

Neighbors not happy with Placer wineries

By Richard Chang, Sacramento Bee

Placer County officials are looking to clamp down on its burgeoning wine industry following complaints by residents over noise and traffic.

In the last decade, several wineries have opened, with vintners spending millions of dollars on tasting rooms that have become regional attractions. But the newfound popularity and growth has come at the expense of neighbors, who often put up with rowdy parties, loud wedding music and large tour buses.

The Placer County Planning Commission is considering limits on any for-profit event with more than 20 people, wine tastings exempted. The restriction would allow wineries to have only six such events per year.

Winery owners are pushing the county to move in the opposite direction, noting that private events – weddings, fundraisers, parties, dinners – are essential to their bottom line. The wine industry brings tourism and tax dollars to the county, the owners argue.

[Read the whole story](#)

SnowGlobe still in search of

permanent location

By Kathryn Reed

Where will the stages for SnowGlobe 2015 be located?

That is a question many people would like answered.

Promoter Chad Donnelly has a three-year contract with South Lake Tahoe to bring the three-day music festival to the city. While this is the fourth year for SnowGlobe, it is the first year of the latest contract.

A big condition of the contract is that the ball fields adjacent to Lake Tahoe Community College can only be used in subsequent years if it's deemed the artificial turf can sustain such activity. That answer won't be known until the spring.



SnowGlobe is returning to the ball fields next to Lake Tahoe Community College Dec 29-31. Photo/LTN file

"Last year the team thought the field could only take one more year. And because the college is using it for soccer, it is getting used for that as well," City Manager Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The city and college own the field. However, when it was built

with what was Measure R money, the taxpayers agreed to the measure with the belief it was a community ball field.

Now the college is adding to the wear and tear by having resurrected the men and women's soccer programs. A question is whether LTCC should be contributing to the maintenance costs of the field. Plus, there is money in the just approved Measure F that deals with fields.

"When it comes to the field where SnowGlobe is happening, the city is in the driver's seat, as the community field is under the control of the city, not LTCC. We just have first right to scheduling for our programs," Kindred Murillo, LTCC president, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

If the field were replaced during the life of the SnowGlobe contract, a new venue automatically has to be found. When the field is replaced, funds will come from what is now Measure R.

"We really need an event location in town," Kerry said. "And with Hard Rock coming on line, we'd really like to keep it on the South Shore. We will explore any option if we can't have it on the field. To lose it to another location would be disappointing for economic reasons as well as we have it running smoothly."

Donnelly would also like to keep it within the city limits – especially since that is whom he has the contract with. He said it is premature to be discussing the possibility of moving the festival across the state line.

"In a perfect world I don't necessarily know that it is the best fit (at LTCC). I love the location and our partners there and there are things that make it very special, but there are a few different places that could potentially add to the experience," Donnelly told *Lake Tahoe News*.

He would not reveal what other locations he might prefer.

One thing that needs to be taken into consideration is the festival keeps growing. In the first year about 9,000 people attended each night. This year Donnelly is predicting close to 15,000 per night.

Donnelly said the growth is a “testament that people like the city of South Lake Tahoe, the festival, and the opportunity to ski and snowboard.”

Discussions about changing locations will take place between Donnelly and the city when he is here later this month for SnowGlobe. Also on the table is the possibility of bringing a summer festival, with a different music genre, to town.

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Notes:

- SnowGlobe is Dec. 29 from 3-11pm, Dec. 30 2:30-11pm, and Dec. 31 2:30pm-Jan. 1 at 1:30am.
- The city's hot line is already up and running – 530.542.6001.
- There will be fireworks all three nights.
- Tickets are still available.

Feds forecast wet conditions for next 3 months

By Paul Rogers, San Jose Mercury News

There is a 75 percent probability of average or above-average precipitation between January and the end of March for

California, according to a new report by federal scientists – the first time in five years such a wet outlook has been predicted in the state during the first three months of a year.

“This is good news,” said Steve Baxter, a seasonal forecaster with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which issued the report on Thursday predicting that the harsh reality of California’s historic drought may finally be giving way to wetter days ahead.

“There are not indications of a monster wet season,” he said. “It’s unlikely that the drought will be broken this year, but it’s likely that it will be improved.”

Pacific Ocean temperatures, which are warmer than normal, along with satellite imagery and computer models, are showing a greater likelihood of low-pressure systems, which can draw storms to California, Baxter said. There still is also a 65 percent chance of mild El Niño conditions developing this winter, which could further increase chances.

Meanwhile, reservoirs continued to slowly rise across Northern California after three weeks of drenching rains. And another report out Thursday also offered an additional glimmer of hope. The U.S. Drought Monitor, a weekly map issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other agencies, showed that 32 percent of California is in “exceptional drought,” notably down from 55 percent last week, due to the recent rains.

Read the whole story

Douglas County water rate drama heating up



Douglas County commissioners on Dec. 18 discuss water issues. Photo/LTN

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Mark Twain was on to something when he said, “Whiskey is for drinking, water is for fighting over.”

And when it comes to Douglas County, the fighting has been going on for years.

“I’m sure that I speak not only for myself when I say that if we are expected to pay for the most expensive little water system on the lake, then we expect something in return. We want to have a say in how our money is spent,” Jim Wire told the county commissioners at the Dec. 18 meeting. “What we expect is more accountability and more control. I propose that you establish a water advisory board with more power.”

Ratepayers are furious about having to continually pay exorbitant prices for water, not get adequate service and being left with an uneasy feeling about where all of their money has gone. The county has been operating the water systems for 25 years, but takes no responsibility for why things are the way they are and ratepayers feel they are being

blamed for problems they did not create.

Resident Dana Tibbetts pointed out that Skyland is paying \$100 less a month for water.

"Why?" she asked. "They are using the same water, the same pumps and getting the same service."

No one answered her question.

No matter how many customers of the Cave Rock/Uppaway Water System spoke, the commissioners were resolved to vote for the staff's recommendation on that and the Skyland Water System rate structures.

The vote was 4-1 on the Cave Rock plan, with Commissioner Barry Penzel dissenting. He wanted an advisory board. It was a 5-0 vote for Skyland.

Cave Rock/Uppaway customers will see rates drop from \$202.46 per month to \$172.68 in fiscal year 2015 and rise to \$195.37 the following year.

In Skyland the monthly water bill for fiscal years 2015 and 2016 will drop by nearly 26 percent to \$84.56.

While a couple people spoke against the Skyland proposal, most of the testimony was against the Cave Rock/Uppaway plan.

Most ratepayers anywhere would welcome a drop in rates. But when the reality is rates are projected to be \$300/month for Cave Rock in the coming years, the ratepayers want a solution so their water bill is not equivalent to their property tax.

They were practically begging the commissioners to come up with a more permanent solution and not just a Band-Aid, as well as to let them have a seat at the table for a resolution. They got neither.

John McCall, after the meeting, told *Lake Tahoe News* that

residents hired an engineer years ago to come up with a plan. It reportedly would have cost one-third of what the county implemented and would have been half paid for at this point.

Residents want commissioners to listen to them – not just to county staff because they believe staff isn't relaying the whole story.

Water rates have been on commission agendas for years. The problem at the lake is that there are multiple agencies with their own budgets, so the cost of maintenance and other items is greater than it would be if expenses were shared with a larger pool of customers.

In the spring commissioners agreed to consolidate the lake water districts. But that unraveled when others protested in having to pay for debt that wasn't theirs.

Commissioners agree a long-term solution needs to be created. Commissioner Nancy McDermid believes meters would be one solution – at least to get people to pay for what they use.

But there will always be fixed costs no matter how much one uses so the base rate could still be high.

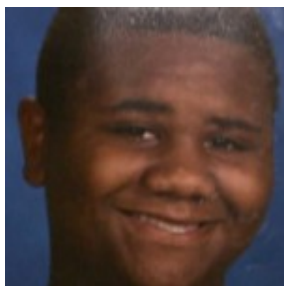
STHS student died from blunt force trauma

By Kathryn Reed

An autopsy of 14-year-old Dejon Smith ruled the cause of death blunt force trauma.

The South Tahoe High School freshman died immediately,

according to the Dec. 18 forensic autopsy conducted in Sacramento.



Dejon Smith

The results came hours before family and friends gathered Thursday night near the site where he died. A tree struck Smith during last week's powerful windstorm.

While there is no question about how Smith died, there are plenty of unknowns about what led up to the tragedy and who might have more information.

"As in any kind of death investigation, we want to piece together the last hours of what happened," Police Chief Brian Uhler told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Even if someone had seen the tree fall on Smith, no crime would have been committed by not reporting what happened. Civil charges could be a different situation.

Police said in the last week a friend of Smith's admitted the two were "checking out houses" prior to the tragedy. No burglaries were reported.

"We are not sure what exactly was about to happen. There is no indication of other crimes in the area," Uhler said.

Smith went out Dec. 11, knowing the next day had been deemed a snow day so there would be no school. But he didn't come back and his parents reported him missing.

As is protocol, his information was entered into the Missing

Unidentified Persons System because nearly one-quarter of the juveniles who run away from South Lake Tahoe are located in other jurisdictions. Police searched his neighborhood to no avail.

On Dec. 12 the boy's parents received a call telling them about someone who may have information. Police say this is the youth who was with Smith looking at the houses for what are still unknown reasons.

"The juvenile described hearing a very loud crash, but denied seeing a tree fall. He was frightened and ran away. He believed Dejon likely did the same, but he had not seen him since," a police press release states.

Searchers eventually found the body Dec. 13 under a large pine tree, almost completely concealed by branches. The pine tree was approximately 4 feet in diameter at its base. Firefighters had to use chain saws to section the tree into pieces to remove the body.

The investigation is not over. Officers have a list of people they intend to question. Tips may be called into the SLTPD at 530.542.6100 or to Secret Witness at 530.541.6800.

Fire plus rain plus drought equal mud

By Amy Quinton, NPR

Less than an hour west of South Lake Tahoe, trucks carrying burned timber from the Eldorado National Forest roar down the canyon as chain saws buzz in the distance.

But U.S. Forest Service ecologist Becky Estes says besides humans, not much else in this forest seems alive.

“We’re standing in an area that ... is going to be probably 100 percent mortality of the trees,” Estes says.

Rainstorms continue to pound drought-stricken California, where dangerous mudslides have caused serious damage in areas burned by wildfires. This year, the state had one of its worst wildfire seasons on record.

Starting in September, the King Fire burned nearly 100,000 acres in the Eldorado. In this steep river canyon, 50,000 acres burned in one day. Now the pine trees are black and lifeless, and not one pine needle remains on the branches.

Read the whole story

Ski towns worry pot is bad for tourism

By Kristen Wyatt, AP

BRECKENRIDGE, Colo. — Business is booming in Colorado’s mountain resorts, and the addition of recreational marijuana stores this year has attracted customers curious about legalized pot. But there’s mounting anxiety that ski towns have embraced stoner culture a little too much, potentially damaging the state’s tourism brand.

That worry flared up in two resort towns last week. In Breckenridge, residents voted overwhelmingly to force downtown’s lone dispensary off Main Street to a less-visible location. And just up the road in Granby, town officials used

a property annex to prevent a dispensary from opening.

The fear is that some families – a mainstay of the ski tourism industry – will stop vacationing here.

“It’s not a morality issue, or that we think marijuana is bad,” said Breckenridge Councilman Gary Gallagher, who supported legal marijuana but also voted to force the Breckenridge Cannabis Club out of downtown. “Marijuana, it is not in this country’s DNA yet. It’s a little bit too early.”

So far, there’s no indication that legal pot has damaged tourism, Colorado’s No. 2 industry. The state notched a record \$17.3 billion in tourism spending the year after legalization, with a record 64.6 million visitors, and state tourism officials say 2014 is poised to top last year’s record.

But it’s an open question whether pot has anything to do with it. Officials cite the improving economy and the weather, with healthy snow totals historically being the most significant driver for mountain visits.

The state and its marijuana industry are barred by law from advertising weed out of state, and the head of the Colorado Tourism Office says the state isn’t tracking the role of marijuana in tourist behavior.

“It’s all anecdotal,” Al White said. “I have heard from some angry parents who said they’ll never come back to Colorado because of marijuana. And I’ve also heard from people who say they came to Colorado just to see the marijuana.

“At the end of the day, it may be having a modest effect, but it’s not huge either way.”

The recent friction isn’t the first time officials have moved to lower marijuana’s profile.

The nation’s largest ski operator, Vail Resorts, made headlines over the last year tearing down makeshift shelters

built illicitly in hard-to-reach areas and used by stoners to “get safe,” mountain slang for toking up out of the cold and away from ski patrollers. Resorts across the state are dotted with the so-called smoke shacks, and some of them are decades old.

“We will continue to communicate that consumption of marijuana is illegal in public and on federal land,” Vail Resorts’ Russ Pecoraro said in a statement about destroying the shacks in its four areas, Beaver Creek, Breckenridge, Keystone and Vail.

Still, at rates greater than their urban neighbors, mountain communities backed marijuana legalization in 2012, including Breckenridge, an early and enthusiastic support base, and there’s no doubt that recreational pot has had an effect on ski towns.

A state-produced July report on the new marijuana industry concluded that 90 percent of recreational sales in mountain resort communities go to out-of-state visitors.

The influx of shoppers – and camera crews that have become frequent sights as they work on pot-themed news stories and documentaries – has prompted a lively debate among residents about how pot is changing their resorts.

“Whether you’re pro-marijuana or against marijuana, you have to be concerned about how tourists react to seeing it,” said Bob Gordman, a Breckenridge retiree who voted to move the dispensary.

Others say the marijuana novelty will die down naturally and that resort towns shouldn’t worry about dispensaries or the souvenir shops that put “Rocky Mountain High” puns on T-shirts.

“In five or 10 years, it’ll be no big issue,” said Bill Kiser, a Breckenridge retiree who voted to keep the dispensary on Main Street.

“Why don’t families get turned off when they go on vacation and see a bar and people drinking alcohol? Because they’re used to it,” Kiser said. “People will eventually get used to this, too.”

Stateline Post Office being repackaged



The back of the Stateline Post Office is in the process of being renovated.
Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Boxes are scattered about, the floor is torn up, one person is putting mail into individual boxes, construction crews are out front.

A tree blocks the direct route to the loading dock, the roofline is crumbling from being hit by trucks, concrete is in need of repair.

This is the Stateline Post Office.

It is finely receiving some attention after years of neglect.

"It's 36-years-old and it seems like it is older than that," Suzanne Phillips said as she walked through the facility.

Phillips' normal job is postmaster in Boulder City in Southern Nevada. Right now she is interim manager of postal operations, which encompasses 90 offices in California and Nevada. She is spending several weeks just at the Stateline office so it will function better – personnel-wise and aesthetically.

"Once we get someone in here and get consistency, people will notice a change," Phillips told *Lake Tahoe News*.

This office has not had a regular postmaster for a number of years. That postmaster is also responsible for the Zephyr Cove and Glenbrook post offices.



Construction crews are a common sight at the post office.

While there was a time when the Stateline office was slated to close, that is no longer the case. Higher ups figured out it would be hard to displace the 2,000 boxholders. Plus, this office makes money.

The next closest office is 1½ miles away in Zephyr Cove. It is a leased facility, whereas the Postal Service owns the

Stateline building. To accommodate the Stateline boxholders it would require significant renovating.

(No one on the Nevada side of the South Shore has home delivery.)

Most of the improvements are cosmetic in nature – paint, cleaning, new floors. The floor in the back – where the public is not allowed – will be replaced after the holiday rush.

The lobby has been revamped. All the writing tables were removed and new cabinets installed.

Juniper out front is gone and more landscaping improvements will come in the spring. The plan is to take out the pine out front so trucks have a direct shot to the loading dock. Some concrete is also slated to be removed.

Phillips is hoping sprucing things up will make the building better appealing from the curb and bring a little pride to the Lower Kingsbury Grade area.

“You drive by and you don’t know it’s a post office,” she said.

Part of this has to do with signage, the loading dock being in the front and the parking lot being in the rear.



A solution for the parking lot is still being sought.

The big unknown is what to do about the parking lot, which is in the back. It slopes down toward a ditch. There are no erosion control measures in place.

A three-year Tahoe Regional Planning Agency permit expired in 2010. Now the price to replace the drive and put in the best management practices is about \$900,000.

But it's not just the post office's runoff that is a problem. The building is attached to offices on the east, plus there are commercial entities all around it. Those properties also have runoff that is not being filtered.

Phillips said postal workers are investigating a more comprehensive approach to come into compliance with TRPA regs instead of going about it solo.

NASA: 11 tril. gallons of water would end drought

By Mark Berman, Washington Post

The historic, horrendous drought in California continues to be historic and horrendous. Even as rain continues to fall over parts of California, the drought is still ravaging much of the state.

To give you an idea of just how brutal this three-year drought has been, NASA decided to use its satellites (it is NASA, after all) to take measurements and figure out the amount of water needed to recover. The answer is 11 trillion gallons, which is a lot of water.

NASA came up with this number by using its Gravity Recovery

and Climate Experiment satellites to eyeball the water storage in the Sacramento and San Joaquin river basins. This data showed that the water storage in these basins was 11 trillion gallons below normal seasonal levels at the peak of the drought earlier this year, according to the NASA announcement.

The volume of water in these basins has dropped by 4 trillion gallons each year since 2011, with most of this loss due to the lack of groundwater under the state's Central Valley.

Read the whole story

Fining parents may stop teen drinking

By Patti Neighmond, NPR

When it comes to teenage drinking, the typical venue is a party – where some teens play drinking games and binge. It may surprise you to learn that the majority of parents are aware that alcohol is flowing at these events.

On any given weekend, some teenagers receive three to four text messages about parties, says Bettina Frieese, a public health researcher at the Prevention Research Center in Oakland.

Frieese recently conducted a study on teen drinking. She interviewed 1,100 teenagers living in Northern California. Most did not host parties with alcohol. But of the 39 percent who did, 70 percent said their parents knew kids at the party were drinking. Twenty-four percent said their parents “probably” knew, leaving just a handful of parents in the

dark.

Now some communities across the United States are trying to hold these parents accountable and fine them for allowing underage drinking in their homes.

Read the whole story