Storms bring excitement to parched Calif.

By Christopher Weber and Janie Har, AP

The biggest storm to hit the slopes of the Sierra Nevada this season triggered cheers Friday from the snow-starved ski resorts of California and the businesses that surround them.

Elsewhere in the drought-stricken state, rain and wind gusts prompted high surf warnings and repeated cautions from highway patrol to slow down when driving.

Severe weather moved south from the Pacific Northwest, where fierce storms this week sent rivers bursting from their banks, spilled boulders and trees onto a major highway and spawned a rare tornado that snapped power poles and battered homes. But the storms had one positive effect – easing drought concerns after an unusually dry summer.

In Washington state, the latest report from the U.S. Drought Monitor on Thursday showed the area west of the Cascade Mountains is no longer in drought. Cities like Seattle, Everett and Tacoma implemented water shortage plans when unseasonably dry summer conditions left the region parched.

California also needs all the snow and rain it can get, given four years of drought that have dried up reservoirs and left trees parched. Even a wet winter is not expected to end the drought, but this week's stormy weather brought on by a tropical atmospheric river is the kind Californians used to see before drought set in.

"This is the kind of storm we've been missing for the last four years of drought," said Doug Carlson, a spokesman with the California Department of Water Resources. "This is the kind of storm we would need a lot of to start digging our way

out of the drought.”

Higher snow peaks in the Sierra Nevada didn’t hit 3 feet as projected, but there was still a foot or two of snow, enough to keep sledders, skiers and snowboards happy, National Weather Service meteorologist Dawn Johnson said Friday.

Lake Tahoe-area ski resorts, property managers and mom-and-pop retailers have been giddy to see snowy conditions this early in the season.

“It’s full-on winter out here,” said Jerry Bindel, general manager of Aston Lakeland Village vacation condominiums in South Lake Tahoe. “This is great news all the way around.”

The National Weather Service issued a high-surf advisory for many coastal areas, with peak waves around 30 feet in places such as Santa Cruz, California.

To the south in Ventura County, surging waves inundated several low-lying streets along the coast as a very large Pacific swell hit Friday. Rough seas surged over the Ventura Pier during high tide, and seawater streamed through residential neighborhoods.

Mike Laan took a break from his job with the city of Ventura’s tourism bureau to join hundreds of residents snapping photos of the huge waves.

“They’re bigger than I’ve ever seen,” Laan said. “When they’re breaking, the waves are higher than the pier. The water is going all the way past the sand to the streets.”

The pier was damaged by the battering surf and closed indefinitely. No serious damage was reported to homes, and the high tide receded by midmorning.

Just north of Ventura two surfers in their 20s were unhurt after being rescued from choppy waters at Mondos Beach.

A female surfer was pulled ashore by a passer-by, county fire Capt. Mike Lindbery said. Her male companion got stuck between breaking waves and onshore rocks and had to be pulled out by county rescue swimmers.

“Mondos usually has a good surf break, on good days,” Lindbery said. “Today is not a good day.”

Another storm is expected this weekend, which could bring another 2 feet of snow to parts of the Sierra.

The Southern California coast remains under a high surf advisory through Sunday, with unpredictable waves topping 10 feet.

Elsewhere, a brief but intense thunderstorm sent pedestrians scattering Friday in downtown Los Angeles, and hail furiously pelted nearby Highland Park. To the east, snow chains were required on a major route to ski resorts in the San Bernardino Mountains. Yet amid the bursts of wet weather, a small brush fire broke out near Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu.

Forecasters have said a strong El Nino weather system could drench California and other parts of the West in the coming months. However, Johnny Burg, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Seattle, said he didn’t believe the latest Northwest storms were related to El Nino.

“We just had a jet stream pointed at us, and it brought successive storms,” he said. “We don’t see the effects (of El Nino) until the winter.”

Enrollment surge may mean Al Tahoe reopens

By Kathryn Reed

Enrollment in Lake Tahoe Unified School District is escalating to the point that officials are wondering if Al Tahoe Elementary School might need to be reopened.

The South Lake Tahoe school closed starting with the 2004-05 school year because of budget deficits and declining enrollment.

There are currently 3,988 students in the district, which is 100 more students than a year ago. The district had 4,544 students in September 2005. The numbers peaked in 1996-97 at 5,978 students.

The biggest growth continues to be at the high school. In 2014-15 there were 911 kids at South Tahoe High School and now there are 1,088.

“They like the career piece push,” Superintendent Jim Tarwater said of why parents want to enroll their kids at STHS.

Between the $64 million facilities bond approved by local voters and more than $30 million in matching funds from the state, the district in the last few years has had a bit of a renaissance. The bulk of the money revamped STHS. With the buildings came a slew of programs.

South Tahoe Middle School has seen enrollment go from 745 students to 830.

The elementary schools are also seeing more students.

“It’s why you never get rid of a school,” Tarwater told *Lake Tahoe News*.

While the district has good enrollment numbers, it would like to see the attendance figures increase. Ninety-five percent is the goal. It’s at about 93.7 percent.

The district loses $60 a day per student when they are not in school.

Today the Al Tahoe site is used mostly by the Lake Tahoe Boys & Girls Club. Before it could be put back into service as an elementary school Tarwater said it needs a new boiler and flooring.

The state owes the district $1.4 million for improvements made to STMS. When the reimbursement comes the district could use it for Al Tahoe.

A state school bond is expected to be on the November 2016 ballot. That is where the state would get the money to pay back LTUSD.

Drones might be next search and rescue tool

By Paul Nelson, KTVN-TV

Many believe the sky is the limit for Unmanned Aerial Vehicle technology, including in Northern Nevada, where drones are being tested.

Warren Rapp is the Business Director of Nevada Advanced Autonomous Systems Innovative Center. He says using UAVs in search and rescue missions would be a huge step for law enforcement agencies.

“It’s a great way that you can, whatever weather condition, just about, take small-sized drones with thermal cameras or regular cameras and start searching for somebody almost immediately,” Rapp said.

Along with cameras, Rapp says drones can be equipped with radios or phones that can be dropped off to lost people, once they are found. That would help communication during the rescue operation, until help arrives. If someone is stranded in Lake Tahoe or Pyramid Lake, a UAV could even drop off a flotation device for that person.

Read the whole story

Congress scrutinizes bill outlawing online gaming in Nev.

By J.D. Morris, Las Vegas Sun

Congressional lawmakers took another intense look Wednesday at a controversial bill that would ban online gaming, including in Nevada and the other two states where it is already legal.

The bill was discussed in a House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform hearing that focused largely on the legal and law enforcement aspects of gambling on the Internet. Arguments from the ban’s proponents included that online gaming could not be confidently controlled and was too vulnerable to criminal activity, while ban opponents countered that legal online gambling websites are robustly regulated and actually steer Americans away from shady illegal sites.

The ban legislation, which has been introduced in both chambers of Congress, would roll back a 2011 Department of Justice opinion that paved the way for Nevada, New Jersey and Delaware to implement some form of legal online gaming.

Read the whole story

Tahoe's needy, other nonprofits (except Christmas Cheer) praise EDC Food Bank



Diane Rawski, from left, Carson Alexander and Jennifer Patterson help at the Dec. 2 El Dorado County Food Bank distribution. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

By Kathryn Reed

Carson Alexander had to choose between school and

volunteering. He chose volunteering.

The South Tahoe High School senior skipped class one day last week in order to help the El Dorado County Food Bank.

He assisted several of the nearly 80 people who showed up at the American Legion Hall parking lot in South Lake Tahoe to get frozen chicken and seafood, and pantry staples. Normally that number is closer to 200, but the truck came a week late because of the snow.

“Without this, I don’t know what I would be eating,” Steve, who was waiting in line, told *Lake Tahoe News*. He went from making $120,000 a year as a truck driver to existing on $900 a month.

He has a 17-year-old son who is an athlete who he is trying to keep fed. Steve said he has lost 40 pounds “because of starving.”

Renee is disabled, raising two kids on her own. Child support is limited.

“It’s a difficult position to be in to need help,” she said. But she is also thankful and grateful for those who make this allocation possible.

For Diane she is most thankful for the protein the Food Bank distributes, and the fact that the food is healthy.

They all praised the summer farmers’ market where the Food Bank brings fresh produce.



In 2015, El Dorado Food Bank has provided 176,071 pounds of food to people and nonprofits in South Lake Tahoe. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

The Dec. 2 truck was the last one for the year. The next one is not scheduled until late January. The truck comes once a month to hand out food to people who qualify based on their income. The truck also makes rounds to about a half dozen nonprofits to fill their pantries.

Diane Weidinger, who runs Bread & Broth, said her nonprofit depends on the Food Bank.

“If it wasn’t for the product we get from (them), we would have to buy everything. That would cost a lot of money,” Weidinger told *Lake Tahoe News*. “We receive all of our protein from the Food Bank.”

Bread & Broth makes a hot meal every Monday for about 100

people. The organization just started Bread & Broth 4 Kids, which provides food for youngsters and their families over the weekend. B&B also works with Lake Tahoe Presbyterian Church to provide soup to the needy every Friday through a program called Second Serving.

In South Lake Tahoe, the Family Resource Center, Kelly Ridge Senior Apartments, and Senior Plaza Apartments also receive goods from the Food Bank.

The Food Bank is a nonprofit based on the West Slope. It has nothing to do with county government.

But not every entity on the South Shore likes the Food Bank.

“I hate them,” Joann Shope with Christmas Cheer told *Lake Tahoe News*.

She and Mike Sproull, who runs the Food Bank, don’t have nice things to say about each other’s organization.



Protein and fresh produce are welcome deliveries from the El Dorado County Food Bank truck. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

There was a time when the Food Bank supplied Christmas Cheer. Shope contends they were given things people wouldn’t eat, like kale. Sproull said some of what he gets is from the U.S.

Department of Food and Agriculture. He doesn't have total control over what his warehouse is filled with.

Shope believes the two organizations are similar. The reality is her group is only helping their clients, which she claims is 1,000 a month, and the Food Bank is helping people directly as well as other nonprofits.

Christmas Cheer is always claiming to be out of cash, with bare shelves.

"We need turkeys badly or hams or anything; food or cash," Shope said last week. This is for the annual distribution of a Christmas dinner that takes place Dec. 21-22 at South Tahoe Middle School.

Shope pays thousands of dollars a year to get food from the Nevada Food Bank.

Most of the nonprofits using the El Dorado County Food Bank pay $25 a month. Bread & Broth upped its payment to $100/month last year.

"We feel because of our Adopt a Day program and how successful it is we want to support (the Food Bank). It is important to nonprofits that the truck comes up once a month with product. We all depend on it," Weidinger said.

The Food Bank got the attention of the folks who distribute funds from the American Century Championship golf tournament, receiving a check for $7,500 this fall. Christmas Cheer got nothing. The Food Bank must spend all of that money on the South Shore.

Shope and Christmas Cheer board member Tom Davis have criticized that decision.

"We are sophisticated. We know how to raise money," Sproull said. In the South Lake Tahoe community alone the Food Bank supplies more than $300,000 worth of food a year.

His goal is to have a warehouse on the South Shore. While Sproull has talked to folks here about doing so, it has not come to fruition. There is only so much land available for such an enterprise, and so many volunteers who could make it work.

Sproull envisions is it would be open four to five days a week for people to get food. That is what Christmas Cheer is afraid of because then it might not be relevant.

The warehouse would also then be a site where nonprofits could come get food. What the nonprofits would likely have to give up is some control and the direct access to donors like grocery stores.

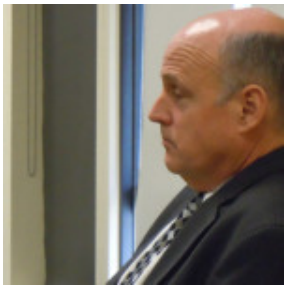
EDC supervisors intend to sue auditor-controller

Updated: ***On Dec. 10 at 3:10pm with county counsel comments.***

By Kathryn Reed

El Dorado County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously this week to sue a fellow elected official, Auditor-Controller Joe Harn.

At issue is payment of $169,859 in developer mitigation fees to Diamond Springs-El Dorado Fire District. This is **not a new issue**, but is actually several years old.



Joe Harn

Harn believes it would be illegal for him to release the funds based on the county not performing its nexus studies in a timely manner and an appellate court decision that came out this fall. If Harn is correct, anyone who paid the fee could personally sue him as well as the county if he were to pay the money.

The county believes the court decision is not a factor and that the check should be written, and has told Harn to do so. Harn continually refuses to. That is why the board took the action on Dec. 8.

Before Tuesday's vote Harn had already retained a private attorney. Neither Harn nor his attorney was at the meeting, which was in Somerset instead of Placerville.

Harn on Nov. 15 asked in writing for a deputy county counsel to be assigned to assist with the matter in order to get it resolved. That has never happened.

"They ordered me to transfer some money. I said I need a more robust legal opinion before I transfer the money. I haven't gotten one yet," Harn told *Lake Tahoe News* on Dec. 9. "In order to sue me they need to establish written legal arguments as to specifically why I need to do this. That is what I have been asking Robyn Drivon for for a long time."

Drivon told *Lake Tahoe News*, "How many written legal opinions does he need? It has been asked and it has been answered. This is an issue driven by facts. He has been provided all the facts."

Neither Brian Veerkamp, chair of the Board of Supervisors, nor Sue Novasel, who represents Lake Tahoe on the board, returned a phone call.

Drivon said she hopes conversations between her office and Harn's continue so litigation can be avoided. She doesn't have a hard date as to when she will call off talks, but said she is hoping for resolution in the next few weeks.

SLT's censure of Conner challenged in court

By Kathryn Reed

JoAnn Conner is seeking legal action to have the censure imposed by her City Council colleagues be overturned. She is also asking to have a court rule that the ban on her speaking to city staff is illegal.

Her attorney, Jacqueline Mittelstadt, on Dec. 9 filed the paperwork in El Dorado County Superior Court in South Lake Tahoe. An administrative writ and complaint for declaratory release were filed, with the city expected to receive the paperwork on Friday.

The City Council, anticipating the filing, has called for an emergency closed session meeting for Dec. 11 at 2pm to discuss the matter. The council will likely have to hire outside legal counsel because City Attorney Tom Watson would be a witness in the case. This may mean altering the budget to contend with the unexpected litigation.



JoAnn Conner

Watson did not return a phone call.

Mayor Wendy David said she had not seen the court filing and therefore could not comment.

Mittelstadt, who at one time was the city attorney for South Lake Tahoe, said the main issues at stake involve censure, Conner's ban from talking to city staff, and the right to public records.

Her first allegation is that the **censure imposed Oct. 19** is unconstitutional and that it violated city protocols.

"No. 1 they need to follow the law. If nobody does, there is no accountability. There needs to be accountability," Mittelstadt told *Lake Tahoe News*. "If we don't do this, they will never change their behavior."

She believes how the city went about imposing the censure is not legal.

In September City Manager Nancy Kerry put out the mandate that Conner not be allowed to talk to staff because she was allegedly creating a hostile work environment and that some employees had filed grievances against the councilwoman.

Mittelstadt said no proof of these grievances has ever been shown to Conner. She cited cases where all of this information would not be protected under the personnel umbrella, as the city contends it is, and that some emails should be public record and that other personal information could be redacted.

Plenty of examples can be found as to when Conner acted unprofessionally – with the Dec. 7 City Council meeting an example. The way she interacts with people and then expects her business to be treated differently than others was on full display Monday. But none of this is illegal.

Members of boards she has been on and others she has worked with as a council member have cited publicly their inability to work with her. While her behavior may be offensive, it has not been proved to be illegal.

According to Mittelstadt, the city hasn't even proved Conner's behavior is hostile as defined by law.

The city claims Conner has left a paper trail of her abusive nature. *Lake Tahoe News* through the Public Records Act obtained emails between Conner and Kerry. There is nothing provided in those emails that points to Conner being particularly difficult nor were they offensive.

While the city in the past has claimed Conner was creating a hostile work environment, Mittelstadt says that is not the case.

"They are willy-nilly preventing a public official form engaging in free speech," Mittelstadt said.

S. Lake Tahoe not playing around with recreation

By Susan Wood

Let's be honest. You'd have to be living under a rock to not know what's important to South Lake Tahoe residents and

tourists.

Recreation. Recreation. Recreation.

So, the city – which is now all over recreation – is hoping you won't be living under a rock as it launches a series of four input-gathering meetings to talk about what to do with the South Lake Tahoe Recreation Complex. The site features a main building that by most standards is as old as dirt at four decades.

In a town that worships ways to play and get the blood pumping, the state the structure is in is unacceptable. It's cold, dingy and energy inefficient – costing the city more than $170,000 a year just to heat and light it. And it leaks. Lauren Thomaselli, who runs the site, had to place trash cans in the gym to catch water dripping from the roof.



The men's bathroom reflects the age of the facility. Photo/LTN file

"This building has outlived its use," city Parks and

Recreation Commissioner Pete Fink told *Lake Tahoe News* after this week's first meeting that brought out about 40 people to share their diverse ideas. The next gathering facilitated by planning consultant Greg Tonello is scheduled for February. Tonello plans to feature sketches of predominant themes.

Fink seemed as pleasantly surprised by the turnout as the prospect of wild-eyed ideas for the recreation-oriented site.

"We could have a SnowGlobe inside," he said referencing the three-day outdoor music festival.

Earlier, Fink had mentioned to the group the idea of perhaps treating a new building on the site as a focal point in town for routine gathering places and for events.

"The one thing we're lacking in our town is a hub," he said Dec. 8. "We might want to take this opportunity and make it our town center."

Fink admitted that now's the time for those who are passionate about recreation to dream big with a "pie in the sky" attitude and through time what's been deemed for years in government circles as "the scoping process" will weed out what's secondary and elevate what's primary.

Ideas abound in respect to what to build and what to consider when the infrastructure goes into place.

They include: a multi-sport complex, indoor soccer facility, bouldering wall, zero-energy pool, therapy tub, spa, arts gallery, kitchen, café, gymnastic center, racquetball and badminton courts as well as a place for the U.S. Ski Team and promising Olympians to train.

The mood of those who showed up resembled kids at Christmas.



Retaining a swimming pool is a priority with many people. Photo/LTN file

City Assistant Public Works Director Jim Marino and councilmembers Wendy David and Austin Sass listened in as the attendees spanning three generations from a junior in high school to seniors seeking a hang out in their autumn years shared their goals.

Teenager Jordan Deas, who sat in the front row, urged the city to make a place for youth.

“Kids are looking for activities,” he said.

Local arts guru Robert Schimmel suggested the theme expand into the arts as a “connected component” and use display areas to promote local artists.

“I don’t know if we want a facility to be all things to all people, but the arts can be a real add-on as practically everything can be done with an eye to art,” he said.

“We need this facility so bad for so many reasons,” South Lake Tahoe Ice Arena operator Van Olson said.

Olson added he’s enjoyed success at the rink since he’s had “to run it as a business.” He advised the city to do all it can to woo the locals who volunteer and make up team sports.

Marino also reminded the group of locals to keep in mind what keeps the city’s facilities going.

“As much as we want a facility for us, we want to build a facility to drive tourism,” he said.

The thought shared by Fink: “If it’s a great place to live, it’s a great place to visit.”

Think sales tax and transient occupancy tax dollars.

A few ideas ranging from grants and taxes to a rich donor and a public-private partnership floated around informally about how to pay for such a venture, but nothing concrete. The council has had no formal discussions about the matter. The new South Tahoe Middle School track was built under a nonprofit financial structure.

Marino cautioned that while dreaming big is a noble goal, the reality is the group of ambitious endorphin seekers may have just spent $25 million with shared ideas in one meeting alone.

“If we make it so big, we’ll never build it. We might have to temper it,” he said.

The city staffer reiterated what he heard that a “pool component is huge” from many who came out to share their thoughts.

Marino was deadpan serious when he talked about how motivated he and his fellow public works staffers are to making things happen because the city’s recreation “train is rolling right now.” He explained that after years of working on storm drains they’re ready to dive into something above ground and prominent that the citizenry is likely to support.

“If we want to see a new recreation center on this site, we need to show up at meetings,” he said, as if speaking to those who weren’t there. “We’re tired of working long and hard on projects that get shelved.”

And don’t forget maintenance. For example, the city buys about 13,000 rolls of toilet paper just for Lakeview Commons.

Nevada strives to increase ag footprint

By Megan Messerly, Las Vegas Sun

Food grows in unlikely places — sometimes in the middle of a desert.

Nevada had 4,137 farms and ranches in 2012, 1,000 more than in 2007. In 2014, the U.S. Department of Agriculture counted 4,200. Most are in the north, but 792 were in Southern Nevada.

State officials, chefs and many residents would like to see those numbers increase.

“When you look at food security, if the borders were sealed off for some reason, we have 2 percent food security,” Nevada Department of Agriculture Director Jim Barbee said, meaning that Nevada grows only 2 percent of the food needed to feed residents. The rest is trucked in from California and elsewhere.

Read the whole story

Nev. gaming wants to influence presidential candidates

By J.D. Morris, Las Vegas Sun

Which presidential candidates would be willing to meet with casino employees? Which would take a stand against illegal gambling? And what would their approach be to the daily fantasy sports industry?

The American Gaming Association is trying to find answers to these and other inquiries by getting presidential candidates to fill out a questionnaire. The Washington, D.C.-based casino industry trade group said today that responses to the questionnaire will influence a voter guide it plans to distribute to some 1 million casino employees in 40 states.

As part of the association’s Gaming Votes initiative, the questionnaire marks another attempt to ensure casino-related issues are accounted for during the 2016 campaign.

Read the whole story