: I have served two terms on the St. Theresa school board, two terms on the St. Theresa's Pastoral Council and I am currently on St. Theresa's finance committee.

Is there any individual, group or organization you would not take campaign money from? Why?: I will take campaign donations

from any group or constituent as long as long as they do not expect any “special favors” in return.

What is the No. 1 reason someone should vote for you over another candidate?: I am a fresh set of eyes and ears. I have no special agenda and will base my decisions on fact and what is best for the district and its customers.

California law mandates water meters be installed. What is your solution to make the fee equitable for those on meters and those without one?: California law created a situation that is simply unfair. The only way to be fair and remain within the law is to install the remaining meters in the shortest period of time. There just isn’t a magic formula that will make the flat rates and the metered rates the same.

To get the remaining 60 percent of South Tahoe PUD customers on meters it will cost $15 million. As a board member, where will you get the money to pay for the meters?: They are really only two ways to fund it. One, borrow and raise rates or two, be successful in securing state grants or low interest loans.

Do you believe the district should spend money on lobbying efforts in Sacramento and/or Washington, D.C.? Why or why not?: The district no longer employs a state lobbyist, as membership in the Association of California Water Agencies provides that benefit. The district’s lobbying firm in Washington, D.C., has since 2009, secured $6.5 million in federal funding for STPUD at a cost of approximately $304,000 for the same time period. These dollars are matched 50/50 with local funds, this lessens the burden on the district’s customers.

What do you know about STPUD getting money from the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act?: It is my understanding that LTRA contains language that reimburses one-third of the costs public water and wastewater agencies incur for relocating underground utilities in erosion control projects. In addition, the

district, as lead agency in the Lake Tahoe Community Fire Protection Partnership, has received federal dollars for infrastructure improvement projects that relate to fire protection. Both of these were authorized under the act, and are therefore appropriate.

How do you balance the economic situation of the community with the infrastructure needs of the district?: It is very difficult to be sensitive to the high unemployment within our community and still replace aging infrastructure. But it is unfair to just ignore the problem and pass it on to our children and grandchildren.

With 38 percent of a customer's sewer bill going to meet the needs of the Porter-Cologne Water Quality Act and $100 million already invested in Alpine County to take STPUD's wastewater, would you leave things as they are? If yes, why? If no, what would you change and how do expect to accomplish those changes?: The district's requirements to export its wastewater is another example of an unfunded state mandate, but the district's investment in Alpine County may be able to pay benefits as the possibility of hydropower generation and increased uses of recycled water in California and Nevada. With proper foresight, the Alpine County operations could well become a revenue source for the district in the future.

What should be done with the land STPUD owns where the old post office was on Black Bart?: It is my understanding that due to the absence of sewer and water to the property, it has little value as a residential lot. Due to restrictions placed on that lot, the best and most economical solution would be to demolish the existing structure and restore the property to its more natural state. I believe any coverage could be banked for future district needs.

There has been a three-year wage freeze for employees. What are your thoughts on employee raises and benefits?: We are all being asked to do more with less and our local economy has

taken a hard hit. It would be pretty difficult to justify wage or benefit increases until the local economy shows some real signs of improvement. As a local business owner, I believe I will know when that happens.

When would you vote for a hike on water and sewer rates and why?: Again, there is a balancing act between sensitivity to the local economy and realizing the infrastructure continues to age regardless of the economy. It would be foolish to ignore the infrastructure, which makes it that much more important to seek additional funding sources, such as state and federal grants, that would allow projects to move forward and still keep rates reasonable.

Lukins Brothers Water District – any comments?: It's a good example of what happens without reinvestment into infrastructure. The board has stated in the absence of outside funding it would be unfair to burden the district's current customers with over $20 million in necessary upgrades to bring the system up snuff.

What should be the main priority of South Tahoe PUD?: To continue to provide clean and safe drinking water and environmentally responsible wastewater collection, treatment, and export for the community in a financially responsible manner.

What should be the main priority of a South Tahoe PUD board member?: Listen to facts and make decisions on the basis of what benefits the greatest number of district customers.

Pumpkin festival in Stateline

Lake Tahoe Community Pumpkin Festival is a free nonprofit event.

Local businesses will have booths, they've donated prizes and materials, there will be children's games, contests and activities as well as a raffle and food.

The event is Oct. 14 from 5:30-8:30pm at 143 Michelle Drive, Stateline.

For more information, click on festival.

'Queen of the Sun'

John Miller from Miller Honey Farms will share insights on the history of honeybees and there will be a screening of "Queen of the Sun: What are the bees telling us?" plus a honey tasting at Cedar House Sport Hotel in Truckee on Oct. 27.

"Queen of the Sun" investigates the dire global bee crisis through biodynamic beekeepers, scientists and philosophers.

Learn about Miller in Hannah Nordhaus' book "The beekeeper's lament: How one man and half a million honeybees help feed America."

Doors open at 5:30pm, with the film at 6pm, followed by guest speaker and tasting.

Tickets may be purchased in advance online for $10.

Lahontan seeks comments on use of pesticides in water

The Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board wants to allow pesticides in water on a limited basis. This requires amending the current rules.

Circumstances eligible for a prohibition exemption involve the use of aquatic pesticides for purposes of protecting public health and safety for things like vector control and drinking water protection, plus ecological integrity that include fisheries management and aquatic invasive species control.

Comments were taken on the plan amendment for 45 days ending May 13. Because of those written comments and the ones submitted at the two public hearings, one of the chapters requires more public review. The latest round of comments is open until Nov. 14 at noon.

Documents for review are available at the Lahontan Water Board's website at under the "Pesticide Basin Plan Amendment – Revised Draft Documents Provided for Public Comments" heading. For a hardcopy of the draft documents, contact Amber Wike at (530) 542.5400 or at awike@waterboards.ca.gov.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report