Tahoe home sales jump, prices stagnant

By Sanford Nax, Sacramento Business Journal

Lower prices are helping boost home sales around Lake Tahoe, according to a midyear report released by Lake Tahoe-based real estate company Chase International .

Sales increased 28 percent, but there was no change in dollar volume. That's because median and average prices fell 19 percent and 33 percent respectively to $310,000 and $628,944 in the first six months of 2012 compared with the same period in 2011. Sales of homes under $1 million jumped 31 percent.

"Decreasing inventory coupled with historic low prices is enticing buyers back to the market," said Susan Lowe, corporate vice president for Chase International in a statement. "I'm sure we'll continue to see a lot of movement throughout the rest of the year."

Read the whole story

NTPUD fined $239,081.25 by Lahontan board

The North Tahoe Public Utility District received a slightly higher than expected fine from the Lahontan Water Quality Control Board for a 2010 sewage spill.

The board voted July 12 to fine NTPUD $239,081.25, about $7,000 more than the team investigating the spill proposed.

The board decided to increase the fine because it felt there was more harm done to Lake Tahoe clarity, Doug Smith, supervising engineering geologist, told *Lake Tahoe News*. The fines are calculated using various criteria designed to standardize penalties, said Smith, and the board decided to bump up the amount on a few factors.

The sewage spill occurred Dec. 19, 2010, during a heavy snowstorm. The power went out on the main line and then the generator ran out of gas. No alarms were installed to let officials know the generator was not functioning properly.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

City dwellers find wilderness closer to home

By Will Doig, Salon

Since 1979, Eddee Daniel has been hiking Milwaukee's Cambridge Woods, part of an 800-acre swath of wilderness now called the Milwaukee River Greenway. Back then, the forest, which cuts straight through Wisconsin's most crowded ZIP code, was largely shunned by the public. "There were vandals and drug dealers," says Daniel. "It's changed in a big way, and mostly in a healthy way."

Today, on any given summer weekend, the Greenway teems with hikers, canoers and mountain bikers. But it's still more wilderness than anything, with few of the accouterments of an organized park. In it, you can see one of modern urbanism's most unexpected traits unfolding: a renewed appreciation for wild space in cities – not just "green space," but actual

swamps, forests, wetlands and streams.

Part of this is the result of changing demographics – the growing number of "urbaneers" dragging kayaks into aqueducts, the same city dwellers who prompted REI to open a giant store in Manhattan. But it's also part of a growing realization that the earth's natural processes can be harnessed in ways that benefit even the most urbanized area.

Tim Carter, director of the Center for Urban Ecology at Butler University, talks about these benefits as "ecosystem services" – ways that mother nature can help cities by doing what she does anyway. For example: "We've typically used pipes to drain our urban lands of water," says Carter. "But a more highly engineered wetland could do the same job as greener infrastructure." Los Angeles has been experimenting with this. In February, it opened its second engineered wetland in South L.A., a boggy, weedy marsh on the site of a former MTA bus yard. Pools of rainwater filled with naturally occurring bacteria scrub storm water clean before it makes its way to city drains. The spot doubles as a park, even as it serves its practical purpose.

Read the whole story

Alan Tolhurst – 1950-2012

Alan Tolhurst, an architect who contributed to the community by serving on local boards, passed away on July 8. He died after a long battle with leukemia.

"Alan served his community of South Lake Tahoe in so many ways to insure economic improvement and environmental responsibility as a leader on the El Dorado County Planning

Commission for 15 years and on the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Advisory Planning Commission," said El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago in a statement.

Mr. Tolhurst graduated from Homestead High School in Cupertino. He attended the University of Colorado, Boulder, graduating in 1974 with a degree in environmental design. He received his graduate degree in 1982 at the Southern California Institute of Architecture, an independent school of architecture in Los Angeles.

Working first with the National Aeronautics and Space Administration Ames Research Center in Silicon Valley from 1985-88, Mr. Tolhurst was later employed by San Jose as an architect in 1988.

After moving to South Lake Tahoe, he opened a private practice as Alan G. Tolhurst, Architect in 1996.

"Alan was a deep thinker, a man of vision, and a quintessential design professional with a light-sided sense of humor. He spoke from experience, presence and thoughtfulness. He felt compassion for everything he touched, decided and discovered. And, he also incorporated a broad vision in every professional application," said Santiago.

"TRPA is deeply saddened by the passing of El Dorado County Planning Commissioner Alan Tolhurst, who served as a long-time member and past chair of TRPA's Advisory Planning Commission," said a statement provided by the agency. "Our thoughts are with his family and his young daughter, whom he was so proud of. We will miss his commitment and compassion."

Mr. Tolhurst is survived by his wife Brigitte and daughter Zyeena.

The flags of El Dorado County fly at half staff this week in Mr. Tolhurst's honor.

Aerial spraying of mosquitoes criticized as threat to area waters

By Cynthia H. Craft, Sacramento Bee

If it seems like aerial bombardments of mosquitoes are coming fast and furious this summer, rest assured it’s not a product of the imagination.

Mosquito control district aircraft are taking to the skies earlier and more frequently this season than in any other year since the West Nile virus was detected in the Sacramento region in 1999.

The stepped-up aerial pesticide sprayings are an unintended consequence of a federal court ruling that forces ground pesticide use by mosquito control districts to fall under the permit requirements of the federal Clean Water Act.

Specifically, mosquito district officials say, meeting the Clean Water Act requirements for groundwater treatments means more paperwork and administrative duties for ground technicians treating larval pools. The new rules have caused technicians to reach an average of 50 fewer larval pools monthly than they would have before the regulations went into effect this year, according to district officials.

Since aerial spraying of adulticides doesn’t face the same restrictions as ground treatments near water, the district has opted to go after adult mosquitoes with sprayings by air or truck-mounted sprayers.

Read the whole story

Hot afternoon winds threaten to provoke Robbers Fire

By Bill Lindelof, Sacramento Bee

The fire that has scorched more than 1,000 acres of wildland and threatened homes near Foresthill is still burning this morning but its march has at least temporarily slowed.

However, fire officials are worried that the afternoon will bring hot winds that could push the fire toward houses despite the best efforts of more than 1,800 firefighters.

Dubbed the Robbers fire, it began about 3:20 p.m. Wednesday near the east bank of the north fork of the American River and burned eastward, toward Iowa Hill. Since then, aerial and ground efforts to quell the blaze have been on-going.

Overnight, the fire was relatively quiet. That was in contrast to Thursday when the fire made several different runs in various directions, the most aggressive being in the southeast direction toward the Yankee Jims area.

When the fire bolted toward the Yankee Jims area about 3:30 p.m. the Placer County Sheriff’s office ordered additional evacuations. About 30 people were told to leave for their safety, bringing total evacuations since Wednesday to about 150.

The fire as of today is estimated to have consumed 1,100 acres of forest, an increase of 300 acres since Thursday. The blaze is 10 percent contained.

Read the whole story

S. Lake Tahoe gas prices drop 35 cents

Every metro area in Northern California, including South Lake Tahoe, saw a double-digit drop in the average price of gas over the past month, according to the latest report from AAA Northern California, Nevada and Utah Insurance Exchange.

The average price in South Lake Tahoe dropped to $3.85 from $4.20 when the survey was done June 12.

California's average for a gallon of regular, unleaded gasoline is $3.70, down 40 cents since last month. Among all 50 states, California has the third highest state average price for regular, unleaded gasoline. Hawaii is first and Alaska is the second.

Northern California gas prices are now averaging $3.71, down 41 cents from last month. The national average price of $3.38 is down by 16 cents, which is 25 cents less than the national price on this date last year, when it was $3.63.

The least expensive average price in Northern California can be found in Marysville where regular is $3.54 per gallon.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Community colleges board considers ways to reward good students

The California Community Colleges Board of Governors this week took the first step toward establishing system-wide enrollment priorities and gave final approval to regulations that prevent students from repeating courses that they have already successfully completed.

The enrollment priority regulations, which are scheduled for final adoption in September and implementation in the fall of 2014, would reward students who are progressing toward their educational goals by allowing them to register for courses ahead of students who don't have an education plan, are not making academic progress or who accumulate units far in excess of the number needed to transfer or earn a certificate or degree.

"The proposed changes encourage successful student behaviors and ensure the system is intelligently rationing classes at a time of scarce resources to provide more students with the opportunity to achieve their goals on time," said Chancellor Jack Scott in a statement. "Current law and practice guiding student enrollment tends to favor the continuing student, based solely on accrual of course units."

Active-duty military and veterans and former foster youth in good academic standing who have completed orientation, assessment and education plans will continue to have first call on courses, followed by students in Extended Opportunity Programs and Services and Disabled Students Programs and Services who have done the same.

Districts would have authority to adopt policies exempting categories of students from the 100-unit limit, such as those

in high-unit majors or programs. Districts also would be required to adopt an appeals policy and process for students who lose enrollment priority due to extenuating circumstances such as verified cases of accidents, illnesses or other circumstances beyond the control of the student. Public comment on the proposed change will be accepted before final adoption.

The regulation changes that will prevent students from repeating a course that they have already completed with a satisfactory grade will take effect in the fall of 2013. Students have been allowed to take some classes, such as performing arts and physical education offerings, as many as four times.

Students will be able to repeat courses needed to meet transfer requirements for a University of California or a California State University campus, or for a legally mandated course. There is also an exception for students participating in intercollegiate athletics.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Snippets about Lake Tahoe

• Edgewood Company and the city of South Lake Tahoe invite the public to the opening of the Bonanza Neighborhood Park on July 14 from 11am to 1pm. The park is located at 1209 Bonanza Ave.

• Tahoe Arts Project is having auditions for Missoula Children's Theater production of "The Wizard of Oz" on the lawn of Valhalla Tallac Historic Site on July 16 from 10am to noon. For more information, contact Peggy at (530) 542.3632.

• Sweetwater String Band and Grant Farm will be performing at Beerfest and Bluegrass at Northstar Village on July 14 from 3-7pm. Tickets are $30 in advance and can be purchased online or at the Tickets & Season Pass office in the Village, or for $38 at the door.

Opinion: Court issues charter cities a break on prevailing wage

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the July 11, 2012, Sacramento Bee.***

In a landmark decision handed down last week, the state Supreme Court has ruled that charter cities in California that use their own money to build new fire stations, libraries, sewer systems or other municipal facilities can ignore the state's prevailing wage law.

The ruling is a blow to organized labor but a boon to taxpayers. If they have the political will to take advantage of it, struggling municipal governments can save a lot of money.

Unlike most states, the prevailing wage law in California is not calculated based on a weighted average of all wages paid but almost always on the collectively bargained union rate instead – generally the highest wage paid by far for construction work in any jurisdiction. For example, a laborer – typically the worker who waves the flag at a road construction site or digs ditches – is paid $43 per hour in Sacramento under the state's prevailing wage law. The market

rate for that same worker on a private construction project is $25 an hour.

Statewide, only some 15 percent of the state’s construction workers belong to unions, but in most cases the state considers only union wages when setting prevailing wage rates. Prevailing wage requirements inflate labor costs on government construction projects in California well beyond what the private sector pays, by 10 to 30 percent according to some estimates.

Read the whole story