SLT crews set to build bike park for summer use

By Kathryn Reed

By August cyclists may be cruising around Bijou Bike Park.

Bids are out for a professional park designer to be hired. The South Lake Tahoe City Council will likely award the contract in May to the person who will essentially be the construction manager.

It will be city crews doing most of the heavy lifting, with assistance from Bijou Bike Park Association volunteers and local contractors chipping in. It will take the better part of July to complete the park.

This is a change for the city. For the last 10 years most projects have been contracted out. Assistant Public Works Director Jim Marino is helping implement a new philosophy.

"We are trying to phase the street crews into doing more projects," Marino told *Lake Tahoe News*. "There are talented operators with unique skills."

Doing projects in house also saves money. The park, with two pump tracks and a BMX track in the center, will cost a little more than a half million dollars. The money is a mix of funds collected from the nonprofit cycling group, the city and in-kind work.

It will be built near the play area, down from the skate park and bordering the meadow. The future Greenway Bike Path will provide easy access to the park.

It will not impact the disc golf course. However, the par course will be eliminated at least temporarily. In future years the city is looking at replacing it with better, newer equipment around the perimeter of the bike park.

Because the city has access to dirt this has helped keep costs down. Marino said if soil had to be purchased, it would have made the bike park cost prohibitive.

About 800-cubic-yards are sitting at the park ready to be used as the base layer. This came from the Harrison Avenue project. El Dorado County will be able to supply about another 800-cubic-yards from a project it is doing this season. And the city will have access to dirt from this summer's Sierra Tract work.

Tahoe Regional Planning Agency requires a permit to move dirt, though there are fewer hurdles when it is moved within the basin.

Bike parks are a growing attraction throughout the United States.

"It's the perfect avenue to teach kids how to mountain bike," Marino said.

Youngsters – and others – usually don't like pedaling uphill. That leaves driving or taking a lift as the other options to get to the top in order to ride down. Bike parks eliminate the need to pedal uphill, but still provide the mountain bike experience.

All that dirt is needed to create the paths that have features on which to learn so riders can take those skills onto trails.

It's not just newbies who use these parks. Parks like this are a way to practice, unwind and for friends to gather. So many mountain biking destinations – which Lake Tahoe is trying to become – have these parks.

Study: High altitude living-depression linked

By Kristen Moulton, Salt Lake Tribune

The loss of oxygen from living at high altitudes or with chronic health issues can lead to depression.

A study from the University of Utah found that female rats living for a week at simulated high altitudes of 10,000 feet, 20,000 feet and 4,500 feet showed signs of depression. Lake Tahoe is at 6,250 feet. Male rats showed no ill effects.

“The significance of this animal study is that it can isolate hypoxia as a distinct risk factor for depression in those living at altitude (hypobaric hypoxia) or with other chronic hypoxic conditions such as COPD, asthma or smoking, independent of other risk factors,” said Shami Kanekar, a research assistant professor of psychiatry at the university and lead author of the report.

In the study published last month in High Altitude Medicine and Biology online, researchers gauged the animals’ depression based on their persistence during a swim test.

Because rats do not respond to the same psychological and societal pressures as people, the research strengthens the argument that physiological changes from low oxygen can contribute to depression.

Read the whole story

International tourist arrivals rapidly increasing

By Dan Peltier, Skift

The World Travel & Tourism Council projects the world will welcome nearly 1.8 billion international visitor arrivals per year by 2025, a 58 percent increase from the 1.1 billion international arrivals who crossed borders in 2014.

These international tourists will certainly contribute to a travel industry experiencing faster growth than the wider global economy but the money tourists spend in their own countries continues dwarfing that of international tourists traveling abroad. This reality has long defined visitor spending in destinations and the status quo won't see significant changes in the near future, the World Travel & Tourism Council projects.

Considering global domestic travel spending made up 72 percent of travel and tourism's contribution to global GDP last year, the organization released forecasts this week which point to domestic travel spending growing slightly faster than foreign visitor spending in 2015, 3.7 percent vs. 2.8 percent and accounting for $3.7 trillion and $1.4 trillion, respectively, of the world's total GDP.

Read the whole story

Nevada entertainment tax could soon expand

By Sean Whaley, Las Vegas Review-Journal

CARSON CITY – Fans of NASCAR, the Electric Daisy Carnival or the Burning Man countercultural event held every year in the Black Rock Desert in far Northern Nevada could soon have to pay a bit more to get their groove on.

Casino nightclubs, performances by disc jockeys and events staged around a hotel pool would also be taxed under the long-awaited measures from Assembly Minority Leader Marilyn Kirkpatrick to simplify and expand the live entertainment tax.

If Assembly Bills 392 and 393 win approval and take effect July 1, many events that have been exempted from the levy will soon be included under her proposed Luxury Discretionary Spending Tax. The tax rate would be 8 percent, or about $60 for a $700 VIP Tier 1 ticket to the 2015 Electric Daisy Carnival or $31 for a $390 ticket to Burning Man.

Many events already impose the tax. The levy brings in about $140 million a year, most from the gaming side from the major entertainment venues.

But Kirkpatrick has been working for years to close off loopholes in the tax, including outdoor concerts. She also wants to simplify the tax. There are now two different tax rates of 5 percent or 10 percent based on the size of the venue.

Read the whole story

CVS wants to become people’s doctor’s office

By Eliza Gray, Time

In the fifth season of “Curb your Enthusiasm”, Larry David visits a pharmacist to fill his father’s blood-thinner prescription. “You know, there’s another drug on the market that I personally like a lot better,” the pharmacist tells Larry. “But the doctor prefers this one?” Larry says. He holds up his hands like a scale and weighs his options. “Doctor,” he says, holding up one hand, then “pharmacist,” holding up the other. He decides: “I’ll go with the pharmacist.”

You may too if Larry Merlo has his way. Merlo, 59, is the CEO of drugstore giant CVS Health. Trained as a pharmacist himself, Merlo has ambitions to play a much bigger role in your health care. He’s already pretty involved. Last year at 7,800 stores, CVS, the second largest drugstore chain in the U.S., filled more than 700 million prescriptions and administered 5 million flu shots – all while selling customers everything from groceries to gift wrap.

Now Merlo says the drugstore can do more. In his vision, CVS will leverage its sizable MinuteClinic business – which already has 970 locations – to diagnose patients, decide on treatments and then sell them the pills they need to get well. In its role as the pharmacy-benefits manager for some 65 million people, CVS also negotiates the price of those pills and helps decide which ones get reimbursed under various insurance plans. Merlo would also like America to stop smoking: he roiled the tobacco industry last year by dropping the sale of cigarettes in CVS stores. And if that causes some customers to have withdrawal pains, the CVS pharmacy can fill a prescription for a drug that helps them quit.

By taking on more of the role of your doctor as well as that of your druggist, CVS looks to grow beyond its already considerable size ($4.6 billion in earnings for 2014). But Merlo argues that the stakes are far higher. He thinks CVS can save lives—and hundreds of billions of dollars in unnecessary health care costs annually—by efficiently treating Americans' routine sniffles and aches, nudging them to take better care of themselves and making sure they take their medications when they're supposed to.

Read the whole story

No denying drought — barren ground at 7,000 feet

By Susan Wood

PHILLIPS STATION —The state isn't fooling around anymore.

In an apparent precursor to Mark Twain's theory, Gov. Jerry Brown issued a mandate April 1 for South Lake Tahoe residents along with the 38 million other Californians to reduce water use by 25 percent. He did so while attending the water year's last and only recorded bare snow survey. There was nothing to register at the foot of Sierra-at-Tahoe ski resort. This has never happened before at this time of year.

If people don't comply with the state Department of Water Resources' order, it could ultimately lead to fines. The executive order will be monitored closely through metering by water districts.

Beyond incentives and other restrictions, this means significant cuts to large users such as golf courses, campuses and the mass collective of state residents – signaling "a new era" commanding shared responsibility, Brown indicated.

When asked by *Lake Tahoe News* how Tahoe residents should handle the dilemma of watering their yards versus choosing responsible water conservation in what may turn out to be a historic fire season, Brown was sympathetic. He was standing less than 10 miles from the hallowed ground of this region's worst wildland fire – Angora 2007. Many wildland fires start close to concentrated residential areas. Flames can ignite from hot power tools left in brittle brush or from a vehicle or careless smokers tossing a cigarette onto dry terrain.

"What I would tell the residents is now we are embarking on an experiment no one has tried. This will require adjustment. It will require learning. But this is our new normal. It will take heart. It will take instruction. We have the technology. All we need is the political will. It's somewhat of a burden. And agriculture is already undergoing major cutbacks. But we can do a lot better," Brown told *Lake Tahoe News*, while joined by the state's Water Resources chief Mark Cowin, snow survey monitor Frank Gehrke and a flood of media.

Frank Gehrke with the state Department of Water Resources, left, tells Gov. Jerry Brown, on April 1 how his measuring tool would be used in a normal snow year. Photo/Susan Wood

Is it time for cisterns to be installed in yards? — *Lake Tahoe News* asked Cowin.

Cowin replied there's financial assistance and incentives for programs that encourage more stormwater management and those that replace grass lawns with more natural habitat. The state also suggested funding of rebates for low water-use appliances.

Water districts' role in monitoring resident and commercial water use is critical.

"If they don't perform, there will be repercussions — maybe fines," Cowin pointed out. "It's as bad as it's ever been."

To South Lake Tahoe Public Utility District General Manager Richard Solbrig, a head start was definitely in order. Since

2007, the district has implemented odd-even restrictions on when residents can water, he reminded *Lake Tahoe News* on a phone call. The turf buy-back program has much demand. And the district stands at about halfway complete on installing its water meters for 14,000 customers. At least 2,000 more are scheduled to go in this summer.

If the state wants to truly do some good – more money for the incentives already put into place would represent a welcome mat to Solbrig.

"(The state executive order) really came with no surprises. If the state wants to make a real dent, they'll put a few more thousand dollars into our turf buyback program," he said. There's a waiting list to get on it because the demand is so high.

And agencies such as STPUD, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and the city of South Lake Tahoe have hired a Sacramento lobbyist to closely monitor the situation to maximize the benefit for our region.

The one additional requirement Solbrig noticed is the restriction on watering during a rainfall event and within 48 hours afterward.

"That could be a challenge to enforce, obviously," he said.

The specifics will be discussed at the district's board meeting on May 7.

Restaurants will also be asked to only deliver water to tables when requested. Hotels will need to implement new laundry frequency programs to guests.

Change. Change. Change. Indeed, the state is entering year four of the drought.

Gehrke illustrated the seriousness of the lack of snowfall by showing the marks on the survey measuring stick that records the water content of the Sierra snowpack. The maximum measurement recorded in 1983 – an El Nino year – sat at the top of the pole with 150 inches. The average is 63 inches. The lowest recorded before this year was 27 inches set in 1977. Last year’s measured 33 inches at the meadow located where Highway 50 and Sierra-at-Tahoe Road meet.

The ski resort up the hill closed March 17; its second earliest shutdown. Resort general manager, John Rice, stood in attendance in tennis shoes – not normal attire for the ski season.

Gehrke characterized the latest condition of the drought as “distressing” – especially since in all his years of measuring the state snowpack’s water content, Wednesday went down as a first to have bare ground on April 1. At least 5 feet of snow should be covering the ground.

“I think the governor here expresses the seriousness of it,” he said.

Are the state’s residents in denial? Have we done enough?

The impression from California’s leaders is yes and no.

“We’re always in denial. But we want to think about the good, and that’s good. But we’re making the climate worse at a rapid pace. Steps take more steps,” the governor added.

In other words, there’s “rationing” now through the various water districts. And now there’s a definitive strategy across a vast state. Brown outlined this order as a proposal in the overall strategy the state has to combat climate change symptoms facilitated by “billions of tons of chemicals released into the atmosphere” where greenhouse gases are trapped.

“That’s why we have cap and trade and electric cars. This is all not easy,” Brown said. And perhaps not smooth-sailing in the words of Tahoe’s most famous writer Twain: “Whiskey’s for drinking, water’s for fightin’ over.”

Nev. water officials stress conservation

By Anne Knowles

RENO — The fourth consecutive year of drought in and around Lake Tahoe is shaping up to be the worst by far.

Snowpack in the Lake Tahoe Basin is down to 3 percent of normal, said Nevada State Climatologist Doug Boyle, during a presentation on the drought at the UNR on Tuesday.

Nearby basins are faring little better. The Truckee River Basin stands at 14 percent, while the Carson River Basin is at 5 percent and the Walker River Basin, south of Lake Tahoe, is at 21 percent.

Boyle said Nevada has so far received less than 3 inches of precipitation, about 60 percent of normal and a three-year trend.

Idle snowplows is becoming

the norm as the drought persists. Photo/LTN file

"If you include the year before that, over an entire year of precipitation is missing in many parts of the state," he said.

Boyle said the forecast through June shows no relief, with higher than average temperatures and, at best, normal precipitation expected.

Separately, Truckee Meadows Water Authority announced it was asking customers to voluntarily cut back water consumption by 10 percent in order for the water purveyor to save and store up to 5,000 acre-feet, or 1.6 billion gallons, of water for next year.

TMWA outlined guidelines for watering lawns, including watering 4-6 minutes three times on assigned watering days.

John Cobourn, water resource specialist with UNR Cooperative Extension, who was part of the drought presentation at UNR, told Lake Tahoe News homeowners should test sprinkler systems for efficiency.

"It's not uncommon for lawns to get five times the amount of water they need," said Cobourn.

He said a simple test is to place empty soup cans, about 20 per 1,000 square-foot lawn, and run the sprinkler system to check for volume and consistency.

If the cans capture varying amounts of water, the sprinklers need to be fixed to ensure even application rather than increasing the water overall.

He said to also check the cans for volume. Lawns should be watered three times a week and the total should not exceed 1.5 inches in the summer.

Boyle and Cobourn were joined by about a dozen other water experts from UNR and the Desert Research Institute discussing various programs and efforts to monitor and forecast the ongoing drought and to find better, more efficient ways to use water.

Water for the Seasons, for example, is a four-year program started about six months ago and staffed by UNR, Cooperative Extension and DRI. Funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Science Foundation, the program is taking a more holistic approach to water usage.

“How do you integrate data with very specific human behaviors? How do you enhance resiliency?” asked Maureen McCarthy, interim director of Academy for the Environment at UNR.

The program focuses on the Truckee Carson river system, but McCarthy said solutions could be applied to any snowpack-based water system. The program’s staff of 10 is talking to water managers including TMWA, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, Carson Water Subconservancy District and the Truckee Carson Irrigation District.

Next, the group will work with water rights holders such as the Fallon and Fernley farmers served by TCID.

Eventually, a Stakeholder Advisory Group consisting of managers and rights holders will be formed to come up with ideas to more flexibly use water, such as creating consortiums of water users who share rights.

McCarthy is also executive director of the Tahoe Science Consortium, which is finishing up eight years of research funded by the Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act. That research includes lake clarity, fuels management, air quality, aquatic invasive species and snowpack and snow dynamics. The research is, in part, attempting to address the question on many peoples’ minds.

“What do we do in the basin if this is the new normal?” said

McCarthy.

Ordinance would redefine lodging in SLT

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe has an overabundance of lodging units. With 26 percent of the more than 5,000 rooms within the 120 hotels-motels being used for long-term rentals, the city is on a quest to change the rental market landscape.

In doing so, it could help the hotel market so the less desirable rooms are off the market and are not dragging down the average daily rate.

Average daily rate for South Lake Tahoe hotels in fiscal year 2013-14 was $127.65, according to the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority. Those are the most current statistics. That number has been rising since 2009-10, but is still off the peak of $137.11 in 2008-09.

Occupancy in 2013-14 was at 25 percent. Since 2003-04, occupancy has ranged from 20 to 28 percent. Hotel occupancy in a tourist destination should be double those numbers, according to officials. City officials would like an occupancy rate of 60 to 70 percent.

“As far as single occupancy motels, I think any destination is served well with a mix of property types, but we just have more than we need from a demand perspective. And from a visitor perspective, we think he/she is looking for more amenities than that typical property would be able to provide," Carol Chaplin, LTVA executive director, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The single room occupancy ordinance will essentially legalize long-term rentals, even though city officials say that is not the case.

"We are working with TRPA because these are still in essence short-term housing. They are not intended for long term," City Manager Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*. "They are transient occupancy."

The city is calling this change a hybrid model.

Property owners will still get to keep their transient occupancy units, which in the Lake Tahoe Basin are a commodity. The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency decades ago created them as a way to control growth. Mission accomplished. However, the unintended consequence is that these properties have a higher value than they would if left to the free market.

What the ordinance is intended to do is address the quality of life for people in these units. Many people are cooking in them, stressing electrical systems that were not designed for this use, and they don't have laundry facilities.

Rent at some of these places is $900 a month. People are in them because they can't save enough for first, last month's rent and a deposit.

Val McClay, 17, lived in the Elizabeth Lodge with her dad and younger brother when they first arrived to town last year. The room had a mini refrigerator and microwave. It was small, pretty clean and didn't have laundry.

"The best thing about it was it was a place to live. The worst were the neighbors and the people there were not good. They were loud and disruptive," McClay told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Current code does not allow inspections of hotels. The proposed ordinance would allow inspections similar to what is done with multi-family residential housing.

One of the problems is the city doesn't have many places for short- or long-term rentals. That is how the hotels got into the business of providing residential housing instead of tourist accommodations.

"I think the city is creating an opportunity for people such as myself to provide better quality moderate income housing," Dave Kurtzman, who owns 20 units that would be affected by the ordinance, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "I am not sure how I will go about doing it. It will depend on what the regulations are."

His goal, as well as the city's, is for tenants to have better accommodations.

It will be up to the property owners if they act more like a traditional motel, where paying transient occupancy tax is required, or if they comply with the ordinance to essentially act as a long-term rental.

Kerry hopes the changes will attract capital investors to the area; as well as better align the supply-demand of tourists-hotels and residents-living quarters.

"Government can create policy to help incentivize change. The ordinance is intended to do that," Kerry said.

Neither Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce's board nor its Government Affairs Committee hacw taken an official position on this topic.

"There are numerous perspectives in addition to intended and unintended consequences to be discussed and addressed during the process," B Gorman, CEO of the chamber, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "There are questions that need to be answered related to the impacts on lodging such as the direct impact these properties have or could have on lodging rates and property values. There are additional community and societal concerns related to the aesthetic impact these properties currently have on the community versus the potential improvements as well as crime, health and safety issues."

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Notes:

• Single room occupancy ordinance workshop on April 22 at 5pm at South Lake Tahoe Senior Center, 3050 Lake Tahoe Blvd.

• The ordinance should be voted on this spring by the City Council.

• Property owners would have one year from July to become compliant.

Little oversight with El Dorado County contracts

By Kathryn Reed

El Dorado County does not require a no compete clause for most employees. This proved to be a profitable turn of events for Alliant Insurance Services and York Risk Services.

When Kim Kerr started with El Dorado County as assistant county administrative officer on June 30, 2011, the contract with Alliant was for $375,000.

In November 2012, Kerr became the county's contract administer. This meant she was in control of the Alliant contract. The compensation was increased to $470,000.

In January 2014, the compensation was increased to $510,000. By the time Kerr left in December the compensation was increased to $610,000.

Kerr now works for Alliant.

"The prior Board of Supervisors had a bad weakness of not doing background checks on high level managers that they hired. It appears that Alliant Insurance Services has the same serious weakness," Joe Harn, county auditor-controller, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

For fiscal year ending June 30, 2014, the state controller's office in its field review report of the county's cost allocation plan found that employees were overbilled by more than $5.2 million for the health benefit plan.

Kerr was responsible for managing this program.

"A refund must be processed and refund given to all funds or departments, employees and retirees that contributed to the excess in the Health Benefit Program," the state report says.

That refund has further contributed to the county's fiscal woes.

The county in November 2011, under Kerr's watch, signed a two-year contract with York for $21,750 per month. In November 2013, the county signed a three-year contract with York for a slightly higher rate. It increases every month.

On June 30, 2012, Kerr hired Sherri Adams. The two knew each other from working on California State Association Counties Excess Insurance Authority committees.

Adams left El Dorado County on Oct. 24, 2014. Her last title was principal risk management analyst, making $40.73/hour at step three. She now works for York.

Parents risk retirement to subsidize kids

By Carol Hymowitz, BloombergBusiness

Cathy Egan has been supporting herself since she was 18, when she worked as a waitress in Minneapolis. Her 23-year-old son lives at home and relies on his single mother for transportation, food, and other expenses. Egan, now 50, only began putting money aside for retirement five years ago, after she started working as a licensed practical nurse for the Veterans Health Administration — her first job with benefits.

Although she also has a son in high school, the single mother can't bring herself to cut off her eldest, who earns $8.50 an hour plus tips delivering takeout orders part time for a restaurant in St. Paul. "Right now, I'm still the supporter," she says.

Baby boomers are putting their retirements at risk by spending too much on their adult children. With real wages stagnant and unemployment among those age 16 to 24 running above 12 percent, large numbers of households continue to dole out cash to children no longer in school, covering rent, cell phones, cars, and vacations.

A July 2014 survey by American Consumer Credit Counseling, a Boston nonprofit, found that a higher proportion of U.S. households (1 in 3) provide financial assistance to adult children than support for elderly parents (1 in 5).

Read the whole story