Say goodbye to fall – snow in the forecast

That four-letter S-word is returning – snow. So says the National Weather Service.

The strong low-pressure system that is expected to develop over the Gulf of Alaska this weekend could bring cold temps, wind and snow to the Lake Tahoe Basin early next week. The white stuff is expected to be above 7,000 feet, with rain below that. The phrase being used is “moderate to heavy precipitation”.

The 70s that have been filling the days will drop 20 degrees. Strong winds are part of the storm. Travel along Highway 395, according to the weather folks in Reno, could be problematic because of the high winds.



The seasons are about to change in Lake Tahoe.
Photo/LTN file

To have some fun with this, *Lake Tahoe News* would like to have a contest. When do you think you will have to shovel at least an inch of snow from your property? With the microclimates in and around the basin, the answer will be different for everyone.

Just put your guess down as a comment. Then when you are shoveling, email to info@LakeTahoeNews.net a picture of yourself shoveling, your full name, mailing address and T-shirt size. Feel free to add some comments that are publishable. The first 10 people seen shoveling will be sent a *Lake Tahoe News* T-shirt.

The other way to get a T-shirt is for subscribers to send in a check of $40 or more. For each check received, in addition to the T-shirt, you will be added to our special NEWS list. People on this list will qualify for special benefits like the ticket give-aways.

(Subscribe by putting your email address in at the bottom right of the home page. Then you will receive the morning digest.)

Send checks to Lake Tahoe News, P.O. Box 13406, South Lake Tahoe, CA 96151 or pay via credit card through PayPal on the website at the bottom right of the home page.

Please include your email address so we can ensure you are subscribed to receive the daily digest.

Please don’t forget to include your mailing address and shirt size – S, M, L, XL or 2X.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Artist event in Markleeville

Markleeville Artists Autumn Open Studios is Oct. 1-2 from 11am-4pm.

Details are online.

Brochures will be also at the Alpine County Chamber of Commerce as well as the Markleevilee Art Gallery.

Washoe County looking for people to paint over graffiti

The Washoe County Sheriff’s Office is asking for volunteers to help turn the tide on graffiti vandalism by taking part in a graffiti cleanup event at the Sun Valley Community Center from 10am-2pm Oct. 6, weather permitting.

The department is also looking for concerned citizens to donate paint, brushes and gloves to the effort.

Graffiti vandalism is now one of the public’s foremost quality of life concerns. Scrawls of graffiti are popping up everywhere throughout Northern Nevada: parks, highway overpasses, street signs, even the most pristine of landmarks.

For more information, contact Katie Stueve at (775) 328.3361.

Nevada agency focuses on waste, abuse and fraud in Medicaid

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – It isn't just fraud, but waste and abuse of Medicaid funds that state officials are taking aim at as the cost of the health insurance program for children, seniors and the disabled continues to climb.

Charles Duarte, administrator of the Nevada Division of Health Care Financing and Policy, which oversees the Medicaid program, said efforts to identify fraud, waste and abuse have been stepped up since 2005 when only two staff in his office were dedicated to these important tasks.

Now there are nine staff devoted to such reviews, and auditors can also be brought in when there is reason to believe an in-depth analysis is needed, he said.

Called the Surveillance and Utilization Review Section (SURS), the team is another line of defense against abuses of the Medicaid program along with the attorney general's Medicaid Fraud Control Unit and the investigations and recovery activities within the state Division of Welfare and Supportive Services.

"If you are looking at it as a pyramid it is really waste that is the big component, and then abuse and then fraud," Duarte said.

His staff closed 290 cases in fiscal year 2008, a number that reached 817 in fiscal year 2011.

"So the numbers of cases we have currently being reviewed and investigated has grown dramatically over the last five years," he said. "And as a result, we have been able to recover, on average, about $2 million to $3 million each year with regard to improper payments."

Medicaid is big business in Nevada and nationally.

Nevada's Medicaid budget for this 2012 fiscal year is $1.6 billion, with just more than $500 million coming from the

state general fund. The federal government is paying 55 percent of the cost of the Nevada Medicaid program this year. Other local funds are also used to support the program.

The budget continues to grow as more Nevadans become eligible for services. In August 2009 there were just over 230,000 recipients. Two years later in August 2011 there were just over 300,000 recipients, an increase of 30 percent.

The federal government focused on Medicaid fraud in 2006 with a new law creating the Medicaid Integrity Program, identified as the "first comprehensive federal strategy" to prevent and reduce fraud, waste and abuse in the $300 billion per year program.

Concerns over Medicaid fraud have caught the attention of state lawmakers as well.

Assemblyman Cresent Hardy, R-Mesquite, proposed legislation in the 2011 legislative session to study the effectiveness of current Medicaid fraud prevention efforts and identify ways to improve efforts to combat the problem.

A contractor, Hardy testified that he identified two Medicaid fraud cases in two years in his business. Assembly Bill 286, which had bipartisan support, did not win final approval, however.

"That's what I wanted to look at and see how prevalent it was, and get the businesses involved to see if we could educate them in how to maybe identify this," he said. "Because everybody that takes it illegally is taking it out of the mouths or the hands of those who really need it."

Hardy said Duarte and other state officials need the tools to do their jobs.

"I really do believe we should be doing more to fight this thing, both at the state level and at the federal level," he

said.

Even without the review, state officials say Medicaid fraud is a priority.

Duarte's staff spends much of its time analyzing data looking for "statistical outliers" or deviations in the normal parameters of billing activity, to identify potential areas of concern.

"And so we do a lot of the work up front for other branches of state government that may be involved either in prosecution or recipient-level fraud," Duarte said. "So we're the front line with regard to those types of reviews."

There is also a deterrence effect from the reviews, he said.

"The word gets around," Duarte said.

Some cases are resolved with education of a provider or group of providers, he said. But repeat offenders could be audited to recoup excess payments. If there is criminal intent, then the case is referred for potential prosecution, Duarte said.

There is also prospective review, such as checking the status of a provider seeking to do business with the Medicaid program in Nevada, he said. There have been cases where a business has been shut down for bad acts, but the same individuals establish a new company in an effort to continue to provide Medicaid services, Duarte said.

Fraud cases can involve a variety of activities, including providers who bill for services that are not even provided, he said.

In 2010 for example, the agency cut off all payments to Ujima Youth Services, which operated group homes at several locations in Reno, after an audit showed the company's records did not support the amount that was billed to Medicaid. The Secretary of State's Office shows there is no longer any

active business entity by that name in Nevada.

“You want folks to have an appreciation that we appreciate their tax dollars and how (they are) being used,” he said. “It’s really an issue of stewardship on our part and on the part of the federal government.”

S. Tahoe pot applications, complaint forms online

South Lake Tahoe residents cultivating medical marijuana must submit an application for a permit no later than Dec. 20 or face a fine of $1,000 per day. Applications and permit procedures are available online.

The city is also providing opportunities for residents to report a possible marijuana cultivation operation in their neighborhood. Residents may submit the information online and anonymously through the city’s website.

Opinion: Parent revolution wants more say in education

By Jim Newton, Los Angeles Times

This is what the revolution looks like: It’s a rally in Lynwood where parents demand the right to exercise their power to shape their children’s future; it’s a dozen residents in a

South-Central apartment gathering to compare notes on the failing elementary school a few blocks away; it's parents comparing notes at a Pasadena community center and discovering that not a single one of that city's high schools scored a desired goal of 800 on California's Academic Performance Index. And it's lots and lots of T-shirts with messages.

Those scenes all were on display last week on a bus tour from San Diego to Sacramento led by Parent Revolution, a Los Angeles-based nonprofit that is spearheading a historic challenge to the education status quo in California and beyond. The trip drew together far-flung activists, some unknown to one another but all united in the conviction that state's education system is letting down its children, and that parents need to assert their power over schools.

Parent Revolution, with the help of sympathetic legislators such as former state Sens. Gloria Romero and Richard Polanco – both of whom were along for sections of the tour – secured for parents that power with passage of a momentous piece of legislation in 2010. Known as the "parent trigger," it allows parents at a failing school to band together. Now, by law, if a majority of parents sign a petition, they can demand that a charter operator take over the school, replace the school staff, remove the principal or close the school. That's not the power of persuasion; that's the power to change.

Parent trigger got its first workout last year in Compton, where parents ran into a recalcitrant school board that deliberately set out to thwart the law. In the short run, the school board triumphed and prevented a clear majority of parents at McKinley Elementary School from getting the charter school they asked for. But Compton's victory was Pyrrhic. The charter operator that would have taken over McKinley opened a school down the street, and it quickly filled up. A second one is opening in the neighborhood. By this time next year, parents will have voted with their feet, and McKinley will be a ruin.

That experience has emboldened parents elsewhere, and the quiet stir of their revolution is as inspiring as the civil rights battles of modern times – the demand for racial equality in the South, the recognition of farmworkers' right to unionize, the right of same-sex couples to marry. This movement brings together parents of different ethnicities, races and ideologies, languages and backgrounds. They are fiercely intent on change.

Read the whole story

Runnels: District needs to shrink, reevaluate its budget

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. John Runnels is running for the seat vacated by Marylou Mosbacher.***

Name: John Wright Runnels

Age: 61

How long have you lived on the South Shore?: 40 years in August 2012

What water company supplies your home? Your work?: STPUD



John Runnels
Photo/Ernie
Claudio

Job/profession?: Business owner

What stands out to you in the 2011-12 budget?: The need to make internal adjustments to offset raising rates. Capital improvement projects need to be slowed down and departments that due to a lack of grant funding or fewer projects need to be eliminated or to have their budgets decreased. Also the funds allocated from lobbyists and consultants need to be carefully scrutinized for their effectiveness and decreased or eliminated accordingly.

What boards, commissions, or other experience, including volunteering, do you have?: Since I came to the South Shore in the early ’70s I have been involved in many city and county organizations working to improve our community. I have listed a few: Citizens Alliance for Responsible Government, president (SLT B.I.D. Elimination, “Fight The Blight” (keeping redevelopment in check), Lake Tahoe Boulevard 4 Lanes Not 2, Lake Tahoe Crime Watch, (past president) South Shore Lions Club, South Lake Tahoe Steering Committee for Police and Fire Salaries, Bicentennial for the U.S. Bill of Rights Citizens for Tahoe County (secretary), Supporters for the Protection of Individual Rights in Tahoe (S.P.I.R.I.T.) (past president).

Is there any individual, group or organization you would not take campaign money from?: I run a low dollar campaign, preferring to meet and talk with locals to find out their feelings on issues and any problems or areas that they feel

need addressing, rather than spending a large amounts of money for ineffectual mailers, or advertising. I really don't think I will need to accept or deny contributions.

What is the No. 1 reason someone should vote for you over another candidate?: I am the best-educated and informed candidate. I have been preparing for this position since I applied to the district board to fill a board vacancy. I ran in 2007 and was narrowly defeated by the incumbent. In 2009, I ran again against another incumbent and again came in second out of four candidates. Since 2006, I have committed myself to learning as much about the district and its operations as I can. I have attended board meetings, committee meetings, workshops, public meetings, field trips, PUC meetings, Lukins Water Company meetings, El Dorado County Water Agency meetings and much more. I know the district and when elected I will step into the position with a background of knowledge and familiarity with the task at hand.

California law mandates water meters be installed. What is your solution to make the fee equitable for those on meters and those without one?: I do not think that an equitable or what feels like a fair fee is obtainable. I think that someone getting unlimited water for a fixed fee is always going to irritate those trying to conserve and paying for every cubic foot. I think the only solution is to use the figure arrived at by the consultants hired by the district in the interim and use every possible method short of rate increases to install the remainder of water meters ASAP to ensure equality among ratepayers.

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?: I will give the installation of the remaining water meters priority, pursuing all federal and state funds when they become available again, slowing other capital improvement projects, and increasing efficiency within the water and sewer operations to free the

maximum amount of dollars to accomplish this project in the shortest period of time without raising rates.

Do you believe the district should spend money on lobbying efforts in Sacramento and/or Washington, D.C.? Why or why not?: I believe that the STPUD's annual trips to Washington, D.C., to meet with aides that they could speak to by driving 100 miles to Sacramento has to stop. The same thing is accomplished in Sacramento and the savings to ratepayers is substantial. In the interest of transparency the district's travel and education expenses need to be examined to see if the costs incurred justify the costs to ratepayers. I also think that the expenditures on the district credit cards should be submitted in a listing of individual expenditures per card per user and open to the public on the payment of claims submitted at each board meeting.

What do you know about STPUD getting money from the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act?: The district has been receiving funds from the Tahoe Restoration Act since the act was first passed following the Angora Fire. The funds have allowed, with the decreased cost of construction, for a great deal of infrastructure renewal and improvement with in the district. However, due to the economy the funding has gone from $2 million last year to $500,000 this year and no further funds are anticipated until the economy improves or a new stimulus bill provides new funding. Also STPUD's ability to provide matching funds required by the majority of grants has been severely curtailed by the exhaustion of the MTBE settlement funds used in the past decade.

How do you balance the economic situation of the community with the infrastructure needs of the district?: STPUD exists to "serve" the ratepayers with clean water and removal of sewage. It has become used to a rate increase averaging 3-4 percent per year. This is a burden upon users, unfair, and unsustainable in this economy. The district has been living off the $43 million settlement of the MTBE lawsuit which is

all gone. This means that the district needs to shrink and reevaluate its budget. My knowledge of the district will allow me to immediately work with other Board members to improve efficiency, while maintaining existing infrastructure and holding rates at a reasonable level.

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?: As the Porter-Cologne Act is here to stay for the foreseeable future, every opportunity needs to be taken to recover more of the costs of exporting the recycled water. Already plans are under way for a hydroelectric generation plant on the downhill run to the district's Diamond Valley Ranch, which will produce electricity to be sold to Liberty Energy recovering some of the costs. Water is the single most valuable resource in the Western states, its value and price are rising dramatically. In 2012, a provision in the contract the district has with the sox Alpine county ranches which currently use STPUD recycled water allows for renegotiation of the fees charged. As the value of water rises so should fees. I would also arbitrate for the construction of a pipeline to provide the option of the sale of this water to Nevada ranchers who have need of it and are willing to purchase it.

What should be done with the land STPUD owns where the old post office was on Black Bart?: Tear it down and transfer the coverage to the sewer plant. The cost of upgrading the structure to render it usable since it needs water and sewer service, insulation, etc., far exceeds the benefits it would return

There has been a three-year wage freeze for employees. What are your thoughts on employee raises and benefits?: I believe that employee salaries and benefits have been driven up beyond those of the community and ratepayers who pay the bills by

consultants and salary comparison studies. I would find away to tie employee salaries and benefits to those received in our community.

When would you vote for a hike on water and sewer rates and why?: I will not categorically declare that I will not vote for rate increases, but I will promise that I will not vote for a rate increase unless the benefit to the ratepayers far exceeds the costs.

Lukins Brothers Water District – any comments?: Only get involved with it if it can be done with no cost to the ratepayers. Projected costs to upgrade the Lukins system to the current district and fire flow standards are $20-25 million as a board member I could not in good conscience vote that kind of a burden on district ratepayers.

What should be the main priority of South Tahoe PUD?: To provide sewage removal and clean water to ratepayers at a reasonable price.

What should be the main priority of a South Tahoe PUD board member?: To always remember the “Public” in STPUD. To operate for the ratepayers, considering the impact that the costs of services have upon them and strive to deliver quality services at the fairest price by maintaining efficiency and controlling expenditures.

Tell readers something about yourself that most people don’t know: I love animals.

Youth hockey leagues looking for players

The Tahoe Grizzlies Ice Hockey club season has started with preseason action at the Squirt, Pee Wee and Bantam levels.

The in-house Mite program is seeking new players to start playing ice hockey. Mites is for anyone 9 and younger. Typically most Mites will be in the 7- to 8-year-old range. But sometimes there are kids interested that are 6 years old or even younger. The object is to introduce kids to the joys of playing hockey.

First practice is Oct. 3 from 6-7pm at the South Lake Tahoe Ice Arena (1176 Rufus Allen Blvd.). Players must have a current 2011-12 USA Hockey membership and a copy of their birth certificate to practice. Contact STAHA on how to obtain a USA Hockey membership.

Regular practices are Mondays and Wednesdays from 6-7pm at the ice rink. Players are responsible for providing their own hockey gear (parents and coaches will be on hand at practice to help advise what is required). There is some loaner gear available. Skates may be rented at the rink. Players need to bring their own sticks, although there are also a limited number of sticks available for use by first time players.

Cost of the program is $395 per player. This represents double the ice time for the same price as last year. This covers all practices through mid-March.

STAHA (South Tahoe Amateur Hockey Association) will be organizing the coaches for the year. Coaches must be USA Hockey certified. If you are interested in helping, contact STAHA.

The 2011-12 season marks the first time in many years (the Club historians could not resolve when) that there were three travel teams in the same year. The following levels will be competing at the competitive level across Northern California:

• Squirts – ages 9 and 10

• Pee Wee – ages 11 and 12

• Bantam – ages 13 and 14.

STAHA also has a new president. After several successful years at the helm, Michael Newberger decided to retire. Phil Sorensen was elected to succeed Newberger.

Prescribed burn scheduled for Ward Canyon area

U.S. Forest Service fuels management crews will begin prescribed fire operations Sept. 30 near the west end of Ward Canyon on Lake Tahoe's West Shore.

Operations may continue through the week, weather and staff permitting. The project area is approximately 2 acres.

Residents and visitors can expect to see smoke from prescribed fire project areas. Smoke management is part of every prescribed fire burn plan, and efforts will be taken to reduce actual or potential smoke impacts on community areas.

This and other prescribed fire projects are designed to reduce wildfire risks to communities and critical resources.

State and local fire management agencies may also be conducting prescribed fire work during this period.

Bridgeport fire completely contained

The 1,140-acre lightning-caused fire near Bridgeport was fully contained Thursday.

It started Sept. 25 near Buckeye Campground and Buckeye Hot Springs.

No structures were lost.

Smoke at times blew north, causing those in the Carson City-Reno area to be able to smell it and see it.

Nearly 300 firefighters worked the blaze, including a crew form the North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report