Swanson cleared of bribery allegation

By Kathryn Reed

The bribery investigation involving South Lake Tahoe City Councilwoman Angela Swanson is over. No charges will be filed.

“At this time we don’t believe Mrs. Swanson intended on a criminal act,” Dave Stevenson, investigator with the El Dorado County District Attorney’s Office, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Swanson has been under suspicion since August 2012 when Gino DiMatteo, then owner of City of Angels II medical marijuana dispensary, was arrested on a slew of drug charges. He implicated Swanson in a bribery case, claiming she would vote a certain way if he supplied cash to a charity she was involved with.



Angela Swanson

Stevenson said the investigation began based on a tip from a source, who wants to be anonymous, saying that there was some criminal wrongdoing going on.

“Throughout our investigation we look at different people and their involvement and their intent and if any laws were violated. Obviously, shortly into the investigation it was determined that Mr. DiMatteo had criminal wrongdoing and

intent so we veered toward him," Stevenson said. "That took a lot of time. Once it was completed, we focused on if anyone else was involved in criminal intent."

DiMatteo pleaded guilty Jan. 9, 2013, to possession with the intent to distribute marijuana. He was sentenced to five years in prison. During the investigation it was uncovered that DiMatteo should never have been allowed to open a pot shop because he was a felon. But South Lake Tahoe officials never did a criminal background check on him.

"Ultimately, our investigation has concluded and found that while it is clear that Mr. DiMatteo believed he was attempting to bribe Councilmember Swanson, it is equally clear that the councilmember already intended to vote favorably for Mr. DiMatteo and his marijuana dispensary," District Attorney Vern Pierson said in letter to South Lake Tahoe councilmembers.

Swanson's vote for medical marijuana has been consistent since she has been on the council.

The bribery issue stems from Swanson and Nancy Rollston, the head of the Lake Tahoe Educational Foundation, accepting more than $1,000 in cash for the foundation from DiMatteo that was delivered in an unmarked brown bag. This was just prior to vote of the council involving DiMatteo. (Despite its being drug money, the foundation has never returned it. Swanson is on the nonprofit's board.)

Swanson always maintained her innocence and has said there was nothing wrong with accepting that money. She did not respond to multiple inquiries.

A bit of potential irony is Swanson is running for El Dorado County supervisor and would be in a position to have some say over the District Attorney's Office, at least budget-wise. And Pierson is up for re-election this year.

Snippets about Lake Tahoe



• Nevada Chief Justice Mark Gibbons and Justice Katrina Pickering get to keep their jobs because no one filed paperwork to challenge them in this year's election.

• A wedding at the West Shore Café in 2012 is the cover photograph of *Coastal Living* magazine.

• Linchpin Structural Engineering, a Truckee-based engineering firm, recently launched its new website. Megan Murray of Tahoe Production House designed the site.

• Jurassic 5, Matisyahu, Random Rab, and Chali 2na & the House of Vibe are coming to Squaw Valley Feb. 15-16 at KT Base Bar. The concerts are free for season passholders, as well as skiers and riders who purchase a day lift ticket on the days of the concerts. Those who do not have a season pass or day lift ticket can purchase a general admission ticket for $20.

• Placer County has a new health officer – Robert Oldham.

Man accused of stealing rental car from Tahoe airport

A San Jose man was arrested in South Lake Tahoe after allegedly stealing a rental car after first reportedly

tampering with an aviation fuel truck.

Anthony Dixon, 22, was booked the afternoon of Jan. 19 on charges of vehicle theft, vandalism, and felony trespass on an airport. Federal charges are possible because of infractions at Lake Tahoe Airport.

Additionally, possible federal violations may be pursued because the incident occurred at the airport.

A Calstar employee called police about a suspicious male who had tampered with the fuel truck. The suspect drove north on the tarmac in a stolen sedan that was abandoned on Melba Avenue. He fled on foot.

Two hours later a resident on Susquehanna Drive who reported a suspicious person near their residence. It turned out to be suspect from the airport.

Police are not releasing how the suspect got access to the tarmac or rental vehicle.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Future of Lake Tahoe Airport being devised

The future of Lake Tahoe Airport will be discussed Feb. 13 at 5:30pm at the South Lake Tahoe facility.

C&S Companies is developing, reviewing and creating an airport master plan to address the airport’s needs.

The meeting will include a presentation of the master plan

process and a description of how the public can provide input on the airport's future use. Following the presentation, attendees will have the opportunity to visit various stations focused on specific aspects of the master plan, and talk with city staff and the planning team.

When available, a draft of the Airport Master Plan will be online.

EPA's process to OK pesticides raises health concerns

By Katia Savchuk, Center for Investigative Reporting

Tiny particles of silver could appear soon in children's toys and clothing, embedded inside plastics and fabrics to fight stains and odors.

No one knows how the germ-killing particles, part of a new pesticide called Nanosilva, affect human health or the environment in the long run. But regulators have proposed letting Nanosilva on the market for up to four years before the manufacturer has to submit studies on whether the particles pose certain dangers.

That's because the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has backed approving Nanosilva through conditional registration, a fast-track process that recently has drawn criticism for oversight problems. Unlike regular registration, it allows a pesticide to be sold before all required safety studies are

in. In this case, manufacturer Nanosilva LLC can move ahead even though it hasn't explored fully the potential health risks if the product were to seep out of plastic or be inhaled.

Nanosilva's approval, which could be finalized early this year, has renewed focus on the loophole, designed mainly to help the EPA speed up approvals of pesticides nearly identical to those already being sold.

Recent reviews have found vast problems with the EPA's oversight of conditional registration. An internal audit showed in 2011 that 70 percent of all active pesticides had been conditionally approved. The audit also concluded that the agency used the label too broadly. Since then, its use has increased. Figures the EPA provided in December put the number at 80 percent.

Thousands of pesticides kept conditional status for more than 20 years, the Natural Resources Defense Council, a nonprofit environmental advocacy group, found in 2010. The EPA says studies typically are due within four years.

And last year, federal auditors found the agency couldn't reliably track how many products were conditionally registered or whether safety studies were submitted. As a result, pesticides could linger on the market for years without critical tests, the Government Accountability Office warned in August.

These aren't new problems. At least seven independent reviews dating back to 1980 have noted flaws with the agency's systems for tracking pesticide registrations.

The EPA said it has enough data on Nanosilva to know that it's safe while the manufacturer finishes testing, as the law requires. But some scientists and environmentalists say the agency is taking a risk on products that are hardly essential, like sports clothing that doesn't stain or stink or toys that

last longer.

“You could allow some uses that are justified based on human well-being, such as medical implements, but to allow the possibility that nanosilver would be released in plastic on children’s toys, and your kid could chew on it and ingest that material before we understand its toxicity – that’s unnecessary risk,” said Samuel Luoma, a research ecologist at the University of California, Davis. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

Conventional silver has been used as an antibacterial product for centuries. It releases ions that are deadly for many bacteria and fungi.

Recently, scientists have broken down silver into particles more than 1,000 times smaller than the width of a human hair – some not much wider than a DNA strand. They’re called nanosilver. Nanosilva is just one brand that contains them.

Nanosilver can be embedded directly into plastics, fabrics and other materials. Companies say this helps products last longer. It also allows them to call items antibacterial and attract germ-conscious consumers. Nanosilver needs to be registered as a pesticide because it claims to kill bacteria and other live organisms.

Regular silver is highly toxic to fish and other aquatic life but isn’t usually dangerous for humans. But scientists say nanosilver could pose unique hazards, and they know little about its long-term risks.

Animal studies show that nanosilver can slip into cells and build up in the brain, heart and other organs. The EPA doesn’t know whether nanosilver causes reproductive harm or cancer because there are no valid studies. Research on animals suggests that it can collect in the male reproductive system, potentially harming fertility, and may cause genetic mutations, which sometimes are linked to cancer.

Scientists have warned that nanosilver may be more toxic than regular silver and act as a carrier for other poisonous chemicals. Besides human health risks, researchers worry that nanosilver could kill fish and disrupt food chains if it makes its way into the environment.

The EPA argues that approving Nanosilva promotes innovation and lets consumers enjoy better products. The agency also says it didn't give the manufacturer enough time to do safety tests. The EPA didn't ask for those tests until nearly four years after an independent scientific advisory panel counseled the EPA on how it should evaluate nanosilver in 2009.

And, in evaluating Nanosilva, the EPA ignored some of that panel's advice.

The scientists told the agency to evaluate every nanosilver product separately. Just because one is safe doesn't mean others will be, they said. The agency instead figured out many health and environment risks based on studies on particles that were different from those in Nanosilva. The EPA said the tests were "scientifically appropriate."

Nanosilva officials couldn't be reached for comment.

This isn't the first time the EPA has conditionally approved pesticides containing nanosilver.

In November, a federal appeals court overturned the approval of two nanosilver products, ruling that the EPA had incorrectly found they posed no risks to toddlers. That decision didn't affect Nanosilva because the EPA used different calculations in each case.

Regulators still are grappling with how to deal with nanomaterials. While only two companies have asked for EPA approval, hundreds of products containing nanosilver already are on the market, according to an inventory by The Project on Emerging Nanotechnologies.

The EPA also has fast-tracked other controversial pesticides, including ones linked to the collapse of honeybee colonies and tree deaths.

All conditionally registered pesticides meet legal safety standards, the EPA said. The agency said it's taken steps to prevent staff from coding registrations incorrectly, which it said was the main reason numbers appeared high.

The EPA also has reviewed some conditionally approved products to look for missing data and other problems. But it hasn't traced the paper trail for all pesticides, as it told federal auditors it would do by last fall.

The EPA also doesn't have a concrete plan for the main fix auditors prescribed, an automated tracking system to guarantee that studies arrive and get reviewed. Currently, pesticide managers sometimes rely on handwritten notes and memory to keep track.

"Until they figure out the system, they shouldn't be using conditional registration," said Mae Wu, an attorney for the Natural Resources Defense Council.

The EPA first told federal auditors it would develop an automated tracking system more than 25 years ago.

No snow: Barton ER visits on the rise

Publisher's note: ***This is one of a series of blurbs about how the lack of winter is impacting businesses in the Lake Tahoe Basin. If you have an idea, please email it to***

info@LakeTahoeNews.net.

One of the businesses that benefits from a bad snow year is a hospital in a ski town. That is because people tend to hurt themselves more when the snowpack is hard or thin and when there are more people on fewer runs.

That's the case at Barton Memorial Hospital. Emergency room visits were up 9 percent in December compared to December 2012. The snowpack in December 2012 was great – even above normal. Not so a month ago.

"Injury patterns are unchanged and, overall, the ski clinics are unchanged from previous years," Warren Withers, medical director of Barton's emergency department, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Barton runs the medical clinics at Heavenly, Sierra and Kirkwood ski areas.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Nev. drones expected in the air by May

By Richard N. Velotta, Las Vegas Sun

The era of pilotless commercial aircraft has begun in Nevada and the first drone test flights are expected by May, a team from the state's program management office told the board of the Governor's Office of Economic Development last week.

Details of the plan to grow what is expected to be an $11 billion-a-year industry were unveiled to a packed board room

at Gov. Brian Sandoval's Las Vegas office.

Nevada was notified Dec. 30 that it had been selected one of six states designated by the Federal Aviation Administration to test unmanned aerial systems. The FAA's goal is to integrate unmanned aircraft into the U.S. commercial airspace by the end of September 2015.

Four test sites have been identified in Nevada: a facility at Boulder City Municipal Airport, Stead Airport north of Reno, Fallon's municipal airport and Desert Rock, a private airfield near Mercury associated with the Nevada National Security Site.

Read the whole story

Traumatic brain injury survivors likely to die young

By Alan Zarembo, Los Angeles Times

People who suffer traumatic brain injuries face an elevated risk of death from suicide or accidents for years to come, according to a study based on four decades of data on hundreds of thousand of patients in Sweden.

Those who survived the immediate aftermath of moderate and severe traumatic brain injuries were three times more likely than people without such injuries to die prematurely, defined by the researchers as before age 56.

Experts said the study was likely to spur calls for long-term monitoring of some brain injury patients. By virtue of its size and scope, the analysis, published Wednesday in JAMA

Psychiatry, puts an authoritative stamp on a growing body of evidence that impacts to the brain can be deadly in ways that are not easily apparent.

Read the whole story

Airbnb's sharing economy threatens traditional lodging

By Andy Kessler, Wall Street Journal

San Francisco's Radius Cafe is one of those places where "local" is the rule – all the food is sourced within a 100-mile radius of the restaurant. So it's a touch ironic to meet there with Brian Chesky, the hoodie-wearing 32-year-old co-founder of Airbnb, whose game plan is global.

Airbnb is a Web service that lets travelers book couches, beds, rooms, houses, boats and even castles on a nightly basis. In six years Airbnb has become a company valued at $2.5 billion, with 500,000 properties available in more than 190 countries – a stand out in what is often called the sharing economy. Airbnb could do to hotels what Amazon has done to bricks-and-mortar bookstores. By year's end, Airbnb says it will have booked more overnight stays than the Hilton and InterContinental hotel chains.

As might be expected, hoteliers and hospitality-industry regulators are suspicious of the Airbnb model. In October, New York state sued the company for violating a law passed in 2010 – just when Airbnb was picking up steam—barring private citizens from renting an entire apartment for less than 30 days.

Read the whole story

Epic Mix creates competition on, off the slopes

By Kathryn Reed

Based on the amount of vertical feet being skied by people at Heavenly Mountain Resort, it would be hard to know the whole mountain hasn't opened because of the lack of snowfall.

Those who are into keeping track of where they ski, vertical feet, number of days and other stats just have to sign up for Epic Mix. The social media component to skiing is Vail Resorts way of making it more than just a ski day. And while it's offered at all their mountains, Heavenly has the most enthusiastic Tahoe participants.

Its nicknamed "Epic crack" because it is so addictive.



At the end of a ski day, Shirley Hackett goes over her Epic Mix account online. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Shirley Hackett, 56, skis every day at Heavenly – except when she's skiing someplace else. In summer 2011 she was diagnosed with a life-changing illness that almost kept her off the slopes for good. When she got back in January 2012 her goal was to ski 1 million vertical feet. She ended that season with 2.5 million vertical feet in 85 days.

In the 40-plus days she has skied this season she is at more than 1 million vertical feet. It's a little easier to do this at Heavenly compared to the New York resort where she learned to ski. It had 250 vertical feet top to bottom.

Hackett's goal last season was to ski 100 days. She got in 112 – but not all at Heavenly. For her 102 days at a Vail owned resort she skied 2,619,439 million vertical feet. She finished the season top among all women at all Vail Resorts.

"So, now all of this seems quite easy," Hackett said as she went over the various components of her Epic Mix page.

And the prize at the end of the season?

"There is nothing except bragging rights," Hackett tells *Lake Tahoe News* with a smile. "It's good clean fun. You are outside in one of the most beautiful places, exercising. You can't beat that."

Anyone can go online to see how people are doing – assuming they've made their profile public. It's optional to activate Epic Mix.

Dave Maderis, who also skis at Heavenly, decided after the first year he could beat the record of 4.3 million vertical feet. So in 2011-12 at age 69 he began his quest. In 136 days he skied 4.8 million feet – for those bragging rights.

He did so through a viral infection and cracked ribs.

Maderis decided after turning 70 he didn't need to challenge himself in quite the same way.

In year three, Mark Emmerling, who's home resort is Heavenly, decided he was going to beat the Colorado guys who often have an earlier start to the season, sometimes a later ending date and resorts with longer runs. He did so – skiing 7,036,536 million vertical feet in 2012-13.

Robert Martin collects his vertical feet on a ski bike.

Then there are the stories of those who have camped out at World Cup to swipe their pass to get the feet without ever getting on the lift, let alone skiing down. It was also an easy way to earn the Dark Knight pin, which is 10 lifts after 4pm.

"I don't think we had any idea how really, truly competitive our guests are," Stacey Pool, director of online experiences for Vail Resorts said. And they are competing against people they may not know, especially people at another resort.

But Epic Mix isn't just about vertical feet. It's also about pictures, pins, lessons and racing. Vertical feet and photos are the two most popular features of the application.

Photos can be uploaded to Facebook within a matter of hours. It's there with the resort's logo, so it's practically free advertising. Guests can buy photos if they want.

People can be seen on chairlifts tracking their pins, vert feet and posting photos. It's that addictive. They don't even wait until the end of the day to know their stats or share their info with others.

"You don't have to be the best skier in the world. It's a game," Maderis told *Lake Tahoe News*. "It's good for people who come up 15 to 20 days to see how many points they can acquire."

The points are based on pins, vertical feet and other criteria.

Vail Resorts started Epic Mix as a way to tap into the burgeoning social media platform.

“It was a way to capture special memories, experiences you were having on the mountain and then you could share with friends,” Pool told *Lake Tahoe News*. “At first we measured social impressions – how many eyeballs were on social posts. It was in the millions of social impressions in the first year.”

Each year Vail has tweaked Epic Mix or added something to it. New this year is with ski or snowboarding lessons the ability to track one’s progression. It also has the name of the instructor and other details not available if the person has not activated Epic Mix. (Epic Mix is free and is available on season passes and day passes.)

Pool said Epic Mix is not being used to track where individuals are. However, it has been used when someone has turned up missing to see where they have been skiing so ski patrol can start with that area to locate the person.

With the pins that can be collected – and they are all virtual – it’s possible to put them up in a route on the mountain at times that would disperse skiers from congested areas. People know where they are by using their smart phones.

Otherwise, Epic Mix is considered a passive app, and that’s how Vail Resorts intends to keep it. What will be new for 2014-15 – if anything – Pool isn’t saying. After all, this season isn’t even half over.