South Shore fighting Caltrans' Echo Summit closure date

By Kathryn Reed

South Shore officials are fighting Caltrans' decision to close Echo Summit four days before the largest professional cycling event in North America starts in Stateline.

State Sen. Ted Gaines, R-Roseville, has stepped into the fray – again. He has arranged for a conference call for Monday with local officials and Caltrans District 3 Director Jody Jones.

"Shock is the word being used. This totally caught people by surprise. There wasn't even a phone call. Just a press release went out and that's that," said Steve Teshara, chairman of the South Shore Transportation Management Association.

This agency that has been in existence since 1994 is taking the lead on changing the start date for the closure. Teshara said anytime after May 15 would be acceptable.

The California Department of Transportation announced April 29 that starting May 11 Highway 50 over Echo Summit would be closed for two weeks to replace the dilapidated rock wall. This route is the main artery between the South Shore and points west.

With about 35,000 spectators expected at the start for the Amgen Tour de California, many would presumably be coming over Echo Summit.

Although there are alternative routes to get to South Lake Tahoe, what has South Shore tourism officials worried is people will skip their end of the lake and instead opt to be

on the North Shore. Northstar is where the first leg ends and Squaw Valley is where Day 2 starts.

While the Echo Summit project has been talked about for years and for more than a month people knew it could start any time after May 1, Caltrans gave no reason why May 11 was picked.

Caltrans officials were not available for comment Friday.

The criteria had been the need for a window of 10 straight days of clear weather. The contractor also faces penalties if the full closure extends into June. Plus, the road will be open during Memorial Day weekend.

May is traditionally an iffy weather month in Lake Tahoe, with 2010 full of snowy days.

Tourism officials have already had to deflect misinformation that has been published. The May-June issue of *Via* magazine wrongly stated Echo Summit would be closed through June. The reality is after the two week closure, it will be subject to controlled traffic for up to six weeks. Construction will end at noon on Fridays and the road completely open Memorial Day – and if work is still going on, Fourth of July.

“With respect to this project, the community has been continuously misled. They said they understood how important Amgen is and it doesn’t seem important at all,” Teshara said of Caltrans.

Teshara once was an advocate for the Echo Summit project starting in May. He wrote a letter to Caltrans saying as much. But this was before the region knew it would be hosting multiple stages of the bike race.

At a March 9 meeting with Gaines, Caltrans, Sierra-at-Tahoe General Manager John Rice, Andrew Strain of Heavenly Mountain Resort, B Gorman with Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce, reps from contractor C.C. Myers, South Tahoe

Councilman Tom Davis, and South Tahoe staff member Nancy Kerry, it was revealed Caltrans picked May based on Teshara's letter. They thought he was speaking for the basin, even though at the time he was speaking on behalf of the North Shore – which is a likely beneficiary of an Echo Summit closure.

Caltrans, according to people at the meeting, did not ask for other input. But Amgen announced in February how the Tahoe area would be part of this year's race, so Caltrans has had time to adjust any internal time line it may have had.

While May is a traditionally slow time throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin, it has been well documented events literally drive people to the basin. That was an impetus for striving to be part of Tour de California.

What worries South Shore officials is Caltrans' decision to close Echo Summit pre-Amgen will drive them elsewhere.

Lake Tahoe Boulevard's future in El Dorado County's hands

By Kathryn Reed

Doing nothing is not an option. That was the message delivered Friday night by El Dorado County officials when it comes to Lake Tahoe Boulevard.

More than 80 people sat or stood through a two-hour meeting about the proposed changes on this stretch of road on the South Shore between Clear View Drive and D Street.



Lake Tahoe Boulevard may not be four-lanes in coming years. Photo/LTN

Issues are whether the road will be reduced to two lanes from four, what types of bike trails and/our routes would be developed, and if the speed limit would be altered.

While some bemoaned not knowing about the April 29 meeting, others had been giving written input for weeks. *Lake Tahoe News* reported on the meeting April 10 and had posted an item on the Events page prior to that.

More information about the alternatives is online.

What was new is a sixth alternative was announced, which will be online next week. Comments will be taken until May 6.

The meeting was a bit of a free-for-all, with people shouting from the audience, engaging speakers in a bit of a debate, applauding, booing and everyone being passionate about their stance.

It was a much less contentious meeting than fall 2008 when county officials were caught off-guard by the overwhelming backlash to keep the status quo. At that time the emotions from the 2007 Angora Fire were still raw. Lake Tahoe Boulevard is one of the main routes to the burn area.

While some still spoke of the need to keep four lanes for

emergency vehicles, that did not dominate the conversation.

The project is billed to reduce sediment flowing into Angora Creek and the Upper Truckee River. Water quality is a major impetus for doing the project. This includes decreasing sediment runoff and storm zone restoration.

Safety is another overriding concern – for motorists and cyclists.

John Runnels said a long ago settlement requires the road to stay four lanes. While county officials disagreed with this after the meeting, they said legal counsel will resolve issues like the one Runnels raised.

Brendan Ferry, project manager for the county, also dispelled the falsehood that this environmental improvement project has anything to do with compensating for the Tahoe Keys debacle of paving over the most sensitive marsh in the basin in the 1960s.

Now it's up to county officials to decide which alternative is preferred. Scales are tipping toward Alternative 4 – which is in detail on Page 18 of the draft that is being discussed. It would maintain two lanes of striped 4-foot Class II bike lanes from Clear View Drive to Tahoe Mountain Road. From Tahoe Mountain Road to Sawmill Road it would go from four to two lanes with 4-foot Class II bike lanes. It would remove 6 feet of pavement on each side of the road. The forest trail from Lake Tahoe Boulevard at Sawmill Road to D Street would become a paved 8-foot Class I bike path.

The county expects to pick a preferred alternative this summer. Then begins the environmental document phase. During that time the public will have more opportunities to comment. That could be completed by fall 2012. Design would be in 2013. Construction would be that year or in 2014.

It's expected to cost between $880,000 and $1.5 million.

Although not all the money is in hand, what is secured is from grants. None is from the county’s general fund.

Echo Summit off-limits to cars for 2 weeks starting May 11

Caltrans today announced it will temporarily close Highway 50 at Echo Summit for two weeks beginning May 11.

This means the route to the South Shore will be less direct for those coming to the area for the Amgen Tour de California cycling event May 15.



The wall on Echo Summit will be replaced starting May 11. Photo/LTN file

The closure is part of the first stage of a safety enhancement project that will remove damaged rock walls and replace them with a barrier that meets current safety standards. The

project is funded in part ($1.9 million) by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

There will be one-way controlled traffic on May 9-10, and Mondays through noon on Fridays for up to six weeks after Highway 50 is reopened.

The highway will be open with no restrictions on Memorial Day weekend.

Alternate routes around the closure take travelers through the Gold Country of El Dorado and Amador counties. Motorists should allow approximately one hour extra travel time during the two-week full closure to reach South Lake Tahoe.

Alternate routes are:

• From Sacramento: Exit at Power Inn Road and take Highway 16 east to Highway 49 south, at Highway 88 in Jackson, turn left (east). Take that to Highway 89 and turn left again (north), and follow it back to Highway 50 in South Lake Tahoe.

• From Placerville: Exit at Missouri Flat Road and take Highway 49 south. Follow it to Highway 88 in Jackson and turn left (east). At Highway 89 turn left (north) and follow it back to Highway 50 in South Lake Tahoe.

Motorists coming through the Stockton area can exit Highway 99 as usual at Highway 88 east, continuing onto highways 88/49. In Jackson, turn left to continue on Highway 88 east. At Highway 89 turn left (north) and follow it to Highway 50 in South Lake Tahoe.

Caltrans will place electronic message signs at key positions on all of these highways to direct travelers. During the temporary full closure, Highway 50 will be open for visitors to Placerville and other locations as far east as Sierra-at-Tahoe Road near Echo Summit.

Caltrans has a website (www.Way2Tahoe.com) featuring a map,

up-to-date information about the project, information about the alternate routes and sites to visit along the way, live traffic cameras, and answers to frequently asked questions.

Chopper replaces mechanical equipment for fuels reduction

By Kathryn Reed

If and when a fire erupts at the Y, a natural fuel break will have been established in the middle of South Lake Tahoe so it doesn't destroy the entire city.

That is the purpose of the nearly 50-acre fuel reduction project at Lake Christopher near Trout Creek and Pioneer Trail. It's the final project to create a break for when the next catastrophic fire strikes. Areas above and below have been treated in recent years.



A helicopter April 28 removes cut trees from the Lake Christopher area.

Photos/Kathryn
Reed

When the U.S. Forest Service gets around to its much talked about South Shore Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project, this part of the city that borders on the fed's property will have been treated.

Much of what is being cleared from this stream environmental zone looks like bad firewood. Not much of it is logs. A lot is slash. A few Jeffery pines are being removed, but mostly it's lodgepole because they love wet areas.

Men on the ground felled the trees with chain saws. Today is the third day pilot Matt Turner is using a helicopter to lift the debris to one of three landing areas.

"This way is better than pile burning," explained Dave Mercer, the contractor for the project. "There is going to be a little disturbance. People don't understand what a forest should look like."

He's out in the woods with his crew making sure everything is going according to plan. One eye is on the men securing the chokes to the piles of wood and another on the helicopter hovering above.

This method Mercer proposed means no big machines on the ground. So, even though the ground is not pristine because trees have been felled, it looks nothing like when skidders, harvesters and other equipment are used.

A few acres by South Tahoe Public Utility District headquarters will have mechanical means used to clear the area, but it's not in an SEZ.

With Lake Christopher being a stream zone and snow still on the ground, it may never have been permitted if equipment had to be brought in. As it was, the Tahoe Regional Planning

Agency deferred the permitting process to the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board even though the memorandum of understanding between the agencies defers the permitting to TRPA. TRPA officials were not available to explain why they were unable to do their job and asked someone else to do so.

“TRPA wanted to pile burn,” Mercer said.

South Tahoe Fire Marshal Ray Zachau agrees with Mercer’s assessment about people not understanding what a healthy forest looks like. He hired a forester to plan this project for fuels reduction and creating a healthy forest.

“If we can keep a fire on the ground, we can put it out,” Zachau said. “Once it’s in the canopy, we really can’t stop it.”

Both men get an earful from people who don’t want any trees removed. But without fire coming through to naturally thin the forest, the stands are overgrown and create more of a threat. Plus, it’s not good for plant and animal species.

This $147,000 project is being funded by a Forest Service grant and money from the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act. The entire project is supposed to take about three weeks, with four to five days of flying.

Mercer isn’t sure what he’ll do with the chips. Some may stay in town for a construction site’s erosion control measures. Some may go to a cogeneration plant in Susanville.

There’s no money in selling this material – the market has dried up. It’s to the city’s benefit if the contractor could make money off the end product because then the bid would have come in lower.

Still, this type of removal is more economical than mechanized, according to Zachau.

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Controversial Boulder Bay project OK’d, Biltmore is gone

By Kathryn Reed

KINGS BEACH – Depending on who one listens to, the Boulder Bay project is either going to be the gold standard for redevelopment in the Lake Tahoe Basin or will be the worst thing to ever be approved by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

On a 12-1 vote, the Governing Board on April 27 approved the more than $150 million project. Mara Bresnick voted no on everything concerning the project. (Board member Byron Sher left before the vote, but said before he left that he would have voted no.)



Boulder Bay is designed to revitalize Crystal Bay.

The multi-phase project will obliterate the outdated Tahoe Biltmore in Crystal Bay and in its place will be the Boulder Bay Resort & Wellness Center. This is the brainchild of Roger Wittenberg, who made his money as co-founder of Trex Company.

As the last of the 80 people who commented on the project during the public hearing Wednesday, Wittenberg told the board that after four years of back-and-forth with the TRPA, he is not going away. He encouraged the board to approve the project unanimously to send a message to the naysayers. While he didn't get that, he can now move forward.

"There will be two phases, with the bulk of the utilities, BMPs, new roads, and major concrete pour in the first phase," project manager Brian Helm said. This allows the existing facility to keep operating.

In a perfect world, construction could begin in May 2012, though with paperwork (aka permitting process) that still needs to occur, dirt may not be turned until 2013.

The first phase is likely to take two seasons – which in the basin is May 1-Oct. 15 in terms of being able to move dirt.

What was approved was the final environmental impact statement, an amendment to Chapter 22 of the TRPA rules regarding height of buildings, and acceptance of the Community Enhancement Project.

Eight structures will be built. The number of hotel units will go from 111 to 275 at the end of build-out. Fifty-nine units will be whole ownership. Fourteen will be affordable housing – with another 10 units also designed for employees to be constructed off-site.

As a sign of the decline of gaming in the region, the area devoted for gambling will drop from 22,400 square feet to 10,000.

The four casinos in the Crystal Bay corridor – like their counterparts on the South Shore – are outdated. The North Shore gaming venues were built in the 1930s and ’40s.

Sticking points

Of the 80 people who voiced their opinions Wednesday, 58 were for the project, 16 against and six were in the middle.

The League to Save Lake Tahoe voiced its displeasure with the project mostly in terms of overall size and the height amendment.

Rochelle Nason, executive director of the League, told *Lake Tahoe News* her group will gather and debrief – as they do with all decisions like this one.

While Nason was at the meeting, a staff member spoke on behalf of the League during the public hearing.

Most of the people who had mixed feelings about Boulder Bay shared the League’s concerns.

Passion ran strong from all sides, though it was civil discourse. The morning presentation on the project took three hours. After lunch the public spent about four hours giving input. Then the board deliberated for more than three hours before the vote was taken.

With minutia to detail, the board took a break at 8:22pm, resuming at 8:43pm. The votes were taken at 9:25pm with adjournment right after that.

While the height issue received much discussion, it was repeatedly pointed out that the amendment could only be applied to other projects in this community plan area – not universally throughout the basin.

This is an important fact because the Homewood project that is also in the TRPA process wants to be granted a height

variance.

Some of the problem is how TRPA measures the height of buildings. The controversy is when a structure is built on a slope. Instead of measuring from the foundation to the roof at each spot, height is essentially calculated by the lowest point to the highest point.

Traffic was another major sticking point. The environmental document says vehicle miles traveled will be reduced. Many who spoke took issue with how this statement came to be.

VMT is a huge component of air quality measurements.

Mixed use is designed to reduce vehicle miles traveled. This is because people have what they want in one place instead of needing to make multiple stops.

But one could easily argue casinos by nature are mixed use based on being a hotel, casino, having restaurants and sometimes a spa – meaning this new project may not change how people travel to the site on Highway 28.

About an hour was spent by the board discussing how traffic studies are done, what goes into them, the standards of the studies and validity of them.

What the public wanted to know is how Wittenberg wants to increase patronage with a new complex, but traffic will be less. That question was never answered.

Although Boulder Bay has to put money into public transit, it’s a well-known fact people who live and visit the basin like to drive their cars. This was obvious by the full parking lot at North Tahoe Event Center and lack of carpooling.

Another concern was the transfer of tourist accommodation units – including 72 from the old Colony Inn in South Lake Tahoe to Boulder Bay.

Some guarantees

The failed convention center project in South Lake Tahoe that has left the South Shore with a more blighted eyesore of concrete and rebar than the rundown buildings that had been there before was repeatedly brought up.

No one wants another hole in the basin. To help combat that, Wittenberg is going to have to prove he has financing before he can break ground.

Another bone of contention is erosion control measures (best management practices) have only been temporary since Wittenberg bought the property a handful of years ago. The reasoning being he would have to undo those as construction took place.

Board member Clem Shute proposed changing the five-year mandate to have a bond to fund BMPs to be extended to 20 years. This is to ensure that if the project goes belly-up, the property owner is still doing the basics to keep sediment from going into the lake. This was added to the requirements.

When the project is done, it will reduce the amount of sediment reaching Lake Tahoe by 90 percent – going to 3,500 pounds a year.

Another thing the project will do is bring jobs to the area. It’s estimated Boulder Bay will employ more than 200 people.

For more information about the Boulder Bay project, go online.

Nevada makes concerted effort to lure Chinese travelers

By Kathryn Reed

China is huge – and not just in size and population.

Since 2004, Nevada has been capitalizing on the desire of Chinese nationals to travel to the United States. And this month, Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., was in China to discuss trade and human rights issues. Robert Young was just appointed Nevada's trade representative in northern China. His job is to work with the Nevada Commission on Economic Development to entice Chinese companies to build operations in Nevada and invest cash in the Silver State.



Nevada would like to lure these Chinese tourists from Tiananmen Square outside the Forbidden City to the Silver State. Photos/Kathryn Reed

The U.S. Commercial Service, a trade promotion arm of the International Trade Administration within the U.S. Department

of Commerce, says in 2007, China was the 16th largest international market for the United States, with 397,405 Chinese visitors to the U.S. That number is expected to reach 579,000 this year. Chinese people spent a record $2.56 billion in the States four years ago, with average expenditures of more than $6,000 per person.

“Close to 90 percent of the Chinese nationals who visit the United States at some point visit Nevada,” Lt. Gov. Brian Krolicki told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Besides being second in charge of the Silver State, Krolicki heads the Nevada Commission on Tourism.

“Chinese tourists tend to stay longer, enjoy more hospitality, and produce more sales tax than any other visitor from the globe,” Krolicki said.

Nevada was the first state to open a tourism office on the mainland of China – which was in Beijing in 2004. The Shanghai office opened last summer.

With 1.4 billion people, China is a market Nevada wants to lure to the state. Gaming is one of the big draws, with most of the visitors having Las Vegas as their primary destination. The U.N. World Travel Organization says China is the fastest growing travel market in the world.

“We have a very vigorous campaign to get tourists to rural Nevada,” Krolicki said.

NCOT brings groups in to see the state. Suggested tours include trips to Lake Tahoe, Reno, Elko – to ski, experience the wilderness, and tap into to the Old West cowboy mystique.

When in Vegas, it’s not just the tables the Chinese people visit.

“The Caesars, MGMS and Wynns of the world produce more sales tax than gaming. The Chinese are attending shows, eating at

some of the finest restaurants, purchase goods at some of the finest shopping facilities in the world," Krolicki said.



Beijing and other cities are full to high-end stores.

It's not that the Chinese can't get these things at home. Macau, in the southern part of the country, is well known for its gaming enterprises – of which Steve Wynn has tapped into. High-end stores abound throughout the country. Food is excellent – and much less expensive than restaurants in the U.S.

Still, like any traveler, they want to explore the rest of the world. One problem that remains is getting a visa to come to the United States. One woman living in Beijing told *Lake Tahoe News* when she looked into getting a visa it was going to take months just to get an appointment to begin the process.

Krolicki said when the NCOT offices book travel for people to come to Nevada a deal on the books between the governments allows the processing of paperwork to be sped up.

But he also admitted the young, single woman isn't who Nevada is marketing to.

"The number of millionaires that have the ability to travel who are Chinese nationals is extraordinary. That is the market that is comprising this outbound tourism profile," Krolicki

said.



Renewable energy may be a goal, but like Las Vegas, China likes its water shows like this one in Xi'an.

The lieutenant governor was also involved with about a half dozen other states in creating a memorandum of understanding for China to invest in the United States – especially when it comes to renewable energy like wind turbines.

“All of these little pieces add up to some very satisfying successes. The relationship works both ways,” Krolicki said.

Reid’s office, according to the *Las Vegas Sun,* said his group would do “site visits of American investments and clean energy projects in Chengdu, Beijing and Xi’an.” These are the same three cities *Lake Tahoe News* visited this spring. With the abundance of pollution from coal in Xi’an, clean energy was not obviously visible under the gray skies. Locals said the air is worse in winter.

Hwy. 50 project not total answer for what ails S. Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

Even though Caltrans will break ground today on a $40 million project to improve water quality, the pipes that carry runoff into Lake Tahoe will continue to muck up the scenic corridor to keep it looking more like a Third World beach community than a world-class destination.

Billions of dollars have been spent and are slated to be spent on lake clarity. But that measurement has everything to do with what a dinner plate of sorts looks like and nothing to do with the near shore, which is where people swim and what they look at from a pier.



Untreated water flows directly into Lake Tahoe. All photos are from April 17, 2011, in South Tahoe. Photos/Kathryn Reed

About a half dozen pipes from El Dorado Beach to Ski Run Marina bring untreated water into Lake Tahoe. All carry the

oils and gunk from Highway 50, along with sediment from the mountain side of the road that runs through South Lake Tahoe. Some of that water carries fertilizer from Bijou Golf Course to the lake.

This is always the best time of year to see what flows into Tahoe because of the snowmelt. The high-mark for runoff is not likely to be reached until late May or early June, so the flow of water will continue at a good clip for at least another month.

Garbage is strewn about at some of these outflows. The outflow near Lakeshore Lodge and Spa is clogged because it is a grate. The water is a rusty orange-brown color. It flows east, discoloring the water all the way to Ski Run Marina. It goes out into the lake well past the end point of the pier at Lakeland Village.

Although the much-heralded Trout Creek to Ski Run Boulevard highway improvement project will help prevent some of the less desirable nutrients from reaching the lake, it won't solve the entire problem.

Part of the issue is Caltrans does not own the pipes so the state agency is not replacing them. So, even if cleaner water flows from some of them, those unsightly discharge pipes will remain.

No official could tell *Lake Tahoe News* who owns all of the pipes, but the city of South Lake Tahoe is responsible for most.

Another issue is not all of the pipes carrying untreated water are part of the Highway 50 project.

"The outfall at Lakeview Commons is not getting any treatment at lake level. That is in the second phase of the project, of which there is no funding for," said Jim Marino, capital improvement project manager for South Lake Tahoe. "Caltrans is

providing all the pre-treatment facilities on the highway to clean up the water."

(The contractor started mobilizing at Lakeview Commons near El Dorado Beach last week and expects to start work May 2 on phase one.)

"The Alta Mira (outflow) is a little unclear. There is some talk by the California Tahoe Conservancy to purchase those properties to expand Lakeview Commons and in that case that outfall," Marino explained. "But right now it's only getting pre-treatment on the highway so it should be cleaner, but the ugly look will probably stay."

This area is at the east end of the pedestrian area where from the highway the lake is no longer visible.

Bijou project

There isn't anything Lakeshore Lodge or Lakeland Village can do about the nasty water coming out of the pipe by the Bijou Center. General managers of both properties told *Lake Tahoe News* the Bijou erosion control project can't start soon enough.

They will have to wait until 2013 – or later.

"That is a landmark project the city is undertaking. That will be a pump and treatment system," Marino explained. "It will take the mucky stormwater out of the Bijou neighborhood and pump it back into the meadow and allow the meadow to discharge and cleanse it out. It's a complex project."

With 95 percent of the funding in place, the city hopes to start on it in two years.

Pat Ronan, who runs Lakeshore Lodge and Spa, said his guests will comment on the unsightly pipe, but his employees explain what it is and that it's runoff starting at Heavenly Mountain Resort that winds up on the edge of his beach.

Although Jerry Bindel at Lakeland Village collects, treats and monitors the runoff from his property's parking lots, he can't stop the trail of orange water from flowing in front of his complex this time of year from the Bijou pipe.

Two pipes from his property carry water to the lake, though they are buried under the sand. Both are visible from the shore.

"The ones coming from our beach don't (bother guests). We have some pretty strict guidelines on property to make sure nothing gets into the lake from our property," Bindel said.

Permitting agencies

Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency issued permits for the multi-year highway project that will bring improvements to both sides of Highway 50.

"The water, hopefully, coming out of them will be a lot cleaner, but it will still be an eyesore. I understand they look ugly," Bud Amorfini, engineering geologist with Lahontan, said of the culverts.

Although detention basins are the optimal choice for treating stormwater runoff, that is not possible with the highway so close to the lake. That is why sand vaults and Delaware sand filters will be used.

But the goal, Amorfini said, is all the water in that section of the highway will be treated in some manner before it reaches Lake Tahoe. That will be a marked difference from what goes on today and has been allowed to happen for years.

With the Total Maximum Daily Load requirements passed last week by the state water board – which the Environmental Protection Agency must still sign-off on – this highway project will allow Caltrans to receive credit for reducing the

amount of sediment reaching the lake.

This road project also qualifies as an Environmental Improvement Project under the oversight of TRPA.

“Highway 50 Trout Creek to Ski Run is an example of an area that needed full treatment, but which also needed roadwork, landscaping, pedestrian and bicycle improvements, so it naturally took a long time to plan and fund,” Jeff Cowen, TRPA spokesman, said. “The NEAT (Natural Environment As Treatment) plan lays out Caltrans projects to infiltrate all stormwater from its roads in the basin. They are accountable to that plan.”

Caltrans spokeswoman Deanna Shoopman said crews are bringing in equipment, putting up fencing and doing other staging work this week. Work that would interfere with traffic will not begin until after May 15 – when the first stage of the Amgen Tour de California bike race on the South Shore is over.

Improvements coming

The project begins on the west side of the city near the Trout Creek bridge by Meeks Lumber and goes to Ski Run Boulevard.

With it being a water quality project, much of the work is happening under the road surface where the drainage – and treatment – of runoff will occur.

Sidewalks, 6-foot shoulders (aka bike lanes), and new signals are part of the plans. Lighting will occur on the mountain (south) side of the highway. Landscaping on both sides will be provided. Walkways will adhere to American with Disabilities Act regulations.

This project has been in the works for more than a decade.

The plan is to time as much of the Lakeview Commons work into Caltrans’ schedule so the same areas of town are not torn up more than once.

Although the end product will be visually and environmentally better, it won't be without inconveniences.

This is the preliminary schedule, though Caltrans may change things or have updates at today's 1pm groundbreaking ceremony at Campground by the Lake:

• April 25: Contractor began mobilization.

• April 25 to May 13: Contractor will set up BMPs for TRPA permit and pre-grade inspection.

• May 1 to Oct. 15: Utilities will relocate infrastructure.

• May 17: Contractor begins phase 1.

• Phase 1: 2011 construction season – Trout Creek to Ski Run westbound (lake side) curb, gutter, and streetscape.

• Phase 2: 2012 construction season – Ski Run to Trout Creek eastbound (mountain side) curb, gutter, and streetscape.

• Phase 3 – 2013 construction season – full limits both directions – grind, pave and stripe.

Expect lane closures for the three years of work. The contractor will be working day and night until July 1. From July 1 to Labor Day, contractor will work nights, with limited daytime work.

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LTCC's budding scientists to

test theory at NASA site

By Stephen Ward

Fittingly, the idea that granted five Lake Tahoe Community College students the opportunity to conduct an experiment aboard a zero-gravity plane was created out of thin air.

“We came back from winter break and only had a little time,” Andrew Burton, one of the students, said about drafting a proposal to send to National Aeronautics and Space Administration. “It was incredibly stringent what we had to provide.”



LTCC science students flank instructor Cathleen Cox before heading to Houston with their science experiment. Photo/Provided

The group, former students of LTCC physics Professor Cathleen Cox, submitted a 15-page proposal detailing their study of gravity’s effect on soap bubbles to NASA in January for its Reduced Gravity Education Flight Program.

Two months later, the students received their acceptance

letter. But with medical examinations, stress analysis and NASA inspections, the group has little time to celebrate.

In June, Cox and the four students —- with one being unable to attend — will travel to NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston to perform their experiment on an aircraft flying 30 parabolic maneuvers in 25-second intervals over the Gulf of Mexico.

The study, titled the "Structural Integrity and Mathematical Modeling of Singular Soap Bubbles in Microgravity and Hypergravity," researches specific aspects of a bubble, such as its color pattern and longevity at different gravity levels.

The soap bubbles will be blown in a tube drilled through a polycarbonate box, which is located within a bigger box made of the same material with rubber attached to the corners. Overall, the entire experiment will fit within the glove box NASA provided the group with.

"(The experiment) is definitely tougher than what we thought, however it's still a really simple project compared to other projects, which is a good thing," Burton said.

Despite providing the students with research experience, Cox said being accepted into the program benefits the community as well.

"One thing that's good about (the program) is it promotes science in the Tahoe basin," Cox said.

Promoting science after the experiment is something the LTCC students have already started planning. Burton, a 24-year-old South Shore resident, said the group will work on curricula for schools throughout the Tahoe region to help students learn more about soap bubbles and gravity.

"First, we are required to develop a website, as well as publish our paper and present our results at a conference,"

Cox said.

The members of the group have recently created a science club at LTCC. This year was the first time community college proposals were accepted into the program.

In addition to Andrew Burton, the students attending the trip to Houston include Melissa Thaw, Jeff Guarino and Jared Szi. Eva Gonzales also helped with the project.

Talking a walk on the wild side in panda paradise

By Kathryn Reed

CHENGDU, China – Fur against my cheek, gnawing away on his (or her?) apple, I so wanted to suddenly be able to speak panda.

For a brief moment, I was in black and white heaven as I held the 6-month-old on my lap. Thoughts of running off with it, learning to grow bamboo in Tahoe, and wondering how to contain it in my back yard filled my head.



Kathryn Reed in panda heaven in Chengdu,

China.

With claws that looked like they could slice and dice me and whatever else it wanted to, I decided to let it stay in China.

The donation to hold this bundle of fur (a Christmas gift from Sue) goes to the reserve to continue research on the endangered breed and to help sustain its existence.

Although I have mixed feelings about humans holding wild animals, I know without such contributions it's likely future generations might not ever see a panda other than one that is stuffed.

For nearly 30 years, the World Wildlife Fund has been working in China to help preserve the 3.8 million acres of forest in and around the habitat of pandas. The giant panda is listed as endangered in the World Conservation Union's Red List of Threatened Animals. There are about 1,600 left in the wild. Nearly 300 live in zoos and breeding centers around the world, mostly in China. The nearest to Tahoe are in San Diego.

Pandas have been special to me ever since they first arrived in 1972 at the National Zoo in Washington, D.C. I was in grade school, living outside of the capital at the time. Every time someone would come visit, I'd ask my parents if we could take them to see the pandas.

I still have one of my stuffed pandas named after those two original ones – Ling-Ling and Hsing-Hsing. Mom made me a pantsuit with pandas. I had sheets with pandas. I insisted on visiting the current pandas when I was in D.C. a few years ago. I have panda pajamas.

Last month, I went to their homeland of China – specifically, the Chengdu Research Base of Giant Panda Breeding. This reserve opened in 1987 with less than a dozen pandas and now has 80.

The goal of this site is to study their behavior, have them reproduce and one day reintroduce them to the wild – though the latter is a future goal.

Our guide, Philip He, gave us a little history lesson as we drove to the reserve – like how the word panda did not exist in the Chinese language before the 20th century. Panda means bear cat. It was a French explorer who named this animal panda. Their habitat is in five major areas, two of them in Chengdu where we were.

Still, the panda has been a symbol of peace in China for centuries. Armies would put a panda on flags as a way to signal a day of rest from war, according to He. And it was 39 years ago they were a symbol of peace when President Richard Nixon made his groundbreaking trip to China.

Part of why their population is dwindling in the wild is that they are solitary creatures and their mating season is short.

They are big eaters – consuming about 44 pounds of bamboo a day. It could be one of 60 kinds of bamboo.

He said in the 1980s large areas of bamboo died, which led to numerous pandas dying off.

At the Chengdu breeding center about two dozen pandas are born each year. On this particular day three 6-month-olds are sleeping in a tree. Then one scrambles down, deciding mom looks bored. They tumble around in a playful manner until mom gets tired of this game and saunters off.

The 321-acre reserve is also home to red pandas – but in my world – they are just weird looking raccoons and not real pandas.

It was the 1½ year olds playing on their jungle gym of sorts that captured me. One just sat there chomping away on bamboo, oblivious to the camera shutters clicking away.

The pandas are reason enough for me to book another flight to China.

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Kite explains thoughts on TRPA, 100% support of guv

By Anne Knowles

Lake Tahoe News sat down with Assemblyman Kelly Kite, R-Minden, to discuss the issues facing the 2011 Legislature. Kite represents Douglas County and portions of Carson City and Washoe County. He is a retired businessman who served on the Douglas County Commission from 1997 to 2008. Kite sits on three Assembly committees: Natural Resources, Agriculture and Mining; Judiciary; and Commerce and Labor. This is his first legislative session. He can be reached in his Assembly office by email at kkite@asm.state.nv.us or by phone at (775) 684.8843.

Lake Tahoe News: ***You've co-sponsored a bill with Sen. James Settelmeyer, Senate Bill 271, to remove Nevada from the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. Why did you sponsor the bill?***

Assemblyman Kelly Kite: I had several requests from businesspeople as well as residents. I was on the county commission for Douglas County for 12 years and there were many things that would have been beneficial to the lake that were road blocked by the two-thirds vote that California has. I think we can get a lot more done through a smaller, more responsible local coverage. My intent is not to do away with

the TRPA or destroy the TRPA, but to make it more responsible to Nevada citizens.



Kelly Kite

Q: *How do you respond to critics of the bill that the time and money required for Nevada to set up its own mechanism for replacing the TRPA could slow development at the lake and cost the state more in the end?*

A: Our goal there is not to reinvent the wheel. We want to take the same organization and set up, but make it more centralized to Nevada's issues and, again, not to destroy the TRPA, but to make it more accessible and open to Nevada residents.

Q: ***How do Nevada's issues differ from California's?***

A: For many years we wanted to help with fuel loading and it was blocked until we had a fire. There were a lot of projects, including NDOT's (Nevada Department of Transportation), that would have helped run-off into the lake and helped lake clarity, but those were blocked and drug out for years with millions of dollars of extra expense. Those types of projects could have gone forward.

Q: ***You've also sponsored a number of bills dealing with firearms. What are you trying to accomplish with all of this legislation and where does it stand?***

A: Protect our Second Amendment rights. That's the best answer I can give you. Most of (the bills) have survived. To the best

of my knowledge, most of them have or will pass through the Assembly floor and go to the Senate, and vice versa.

Q: ***Where do you stand on Gov. Brian Sandoval's proposed budget, in particular his proposed cuts to the state's education budget and his vow to not raise taxes?***

A: I support him all the way.

Q: ***So, you are opposed to looking at the mining industry for additional revenue or, say, a services tax?***

A: I'm not averse to looking at anything. I'm going in with an open mind, but as it stands right now I am 100 percent behind Gov. Sandoval's budget and his tax policies.

Q: ***What do you think the state needs to do to revitalize its economy?***

A: Stabilize. And stabilization means a lot of things. But in order to get new businesses to come here, one of the things that scares businesses the most is uncertainty. Businesses will deal with a lot of things, but one thing they do not like is not knowing what's ahead of them. Until we can get a stabilized tax structure, get our education stabilized, which is important, we're not going to see a lot of new businesses. And I think the most important part of economic growth comes back to one word: stabilization.

Q: ***What do you mean by stabilize the education the system?***

A: There are two different schools of thought. We keep throwing more money at it, getting the same results, or reform and stabilization, and by stabilization I mean, they're talking about cutting $1.2 billion out of education, but they knew a year ago that that was stimulus money that was one-time only money. They did not look ahead to see the conditions that were coming when that money was not there. To the best of my knowledge, we've only cut education once or twice in the last

20 years, every year has been an increase in funding and I don't think we're seeing the results that we need from it.

Q: ***The economy is an almost all-consuming issue this session, but are there other issues you consider to be vital as well?***

A: Redistricting is going to be huge. Right now, my district covers all of Douglas County and every grain of sand in the Nevada side of Lake Tahoe is in my district. I don't know whether that will be my district next time or not. I'm pretty sure the South Shore will be; Incline Village and Crystal Bay, I don't know. We've got to make sure that Douglas County and the lake portion is not split up into different districts. I think they need and deserve representation and Lake Tahoe issues are Lake Tahoe issues, whether it's Washoe County or Douglas County. And I think it's imperative that they have contiguous representation.

Q: ***How do you influence such a thing when you are not on the committee that deals with redistricting?***

A: It'll come down to a vote. Both sides of the houses will present theirs. The governor will present his, and, to be honest with you, I think the judge will do the decision-making. Shouldn't be that way, but I believe that's how it will turn out.

Q: ***This is your first session. What have you learned so far?***

A: I've learned a lot. As 12 years as county commissioner, I was familiar with the way things work, I was here for a lot testifying and lobbying, if you will, for the citizens of Douglas County. There is frustration the first 60 days, seems like we do nothing, the last 60 days, it's all crammed into there. I think it could be run smoother. I have my own ideas about that, but being a freshman in the minority party, so far you're the only one to listen to me about this.

Q: ***Are you concerned that things that have previously been the***

responsibility of the state will be put on to the counties and towns?

A: Absolutely. It worries me a lot. Probably it concerns me more after working in county government for 12 years, being responsible for a county budget and all the things that counties do. Kicking the can down the road to the counties is not solving any problems. We need to solve our own problems without passing them on to someone else. I've talked with leaders in county government and there are some issues they feel that they can handle better and cheaper than the state can, but there are some that they are just not equipped to handle. What Washoe and Clark counties can handle, the rural counties cannot.

Q: ***Finally, what is the best way for your constituents to be heard?***

A: Email us, directly in. Go to the state's website, pick the bill that they're interested in, make their comments and send those directly to the people who are involved. The shotgun-blast emails are not nearly as effective.