El Dorado supes spare aging programs in $4 mil. cuts

By Kathryn Reed

By the time the meeting wrapped up after 8pm, nearly $4 million had been trimmed from the 2011-12 El Dorado County budget.

This leaves a $7 million projected deficit before the fiscal year begins July 1. That sum will be dealt with sometime next year, possibly not until June. Getting agreements from the 13 bargaining units and waiting to see what the state does are factors that will play into what the supervisors will need to do.

The Board of Supervisors heard the county's outcry to save senior services. Not a dime was taken from that budget on Nov. 15. The museum, GIS and UC Extension also all remain intact.

"The programs were spared (Monday), but they are still discretionary programs. That is not to say they are forever out of the budget discussion," explained Mike Applegarth, analyst with the Chief Administrator's Office.

The budget document shows how much was taken from which departments and what had been proposed.

Law and justice (sheriff's, probation, district attorney, public department) is losing more than $1.6 million.

Although it appears Veterans Affairs is taking a $100,000 hit, that's not entirely true. Half that amount will be offset by the state in a bill passed to increase veterans services statewide.

Applegarth said there would be no reduction in services. With an employee retiring, the county is hiring a person in the community with experience to do the vet work on an as-needed basis.

S. Tahoe paychecks don't shrink; manager perks intact

Publisher's note: ***This is the second in a three-part series on South Lake Tahoe's budget.***

By Kathryn Reed

For most municipalities, people are the biggest expense. South Lake Tahoe is no different.

In the 2010-11 fiscal year budget, the city has 205.75 full-time positions; 61 in the police department and 40 in the fire department.

Lake Tahoe News asked the city to provide the total annual amount of money spent on salaries and total allocated for benefits. Finance Director Christine Vuletich said, "… we don't have the ability to respond that quickly to questions that require research or complex calculation."

LTN's financial consultant in 15 minutes figured out the combination of salaries and benefits in the 2010-11 budget is $32,830,145.

The issue is they are not separate entities in the budget document. El Dorado County's budget does separate out the

benefits – which include taxes, medical, retirement – that can be accessed online. What the city is doing is not a universally accepted practice.

Further analysis on Tuesday by *LTN* of the 2010-11 Budget Work Papers-A shows on average about 42 percent (or $13,788,660.90) of that nearly $33 million figure is solely for benefits.

Vuletich said it would take her a week to provide *LTN* the answer.

Furlough days v. salaries

The city claims to be saving money by instituting furlough days. But that really isn't the case because employees have been getting approximately 5 percent annual raises in the last two budgets. It means their paychecks are the same as they were in 2008.

A reason to have a higher salary on the books is so when it comes to retirement those dollars are calculated on the higher rate of pay. Had the city decided to cut pay and keep employees at full-time status, it would have hurt them come retirement.

Instead, it is the 24,000 people who live in the city who are hurt by not having the same city services as they had two years ago because staff isn't there to do the work. But residents are paying the same in taxes – just getting less.

What employees have is more time. They are working less and getting paid the same amount as two years ago.

There are a number of city employees working on their furlough day or beyond eight hours and not getting paid overtime. Those discrepancies are for the state Labor Department to resolve.

Most city employees were mandated to take two days off a month last fiscal year. That switched to three days a month this fiscal year. By closing city offices for two weeks in December

and swapping furlough days like what happened last week to make for a four-day weekend with the Veterans Day holiday, the furlough days are an average of three a month, not literally three a month.

City Manager Tony O'Rourke is not a proponent of furlough days.

"We can't be in a constant state of furloughs. That is postponing the inevitable," O'Rourke said.

He believes, as do most economists, that it's a new day when it comes to finances. It's not about waiting to return to how it was, but learning to operate with less for the indefinite future.

O'Rourke wants to take a look at the structure of the city government to make sure the positions are needed and the appropriate people occupy them. He says most of the staff is competent and an asset, but is recognizing some people are dead weight.

Some positions are at-will employees, while other workers are covered by one of the seven bargaining units. What could hamstring O'Rourke as he tries to get the staff in place he desires is the seniority rule. Eliminating a position means the person who had it can stay employed by bumping the low person on the totem pole onto the unemployment line.

Regarding personnel, an item not identified in the budget is administration time. Beyond the allotted sick days and vacation time, all directors are given 80 hours of what's call "admin time" and managers get 40 hours.

No one tracks these hours. It's not accounted for on time cards.

With revelations about the tiny town of Bell making headlines, one would think all cities – especially in California – would

not be having transactions occurring off the books and under the table.

An email from *Lake Tahoe News* to O'Rourke and Finance Director Christine Vuletich said, "Can one of you tell me how the admin time works? I don't see it accounted for in the budget. I know all the directors get those 80 hours and managers get 40 a year. Can you tell me how many people this affects?"

"We will do our best to get this information to you today," Vuletich wrote Tuesday morning. She didn't come through.

Lake Tahoe News has been told by sources that admin time is essentially time-off that is given with a wink and nod. This means these people don't have to use sick time or vacation time. This means those hours on the book are increasing. They can add up to big bucks the city would be responsible to pay when someone leaves the city.

They are costing the city dollars now with loss of work. Again, this equates to taxpayers ultimately having a reduction in services.

With California essentially making "comp time" a phrase to be banned in the workplace, dealing with salaried employees' overtime had to be addressed. They don't get overtime like hourly workers do. El Dorado County also has a form of admin time and was able to explain it in about two minutes.

This begs questions for the city: What are you hiding? Is admin time really comp time? Or is admin time just more time off for higher ups to take whenever?

Grants pay for salaries

The general fund, the money where basic services are covered and the bulk of discretionary dollars are found, also covers salaries. But the city budget (South Lake Tahoe is not alone in budgeting this way) does not actually have the funds to pay

all city employees their wages and benefits.

Depending on the worker the money may come from grants or an outside agency.

“Because the employees in the Engineering Department work on all engineering projects, Environmental Improvement Program (EIP) projects funded by the CTC and storm water projects, their salaries are allocated between Engineering and Storm water Management based on hours worked on each project,” the city Finance Department told *Lake Tahoe News*.

One of those California Tahoe Conservancy projects is the stalled $6 million Lakeview Commons makeover. No staff is being laid off while that project is in limbo. Their salaries will be paid by city and CTC dollars.

The question, though, is what happens when the work resumes and goes into the 2011-12 fiscal year and the CTC dollars have been spent? Where does the money come from to keep paying people in the Engineering Department?

The city is co-mingling all of its income, which without careful oversight can lead to fiscal mismanagement.

Grant dollars are thrown into a department’s general pool of money instead of being tracked separately. For instance, the $1.5 million federal grant to deal with ridding city residences of lead paint was put into the Redevelopment and Housing budget. This makes that budget seem like it has spiked by 58 percent. There is no easy way for someone to know by looking at the budget why the increase occurred. It took the finance director to explain it.

“I have never been in any community that is so grant dependent,” O’Rourke said. “I would feel more secure if could just rely on what we control for revenue.”

Sales, hotel and property taxes are the three main revenue

sources the city has outside of grants.

Taking action to help the abused

By Liliana E. Sanchez

As we wrap up the series Breaking the Cycle, we recap the previous three articles and we end with what we hope will inspire you to take action if you witness domestic violence or if you know someone in an abusive relationship.

In the first article we discussed the cycle of violence, how each phase affects victims and the different tactics used by abusive partners to manipulate and coerce their victims. The second article looked at the abusive partner by explaining some of the characteristics and tactics of those who batter, followed by the third article that answered the most common question asked by anyone who has not experienced domestic violence, “why do they stay?”

Today we are going to address how the damage of domestic violence propagates through every aspect of a victim’s life and how it affects everyone and everything around her. But more important, we will discuss what we can do to help victims of domestic violence and their families whether you are a bystander, a coworker, a friend or a family member.

You may be wondering if domestic violence extends beyond the confines of four walls or if it affects any other part of a victim’s life or other people around them? Domestic violence

does not stop when victims walk out and close their door. Domestic violence follows the victim and affects every part of their lives as well as those around them. Let’s first look at someone in a domestic violence situation who is employed. Absenteeism and/or tardiness are reoccurring issues at work for a victim of domestic violence for various reasons. These can be severe arguments at home, physical altercations or evidence of it especially on the face and neck areas, emergency visits to the hospital, jealousy, physical injuries which are not addressed or the abusive partner won’t allow the victim to go to work that day or ever. Productivity and job performance are other aspects that are affected by domestic violence; the victim may have trouble focusing on the task at hand resulting in the decline of productivity and/or job performance. This makes a negative impact on a business which can result in loss of revenue, clientele or both which is how domestic violence affects the workplace.

Another part of life that is affected by domestic violence is academic performance for both the victims and their children. The victim may fall behind in school work, miss assignments, fail or drop out of school. The children may loose interest in school, arrive to school late, miss breakfast, loose concentration, withdraw from their peers, act violently towards others, fall behind academically or fall asleep in class because they were up all night listening to violence at home.

Family members are also affected. They may often be pushed away by the victim because the abusive partner does not want them around due to power and control and fear that the victim might leave. Often, friends and family members turn their back on the victim judging and criticizing their choice to stay in the abusive relationship, not realizing or understanding that they are being coerced into isolation. This judgment, criticism and lack of understanding from family and friends can put the victim in deeper isolation because he/she will

feel like they don’t have anyone but their abuser. Family and friends may spend time and money trying to help a victim leave the abusive situation and may even become involved in conflicts and confrontations with the abusive partner to protect the victim.

As you can see, domestic violence indirectly affects the workplace, employers, coworkers, school, academic performance, children, and family. The problem does extend beyond the four walls and it touches everyone directly and indirectly, so what can we do? As family members, friends, coworkers, employers, neighbors or even bystanders we need to take action to help victims of domestic violence. To begin, you can let victims know that there is a way out.

As an employer, ask how you can help or if they would like to talk about what’s going on, refer them to law enforcement or the Women’s Center, be supportive and never threaten their job security – work may be the only safe place they have. As a neighbor or a bystander, every time you hear or see yelling, shoving, objects hitting the wall, screaming or children crying hysterically call 911 or call the police and ask them to do a welfare check at the address where the commotion is coming from – this can save someone’s life. As a friend or family member it is extremely important to remain supportive so that the victim feels that he/she has support and help when they are ready to leave the relationship, help them come up with a safety plan if time allows. Don’t turn your back on them by judging or criticizing their choice to stay because leaving the relationship can put them at greater risk for physical retaliation which may cause injuries and sometimes death.

Finally, listen to them and be there for when they are ready to leave because it takes a lot of courage to do so and if you have any questions on how to help someone who is in an abusive relationship call the South Lake Tahoe Women’s Center to discuss more ways in which you can help.

During Domestic Violence Awareness Month in October, South Lake Tahoe Women's Center took our Silent Witness Exhibit to different locations in the community each week. This exhibit is composed of silhouettes of men, women, children and pets. Each silhouette honors a person from Reno/Tahoe and the surrounding area whose life was cut short because of domestic violence. The exhibit is meant to bring awareness to the public and to evoke others to take action against domestic violence.

Joins us in our efforts to stop domestic violence. To find out what you can do call the South Lake Tahoe Women's Center, Monday-Friday 8am–4pm at (530) 544.2118 or call our 24 hour crisis line at (530) 544.4444. The Women's Center Business office was financed through a low-cost loan from the Rural Community Assistance Corporation.

Liliana E. Sanchez is outreach coordinator for South Lake Tahoe Women's Center.

El Dorado County's top official to retire in December

By Kathryn Reed

After a long day of budget battles, it was time for Gayle Erbe-Hamlin to strike one more name off the payroll – hers.

Erbe-Hamlin, chief administrative officer for El Dorado County, is resigning. Her last day will be Dec. 3.

"I'm 61. At some point you think about these things. When I

originally accepted the CAO job, I said I would stay between two and three years," Erbe-Hamlin told *Lake Tahoe News*.



Gayle Erbe-Hamlin

That was in July 2008. She kept her promise.

The Board of Supervisors' next meeting is Dec. 6. In closed session they will decide how to go forward – interim director, acting director, hire a search firm? Terri Daly, the assistant CAO, has worked for the county since the summer. However, she was the CAO of Amador County before coming to El Dorado.

Although Erbe-Hamlin has had a short tenure as leader of this government system, she has worked for El Dorado County since 1985. She was director of the Public Health Department before being interim CAO, and eventually hired on as CAO.

Despite the nasty budget quagmires she has negotiated the county through in the past few years, it's keeping the county solvent that she is most proud of.

"There is never an end to what needs to be done. Part of me wishes I had the job when I was younger, but I'm not sure I would have had the maturity to manage it," Erbe-Hamlin said.

She describes the job of CAO a bit like being a shepherd – herding everyone in the same direction.

She believes the decisions the Board of Supervisors made Monday will bode well for the county as it goes forward. Still, she knows the state's $29 billion hole will impact the county.

Erbe-Hamlin doesn’t exactly get to retire. Yes, she’ll turn in her keys to office in Placerville, but her husband has plenty of work for her. They own a bed and breakfast in Coloma.

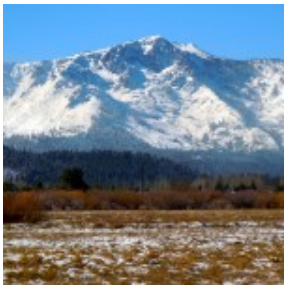
“I go home and spend the night with 10 strangers,” Erbe-Hamlin said. Soon she’ll get to spend the days getting to know her guests.

Snow in Tahoe basin may be measured in feet this weekend

By Steve Timko, Reno Gazette-Journal

A storm expected to form off the coast of British Columbia today could drop several feet of snow in the Sierra and several inches in the valleys of western Nevada, the National Weather Service said.

This is good news for more ski resorts scheduled to open this week.



Mount Tallac will have even more snow in a matter of days. Photo/Kathryn

Reed

There is a large area of high pressure in the central Pacific Ocean an it is creating a flow of air from Alaska to the coast of California, weather service meteorologist Brian Brong said.

“What that pretty much does is open up the door and allow cold air from Alaska to drop into the Sierras and Nevada,” Brong said.

That means stronger winds moving into the area on Thursday, Brong said. Winds could top 50 mph in the Sierra and 90 mph on some ridges.

Read the whole story

Tighter rules for puppy mills approved by voters

By Cathy Scott, Best Friends

“It’s a good day for the dogs.”

Those were the words Wayne Pacelle used when he announced to an anxious group of animal lovers that Proposition B – the Puppy Mill Cruelty Prevention Act – had officially been approved by the citizens of Missouri, sending an unmistakable message to the puppy mill industry.

“This is a tremendous victory for the hundreds of thousands of dogs suffering in Missouri’s puppy mills,” said Elizabeth Oreck, national campaign manager for Puppies Aren’t Products and representing Best Friends as a member of a coalition of animal welfare charities and organizations gathered on

election night to hear the results. Pacelle, as president and CEO of the Humane Society of the United States, was at the gathering too. “The people of Missouri recognized that change needed to happen and that they are no longer willing to support this cruel and inhumane industry,” Oreck said.

With the Nov. 2 vote, life, indeed, is looking up for the puppy mill dogs of Missouri. And Missourians are one step closer to shedding their state’s reputation as the “puppy mill capital” of America. The statewide ballot initiative, which drew national attention, summarily ends substandard conditions at overcrowded commercial breeding operations.

It translates to changes for puppy mill dogs in other states too. “If it can be done in Missouri, where the problem is the most severe, it can be done anywhere,” Oreck said.

Read the whole story

Prescribed burn in McKinney-Rubicon area

U.S. Forest Service fuels management crews will resume prescribed fire operations in the McKinney-Rubicon area Nov. 17, weather permitting.

Operations are expected to continue through the weekend if favorable weather conditions continue.

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.

Wild horse roundups to resume in N. Nevada

By Frank X. Mullen Jr., Reno Gazette-Journal

Federal land managers this week are scheduled to begin the first of three wild horse roundups aimed at reducing the number of mustangs in Northern Nevada.

The Bureau of Land Management on Wednesday plans to gather and remove about 94 “excess” wild horses from a site south of the Lahontan State Recreation Area in Lyon County, about 35 miles east of Carson City.

“We think there are up to about 150 horses in that (Lahontan) area, and there’s supposed to be about 10,” said Mark Struble, BLM spokesman in Carson City. “We don’t always know an exact number. In that area, the horses are often down under the trees along the river and can’t be seen (from airborne surveys).”

The gather is expected to be completed in two to three days. It’s part of an effort to remove up to 12,000 mustangs from the West this year.

The agency said there are too many horses on the range, and

the herds must be culled to ensure ecological balance and forage for the remaining horses, wildlife and privately-owned cattle. Wild horse advocates said the BLM exaggerates the number of animals and harms the genetic viability of herds by indiscriminately removing animals.

Read the whole story

Heavenly Ski Foundation's annual equipment swap

The Heavenly Ski and Snowboard Foundation's 22nd annual Ski and Snowboard Swap at MontBleu in Stateline is Nov. 19 and 20.

Proceeds benefit the foundation, a nonprofit organization providing skiing and snowboarding programs for regional youth, local middle school students, and the S.O.S. program.

The swap opens with Moonlight Madness on Nov. 19 from 6 to 11pm in the MontBleu Convention Center. Admission for adults is $5, children 12 and under are free.

The deals continue Nov. 20 from 10am to 5pm. Admission is free.

Public merchandise registration is at the Heavenly Ski and Snowboard Foundation building, located in the Heavenly California Lodge parking lot at the base of World Cup lift across from the Heavenly Tram, on Nov. 17 from 3 to 6pm. No equipment over 5 years old.

For additional information, call (530) 541.7354.

Opinion: UC Davis climate study flawed

Dear Publisher,

Your recent story about a $230,000 UC Davis study that predicts a 40 percent decline in snowfall due to global warming was fascinating, but scientifically flawed. Fortunately, the dire predictions by these UC Davis scientists overlooked compelling new solar research that insists global cooling, not warming, lies ahead.

Regardless of any increase in greenhouse gases, or any other arguments for global warming, it is the output of the sun that drives our weather and climate. Now we have hard evidence that our sun has entered a period of minimum solar output.

According to peer-reviewed research, published in June of this year, solar scientists are now predicting global cooling due to several decades ahead of lower solar output: "…using new data for the geomagnetic aa index we foresee that a Grand Minimum is immanent. Thus, a prolonged period of relative global cooling is forecasted." See details at: http://journalofcosmology.com/ClimateChange111.html

Think snow,

Steve Kubby, South Lake Tahoe