Echo Summit closure could impact S. Shore ski resorts

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe officials were in Sacramento on Wednesday discussing Caltrans' plan to close Highway 50 over Echo Summit next month and what it will mean to the local economy.

With the contract already awarded to C.C. Myers contractors out of Rancho Cordova, the city and tourism entities have no control over whether the road will be closed Easter weekend. Work could begin as early as April 15. The start date is up to Mother Nature – as in if there is snow on the ground and when the skies look to be clear for a two-week stretch.

The contractor has until Memorial Day weekend, per the contract, to close the road for two weeks.



Caltrans crews restripe Highway 50 in South Tahoe on March 10 -- one activity that doesn't impede traffic too much. Photo/Kathryn Reed

A major issue is how the road closure will impact Heavenly Mountain Resort and Sierra-at-Tahoe, and all the businesses their customers frequent on the South Shore. As of now Heavenly plans to close April 24 – Easter Sunday. Sierra has not set a closing date.

Caltrans needs to shutdown the main gateway to the South Shore from the Bay Area and Sacramento for two solid weeks to replace the deteriorating rock wall. Then for another six to eight weeks there will be delays on Highway 50 Monday-Thursday until the work is completed.

Tom Davis, the City Council's rep on the South Lake Tahoe Lodging Association board, on Thursday updated his colleagues and the full room at Inn by the Lake about the plan.

He said on March 9 he met with state Sen. Ted Gaines, Caltrans, Sierra General Manager John Rice, Andrew Strain of Heavenly, B Gorman with Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce, and the contractor.

"Once the road closes, Sierra is done," Davis said.

However, the resort isn't exactly saying that. A number of their patrons come from outside the basin and would be able to access the resort even if the summit were closed.

Historically, Sierra has closed the second or third week of April. With Easter being late this year and the abundance of snow, spokesman Steve Hemphill said the resort would like to stay open until April 24.

"We are keeping our options open and hoping for the best," Hemphill told *Lake Tahoe News* in regards to the Echo Summit closure.

Jerry Bindel, a lodging board member, at the meeting said, "It may not be terrible if snow occurs in mid-April."

His concern as well as others in the lodging industry is

people have booked rooms over Easter with the intent to ski. Hoteliers are concerned skiers will head to the North Shore instead of taking the back roads to the South Shore.

Bindel is less concerned about how the road closure could impact the Tour of California cycling event that starts in Stateline on May 15; speculating people coming for that won't mind the additional time it takes to be routed to the South Shore because it's a one-time special event.

Opinion: Realtors need to turn focus on short sales

By Beth L. Peerce

I write on behalf of the California Association of Realtors, whose 170,000 members continue to witness the devastating consequences the home foreclosure crisis is having on California's families, neighborhoods, and communities on a daily basis.

The number of families affected by foreclosure is staggering. During the past three years, more than 640,000 Californians have lost their homes. With the number of homeowners who owe more than their home is worth hovering at 30 percent, experts predict there will be many more foreclosures in 2011 and 2012. Unless we take immediate, aggressive action to assist these homeowners, any meaningful recovery in the housing market and overall economy will continue to be delayed.

Tragically, only a fraction of those who face foreclosure will remain in their homes when all is said and done. Those whose incomes and financial circumstances meet strict guidelines may

qualify for a loan modification that will reduce their monthly payment to more affordable levels. Yet the federal Home Affordable Modification Program is expected to prevent only 700,000 to 800,000 foreclosures nationwide before it expires at the end of 2012, and the program does little to help those homeowners who are unemployed or otherwise no longer able to meet their financial commitments. Their last hope is to sell their home, which often means convincing their lender or the investor who "owns" the loan and, in many cases, the holder of a second mortgage lien and the mortgage insurer to accept a "short sale."

With a short sale, homeowners with a proven hardship negotiate an agreement to sell their home for less than the balance owed. Although not every homeowner or mortgage is eligible, those who are able to finalize a short sale avoid a foreclosure on their credit record and can move on with their lives. Last year, 20 percent of home sales in our state involved short sales.

Short sales can play an important role in our state's economic recovery by accelerating the pace of home sales and reducing the inventory of bank-owned homes on the market. There are other benefits as well. Homebuyers who can qualify for a mortgage at today's low interest rates also are able to purchase a home at below-market prices. Banks get a nonperforming asset off their books and avoid the headaches associated with disposing of assets they don't want to own in the first place. Neighborhoods have fewer abandoned homes, and local businesses have more customers with money to spend.

Unfortunately, many homeowners are unable to successfully negotiate a short sale. According to a recent survey of 2,150 California Realtors who have assisted clients with a short sale, only three out of five transactions closed – even when there was an interested and qualified buyer.

What's the problem? For one, no two mortgage agreements are

the same, so it can be difficult to standardize short sale processes and procedures. Many homeowners have second mortgages, which further complicate matters. Then there's the challenge of convincing multiple parties to take a financial loss or, in the case of loan servicers, to forego fees they otherwise might earn during the course of the foreclosure process. Poor and slow service by many banks and servicers has only exacerbated the problem. Horror stories abound from potential homebuyers and Realtors forced to wait 90 or more days for a response to a purchase offer or being required to fax short sale applications or other paperwork as many as 50 times. These delays discourage potential homebuyers from considering a short sale purchase and undermine the process for those who short sales are intended to benefit – the hundreds of thousands of families facing foreclosure.

Increasing the number of closed short sales by speeding up and streamlining the short sale process is one important way we can help California families avoid foreclosure and move our economy closer to recovery. That's why the California Association of Realtors is taking steps to enable more families to arrange a short sale. Recently, we advocated for improvements to short sale guidelines established under the federal Home Affordable Foreclosure Alternative program. We're meeting with major banks, U.S. Treasury officials, government-sponsored entities, including Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac, and others to urge them to standardize processes, comply with federal guidelines, improve communication with other stakeholders and increase staffing with the goal of eliminating service issues. We've also offered our members training in every aspect of the short sale process so they can assist their clients.

But we can't do it alone. That's why we're focusing the spotlight on short sales and calling on regulators, elected officials, nonprofits, business organizations, companies, and individuals with a stake in California's economic future to

resolve this issue and others that get in the way of a recovery. It won't be easy, and some compromises will be required. The important thing is that we need to act today. Our families and our communities can't wait any longer.

Beth L. Peerce is president of the California Association of Realtors.

Advertising award bestowed on Meyers ad agency

Charter Advertising/Design Inc. of Meyers received a Gold Award at last week's ADDY Awards in Reno.

The recognition was for its cover design of Tahoe Writers Works literary publication "EDGE".

Bruce Rettig served as creative director for the project, and Brianna Rettig as photographer.

The ADDY Awards are the advertising industry's largest and most representative competition, recognizing and rewarding creative excellence in the art of advertising. Every year approximately 60,000 entries are submitted in local ADDY competitions conducted by the American Advertising Federation.

Bruce Rettig also served as Publisher of this edition of "EDGE", along with Managing Editor Kim Wyatt, Fiction Editor David Anderson, Poetry Editor Andrea Wexelblatt, and editorial intern Hannah Elder. This was the fifth volume of the award-winning publication.

Healthy recipe contest in honor of National Nutrition Month

Destination Hotels & Resorts, parent company of Resort at Squaw Creek, is creating a Kids Healthy Recipe Contest in support of this being National Nutrition Month.

The contest encourages consumers to submit their favorite healthy recipe children enjoy eating. The winning recipe will be featured on the company's Kids Café healthy menu selections for a year, and the chef who submits the top entry also wins a trip for a family of four to any full-service Destination Hotels & Resorts property.

Kids Café healthy menu selections started last summer. The menu selections were created in an "Iron Chef" event by executive chefs from the company's more than 30 restaurants. These menu items were judged by six children who rated the selections from 1 (Gross) to 4 (Delicious). Menu favorites that are offered through Kids Café include Melon Fries with Strawberry Ketchup, Build Your Own Fruit Taco, Fruit Shots, Watermelon Fizz and Squidword Breaded Fish Sticks.

Kids also will be a part of the judging process for the Destination Kids Healthy Recipe Contest.

To enter, go online . The top three recipes with the most "likes" will be prepared and tasted by a group of Destination Hotels & Resorts food and beverage professionals along with a children's panel of judges.

STHS grad: Redefine what success means in Peace Corps

Publisher's note: ***The Peace Corps turns 50 this month. Two 2005 South Tahoe High School grads are in the Peace Corps having different experiences. Michelle Aguilar today weighs in with her thoughts from Panama. On March 4, Jessica Wackenhut shared her opinions from Paraguay.***

By Michelle Aguilar

BOCAS DEL TORO, Panama – I was the first and only person waiting that morning when the gate opened. I didn't realize that a place like this had hours of operation. The guard let me in, handed me a map, and pointed me toward my desired destination. I cautiously checked my watch. I had hours until my very first Peace Corps meeting in Washington, D.C. This was my first visit to the East Coast; I was bound for Panama the next day. But first I wanted to visit the person who was responsible for me being there in the first place.

As I stood at President John F. Kennedy's burial place in Arlington Cemetery and read some of his words that are engraved in the surrounding rock, I couldn't help but feel motivated. I thought about some of the words he spoke in 1961, when he first introduced the idea of Peace Corps to our country.

"Our peace corps, I want to emphasize, is not designed as a weapon of propaganda, it is not designed as a tool during the cold war. It is a genuine effort, by the people of the United States, particularly those who are young, to play their part in working for peace and improving the lives of all mankind. They will learn as much as they will teach."



Michelle Aguilar, middle, is on a two-year Peace Corps mission in Panama. Photos/Provided

Today, as Peace Corps celebrates its 50th anniversary, I think once again about those words Kennedy spoke, and wonder whether today's Peace Corps still has the same vision.

Peace Corps is currently in 77 countries worldwide. There are more than 8,500 volunteers and we are a government run organization. What happens in Washington directly affects us in the field. Even though the Peace Corps logo can be seen and recognized globally, I think when we talk about efficiency and effectiveness of the Peace Corp organization, it is only fair to speak on a country-to-country basis. The truth is that no two Peace Corps countries are alike, and the success or failure of a volunteers project is dependent upon the support and resources the volunteer receives from their country director, program director, language instructors, and medical staff. Through personal experience, I can with confidence say that Peace Corps Panama is doing it right.

I am living in a community of less than 300 indigenous people. I was brought here to do community economic development with an artisan and tourism group. But, after living here for a year, I realize the needs were more critical than the lack of

economic income. My people live off of their land. They are not going hungry due to lack of cash flow. What they needed was clean water, latrines and clean stoves. They also need health education and basic community organization. They need the basics met before they can start worrying about bringing in tourists and stimulating cash flow. I felt like I had freedom and numerous resources from the Peace Corps Panama staff when my community and I decided to work on a water project. Yes, it was technically not part of my program sector, but it is what my community needed, and most important, it is what my community wanted.

Peace Corps has three main goals for their volunteers. One relates to providing a community with trained men and women, but the other two goals revolve around cultural exchange. There is a good reason for this. In communities like mine, the first goal, the one relating to development, could never be achieved if the other two goals didn't happen. If I didn't live with my community, work with them shoulder to shoulder, ask them questions, answer their questions, learn their traditions, customs and language then I would never be able to provide true aid. I believe there is a very fine line between helping and hurting a community like mine. I have seen too many non-government organizations and nonprofit organizations implement volunteer projects that cross that line. The saddest part is that they think they are doing good. You can't truly know what the community needs, and what the best and most sustainable way to provide aid is, until you are one of these people. Our current Peace Corps director, Aaron S. Williams, reminds us "we are not just witnesses to a countries development, we are participants."

Peace Corps has been forced to make some cuts lately. My program was recently cut. When I leave my community in October, no volunteer will take my place. I think often the in country leadership of Peace Corps struggles in trying to prove to Washington and the taxpayers that the work we are doing is

truly making a difference abroad and on our home soil. But what is the best way to measure the outcomes of our projects and experiences?

Sure, building infrastructure and/or facilities could be a type of development, and easy to measure, but what about building capacity? Capacity building refers to assisting a community to adapt a new skill or competence to become sustainable. This is a more common outcome of Peace Corps projects, and very hard to measure. Do we need to start giving our communities and host country counterparts standardized tests to prove that capacity building is happening? For example, we just installed rainwater systems in my community. That is infrastructure development and something concrete that we can count and put onto paper to show Washington. But really, the most important part of this rainwater project is the education and capacity building. My people need to learn why their babies were getting sick, how and when to use the rainwater, how to maintain and clean the tank. If we just installed the tank and left, that tank would eventually yield water that is more dangerous and harmful to their health than what they were drinking before. Capacity building is the only way a project like this is going to be sustainable. And work like that does take time, hence the two-year commitment to Peace Corps.

A common argument I hear against Peace Corps is in reference to the time commitment and how two years is a lot to "sacrifice." Sure, two years is a significant amount of time, and it really does take this amount of time to do true development work. However, I do not see the Peace Corps experience a sacrifice at all. I see it as the opposite actually. I see this experience as an investment in myself, an investment in my future and an investment in my country.

Another common argument I hear is: "Why would you go volunteer in another country when there are plenty of people to help here in ours?" I would like to remind these people that it was

the same President Kennedy who declared, “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.” Do you find it a bit contradictory that he would say something so profound and patriotic, and then establish an organization that uses taxpayer money to send our “trained men an women” overseas to help other countries? Remember Kennedy also said, “There can be no greater service to our country and no source of pride more real than to be a member of the Peace Corps of the United States.”

Peace Corps volunteers help our country is two major ways. First, after 27 months abroad the volunteer usually returns to the United States. There are returned Peace Corps volunteers in every facet of the American workforce. They are in medicine, education, government and politics. They take what they have learned abroad and use these skills in their home communities. And second, these foreign countries that we are working in already have an American Embassy and American ambassadors to promote American policy. Some would say the Peace Corps volunteers are ambassadors as well, but we are not promoting American policy in our communities, we are promoting America. What could be more patriotic than that?

Nineteen months have passed since that day I stood in Arlington cemetery. I paid my respects to President Kennedy and walked away, having absolutely no idea what would lie ahead. Today, I celebrate Peace Corps 50th anniversary. I am grateful for the opportunities and experiences that this organization has given me and has allowed me to give to others. For the seven months that remain in my service, I will continue to make a “genuine effort” just as Kennedy had hope for 50 years ago.

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Sometimes the hardest part about doing a development project in our communities is finding the necessary funding. Peace Corps does not give us any monetary resources to realize our

project ideas. If you would like to donate to any Peace Corp project, go to this website.

Choose your favorite country, read the current project descriptions and make a confident donation because you can be certain that the volunteer receiving these funds is using them in the most efficient, effective and sustainable way.

Also, if you would like to follow my adventure, check out my blog.

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Lake Tahoe Autumn Food and Wine Festival

The 26th annual Lake Tahoe Autumn Food and Wine Festival is Sept. 9-11 at the Village at Northstar in Truckee.

Back bigger and better than ever, culinary aficionados and hungry travelers will return to the Village at Northstar for chef battles, free outdoor grilling demonstrations, celebrity chef luncheon, gourmet marketplace vendor fair, grape stomp, wine walk, art and sculpture exhibit, winemaker dinners, live entertainment, along with food and wine pairing seminars. Most events are outside.

Ski-food tour in Tahoe City

Tahoe Cross Country hosts its 10th annual Gourmet Ski Tour March 13.

Bring skis or snowshoes or rent gear for the 1-3pm trek along a one-mile trail filled with food and wine kiosks.

Cost is $30 adults, $25 ages 13 to 17, free for 12 and younger. Price includes an afternoon trail pass. Dessert in the Yurt will go until 5pm.

The ski center is at 925 Country Club Drive, Tahoe City.

For more information, go online.

Seminars designed to help businesses during Tour of California

The North Lake Tahoe Chamber of Commerce is hosting a series of seminars this month to help businesses benefit from the Amgen Tour of California May 5-16.

Hosted by Tourism Director Andy Chapman of the North Lake Tahoe Resort Association, the seminars will educate businesses about how to connect with the thousands of spectators, fans and participants who will be in North Lake Tahoe for the Stage 1 Finish (May 15) and the Stage 2 Start (May 16), as well as the Tahoe 10-Day Countdown, a succession of events in the days leading up to the start.

The seminars are free and open to the public. No RSVP is required to take part.

Attending businesses will walk away with information about deadlines for advertising in publications, race contact information, sponsorship information, best viewing spots for their guests, timing for best viewing, where to view the race on television, ideas for maximizing their revenue during this time, as well as lodging package opportunities.

Seminar dates are:

March 23 2-3:30pm at Sawtooth Ridge in Tahoe City;

March 24 5:30-7pm at Blue Onion Café in Kings Beach;

March 28 9-10:30am at the Parasol Building in Incline Village;

March 28 2-3:30pm at Granlibakken Resort just outside of Tahoe City.

For more information about the seminars, call Kym Fabel at (530) 581.8764 or kym@puretahoenorth.com.

Vail Resorts’ second quarter earnings rise 34%

By Wall Street Journal

Vail Resorts Inc.’s fiscal second-quarter earnings rose 34 percent as more skiers visited its slopes and ancillary sales jumped.

The results beat Wall Street’s expectations.

Ski resorts have seen their results improve since the economic downturn, when spending on travel and leisure plummeted. Visitors numbers began climbing in 2009 and picked up in 2010. Brief unfavorable weather in Colorado and the Northeast during the key Christmas-to-New Year's week last year did little to damp Vail Resorts' visitor numbers.



Skiers on March 9 fill Heavenly's California base lodge parking lot. Photo/Kathryn Reed

"We continue to be encouraged by the strong rebound in guest spending, with all major ancillary areas outpacing the growth in both lift ticket revenue and visitation," Chief Executive Robert Katz said.

Vail, the only publicly traded ski resort, owns a handful of ski areas in Colorado and California. In October, the company acquired the Northstar at Tahoe Resort.

Read the whole story

Nevada casino win drops in January

Statewide, the casino industry started the year off with a slight decline, though the Stateline numbers were worse.

On the South Shore revenue was down 7.85 percent in January compared to 2010.



Stateline casinos do worse than state average. Photo/Kathryn Reed

However, throughout Nevada the numbers dropped less than 1 percent year over year. Casinos collected $877.4 million from gamblers two months ago.

There were bright spots up and down the state, with casinos in Carson City and Carson Valley posting a 10.57 percent increases. The Boulder Strip and North Las Vegas in Southern Nevada had double-digit increases of 13.2 percent and 10.9 percent, respectively.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report