BlueGo deficit demands route and fare adjustments

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – To stop a projected annual deficit of $449,500, overseers of the South Shore public bus system on Friday agreed to proceed with route changes and fare increases.

Although ridership numbers are 8 percent higher than projected, the people on the BlueGo buses are not paying full price because they are seniors, disabled or youths. This is making income from the fare box less than expected.

“Eighty-five percent of the ridership is discounted,” consultant Gordon Shaw told the Tahoe Transportation District board March 11. “Thirty percent of that is ADA. The others really need the service especially with how hard it is to get around on foot in this community in the winter.”



Heavenly is the largest contributor to the BlueGo bus system. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Those facts coupled with the private funding partners that had been part of the bankrupt-lawsuit riddled South Tahoe Area

Transit Authority not agreeing to put their money with Tahoe Transportation District has created the red ink on the ledger.

TTD Executive Director Carl Hasty told his board he is meeting with MontBleu casino officials next week in an attempt to get them back on board. Harrah's and Harveys remain on the sideline when it comes to putting in money for public transit.

"If we get back to the level of private sector participation, which I think we will, then we wouldn't be having this discussion," Hasty said.

Shaw outlined a plan to stem the cash flow problem, which would bring BlueGo within about $95,000 of having a balanced budget. The board agreed to the changes, which staff will iron out. The intent is this spring the route changes and fare increases will be implemented.

No longer do these types of changes have to be approved by the South Lake Tahoe City Council. That stipulation had been part of the operating agreement the city had with STATA. However, as a formality, Hasty said he wants to bring the plan to the council and Douglas County commissioners so the electeds know what is going on. Both those entities pay into the operation of BlueGo.

One of the first things that will be put in place is what's called the Triangle Plan. It will replace routes 20X and 21X with a circulating route between the South Shore, Carson City and Minden/Gardnerville.

Shaw pointed out how the Nevada Department of Transportation is the largest public funder of BlueGo at $470,000 year. NDOT bases its allocation on the percent of miles driven by buses in Nevada. This is one reason the consultant urged not to pare down availability of buses in the Silver State.

With Heavenly Mountain Resort's $850,000 contribution, it is the largest contributor of any entity – not just the private

sector.

Cutting the oncall hours 10 hours a day to 26 hours will also save money. No longer will it be available on weekends from 12:30-5:30am.

“We can’t afford to be a taxi cab service,” Shaw said.

Shaw said Ridge Tahoe guests, Lake Tahoe Community College students and BlueGo employees may use the oncall service for free. To which he added this is not standard operating procedure in other bus companies and recommended doing away with this practice.

“This is probably the most complicated fare system I have seen,” Shaw said of the various fees.

He wants to eliminate tokens. To this idea a bus driver in the back of the room said to someone else in the audience this is a good idea because a number of fake tokens, many from arcades, pass through the BlueGo fare box.

Most of the rate increases affect the oncall service.

Shaw is not recommending the base one-way fare be increased.

Board member and South Lake Tahoe City Councilman Bruce Grego asked what happens if gas prices reach $5 a gallon.

Although this would substantially increase the fuel budget, Shaw said it would bring more passengers to BlueGo, which would create a positive cash flow.

To fill the remaining budget gap, Hasty said $100,000 in savings from the California Transit Insurance Pool is possible. He is also looking at reducing workers’ comp expenses.

However, Jason Van Havel, NDOT’s rep on the TTD board, said he is not convinced enough contingencies are in place to prohibit

more cost-cutting measures in the future.

In other action:

• TTD is looking for a transit manager who would report directly to Hasty. Grego was adamant in not wanting the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's Human Resources Department to be part of the background checks, implying it did a poor job in hiring the former transit administrator.

• Ten bus shelters for BlueGo riders are expected to be erected this summer – five in California, five in Nevada.

• Martin Jimenez, BlueGo operations manager, said bus shelters are not cleared right after storms because his crews have to use personal vehicles to get to the stops to shovel out the areas that sometimes have been bermed by plow drivers. He added BlueGo has no snowblowers to do the work.

Billabong Flaunt it Finals at Sierra

Billabong Flaunt it Finals at Sierra-at-Tahoe is April 9.

The finals of this North American women-only snowboard series is a Swatch Ticket To Ride World Tour rated event, so expect high-level femme riding from some of the best snowboarders in the industry.

Sierra Resort's Jamie Anderson, currently ranked one of the top female snowboarders in the world, will be throwing down on the custom Slopestyle and Rail Jam course.

This event always brings tons of great female energy to Sierra

Resort.

For more information, go online or call (530) 659.7453.

Coast Guard issues update on tsunami off California coast

Publisher's note: ***The following is from the U.S. Coast Guard on March 11 at 1:34pm.***

Northern California Coast Guard response crews are conducting the following actions in response to the West Coast tsunami and related impacts:

* Coast Guard Air Station Humboldt Bay's MH-65C helicopters are continuing to search for a person in the water near the Klamath River, reportedly swept out to sea while trying to photograph tsunami waves.

* Six vessels have sunk or are overturned in Santa Cruz Harbor. Coast Guard responder crews are at the harbor that was evacuated due to an oil sheen leaking from the vessels.

* Overflights today found 20-30 vessels damaged at Crescent City Harbor.

* Coast Guard is investigating activation of a 406mhz EPIRB in Crescent City. It was found in a sunken vessel with no one on board.

* Coast Guard Air Station Sacramento HC-130J Hercules aircraft stands by to assist in any long-range air missions.

* Sector San Francisco's Captain of the Port is currently

assessing port conditions and evaluating all vessel entries into port. Vessels are prohibited from transferring hazardous cargo at this time.

* Coast Guard resources are all accounted for in Northern California with no damage or injuries.

* The Coast Guard remains ready to respond to any reports of maritime emergency situations.

The Coast Guard is urging mariners and those planning to recreate on or near the water to take the following special precautions under hazardous conditions:

* People should stay away from beaches, jetties, and low lying rock areas.

* Check with the local harbormaster for marina evacuations and to make preparations for the possibility of a surge.

* Mooring lines for vessels should be doubled-up.

* People living or visiting tsunami warning areas should be prepared to evacuate.

Both parties eager to win Ensign's seat

By Erin Kelly, Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON— Sen. John Ensign's decision not to seek re-election surprised few in the nation's capital, where political leaders of both parties have been quietly planning for the possibility for months.

Both Republicans and Democrats believed that Ensign had been so badly weakened by scandal that he could not win a third term. Ensign apparently became convinced of that as well as he looked at the results of recent polls showing him vulnerable to a Republican primary challenge from Rep. Dean Heller, R-Carson City.

“I do not want to put my family, those that I care about, or this state through what would be a very ugly campaign,” the Republican senator said Monday in Las Vegas.

Heller and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., issued solemn statements expressing sympathy for their departing colleague.

“This must have been a very difficult decision for John to make,” said Heller, who is widely viewed as the leading GOP contender for Ensign’s seat despite the fact that he has not yet announced he will run. “He and his family have been through a lot.”

Similarly, Reid said, “These have been difficult times for John and his family.”

“I wish him the best as he serves out the rest of his term,” Reid said.

While Reid and Heller carefully refrained from making any political comments, their respective political parties clearly have already begun the scramble for Ensign’s seat.

Read the whole story

North coast of Calif. riding out threat of tsunami

By Bill Lindelof and Tony Bizjak, Sacramento Bee

Some minor effects from a possible tsunami have been reported along the California coast this morning, although thousands were evacuated from a handful of coastal counties as a precaution.

Ocean swells have begun to rise quickly in the last hour in some coastal areas, with Crescent City a hot spot, officials with the West Coast and Alaska Tsunami Warning Center report at 8:30 a.m.

Crescent City harbor is seeing a three-foot sea level rise in the last hour, according to Cindi Preller, tsunami program manager at the center in Alaska.

“Our modeling still says it can go up to seven feet,” Preller said.

That may not cause major problems, she said. “We have seen tsunamis there that do stay in the harbor.”

Monterey and Arena Cove areas have seen a 2.5-foot sea level rise in the last hour, she said. But Preller said San Francisco “shouldn’t see a whole lot of action.”

Brad Alexander of the state Emergency Management Agency operations center said the California coast will experience rising water over a several-hour period this morning, but no huge waves.

Read the whole story

Vonn on podium, Mancuso 6th in GS

By U.S. Ski Team

SPINDLERUV MLYN, Czech Republic -– Reigning Audi FIS Alpine World Cup overall champion Lindsey Vonn of Vail rocketed to the first World Cup giant slalom podium of her career Friday to make a bold move toward her fourth consecutive season-long title.

Vonn, who wrapped up the super combined, downhill and super G titles last weekend, finished third and has now earned a World Cup podium in every discipline. In doing so, she trimmed German Maria Riesch's overall lead to just 38 points with five races remaining in the season. World Cup giant slalom leader Viktoria Rebensburg of Germany captured the win with Julia Mancuso of Squaw Valley sixth and Sarah Schleper of Vail 20th.

Official results, Audi FIS Alpine World Cup, Spindleruv Mlyn, Czech Republic, Giant Slalom

1. Viktoria Rebensburg, Germany, 2:15.22

2. Denise Karbon, Italy, 2:16.48

3. Lindsey Vonn, Vail, CO, 2:16.67

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6. Julia Mancuso, Squaw Valley, CA, 2:17.03

20. Sarah Schelper, Vail, CO, 2:18.57

–

Did not qualify 1st run:

Laurenne Ross (Klamath Falls, OR), Mikaela Shiffrin (Vail, CO)

Ski report: Check the grooming report



Blue skies fill the Lake Tahoe Basin.

Here is the ski report from Curtis Fong, the Guy from Tahoe.

S. Tahoe, El Dorado on alert after massive quake

To the community,

At 10:54 (PST) last night, FEMA region IV and the Pacific Tsunami Warning Center issued a tsunami warning for Northern Marianas/Tsunami Watch for Guam, Wake Island and Hawaii which was a result of an 8.8 magnitude quake in Japan. This warning has been expanded to the California north coastal area, Oregon and Washington. the Tsunami Warning center is predicting surf of 6-8 feet along the coast.

Local communities along the California Coast are exercising their respective emergency plans to inform their communities of the activity and are voluntarily moving people away from the beaches and unprotected marinas. The Coast Guard is taking steps to monitor boating traffic off the US coast and providing boating advisories.

Our county is a part of the California Inland Region, California Emergency Management Agency Region IV. Should the forecast from the Pacific Tsunami Warning center change to reflect significant changes in the estimated impacts and the need arise to expand into contiguous inland operational areas (counties), El Dorado County will receive an alert from the Inland Regional Emergency Operations Center of resource needs which might include temporary housing and/or resources in the form of emergency response.

However, it is highly likely that mass relocation would be to immediately adjacent areas to those impacted.

If resources are requested through the California Emergency Management Agency, it would be through activation of the statewide mutual aid system, the State Mutual Aid regions and subsequent operational areas would be notified. If requests are received through the Emergency Management response program, they would be fielded by the El Dorado County Office of Emergency Services in Placerville which manages the El Dorado County Operational Area. If resources are needed, we will be notified of the need and we would fill the request to our capability.

The plan we operate under for such an event is the El Dorado County Emergency Operations Plan which maintains contingencies for mass evacuation and the management of evacuees.

We continue to receive updates from both FEMA Region IX and the USGS/Pacific Tsunami Warning Center on activity in Japan which has included aftershock activity of 6.5-7 magnitude.

Lorenzo Gigliotti, South Lake Tahoe fire chief

South Shore Polar Plunge

Hundreds of brave souls with warm hearts will take the plunge in the chilly waters of the South Shore at Zephyr Cove to raise much needed funds for Special Olympics Northern California and Nevada.

The Polar Plunge on March 19 is not a swim. It’s a party. Dress up in a crazy costume, dip your big toe or your whole body and then off to the post plunge party.

2011 schedule:

10am – Registration

11:30am – costume parade and judging

Noon – Plunge

12:30pm – Post Plunge Party.

For more information, see the flyer.

8.9 quake rocks Japan; West Coast braces for tsunami

Publisher’s note: ***Here is a link to when NOAA forecasts a potential tsunami could hit West Coast cities. Here is an***

emergency preparedness guide for the South Shore that has relevance to other areas.

By Barbara Demick, David Pierson and Kenji Hall, Los Angeles Times

The worst earthquake in generations struck off the northeast coast of Japan on Friday, setting off a devastating tsunami that swallowed swaths of coastal territory and fanned out across the Pacific Ocean, threatening everything in its path.

The 8.9-magnitude earthquake – the world's fifth-largest since 1900 and the biggest in Japan in 140 years – struck at 2:46 p.m. local time, shaking buildings violently in Tokyo for several minutes and sending millions fleeing for higher ground.

At least 60 people are believed dead, though that number is expected to rise dramatically as officials begin assessing the extent of the damage. Japanese media is reporting scores of people missing, likely buried under rubble or swept away by waves as high as 33 feet.

Nearby islands are bracing for the tsunami and warnings have been issued for 53 countries including ones as far as Colombia and Peru.

At least 80 fires have been reported across the country and large areas are without electricity.

Read the whole story