Vehicle found in S. Lake Tahoe belongs to missing Elk Grove man

By Cathy Locke, Sacramento Bee

A vehicle registered to an Elk Grove man who was reported missing in May was located Friday down a steep embankment off Highway 50 in South Lake Tahoe.

Sgt. Dan Paxton of the California Highway Patrol said the vehicle, a 2001 Honda Civic, was spotted near Johnson Pass Road about 2pm Oct. 12 by a person walking a dog in an area above the crash site. He said the vehicle was about 100 feet down an embankment on the south side of Highway 50.

When officers reached the vehicle and found no one inside, the El Dorado County sheriff's search and rescue team brought in a dog to search the area. Paxton said human remains were found about 100 feet from the vehicle.

The remains were turned over to the coroner. Efforts will be made to identify the body from dental work, Paxton said.

The vehicle had major damage, which could have been sustained as it went down the embankment, he said, but it has not been determined when the crash occurred. Paxton said no reports of a collision at that site had been reported.

When officers ran the license plate number, they learned it was registered to an Elk Grove man in his mid-40s who had been reported missing five months ago.

Homes selling throughout Lake Tahoe Basin

Home sales have continued to rise around Lake Tahoe, where there was a 37 percent jump in units sold and a 16 percent rise in sales volume, according to a quarterly report released by Lake Tahoe-based real estate company Chase International.

Homes less and more than the million-dollar mark experienced significant increases in sales (37 and 33 percent, respectively) while overall prices fell around the lake. The median price of a home in Lake Tahoe is $330,000 (down 11 percent) and the average price is $538,289 (down 15 percent). There is promise for home prices however, as the National Association of Realtors is projecting the median existing-home price to rise about 5 percent in 2012 and 2013.

Sales were strong in all areas of Lake Tahoe. Tahoe City saw a 33 percent increase in sales volume and a 42 percent leap in homes sold. Incline Village experienced a 30 percent increase in volume and 44 percent jump in homes sold. South Lake Tahoe came in with a 22 percent rise in volume and 34 percent increase in homes sold, while the East Shore saw a 39 percent decrease in volume (primarily due to a small dip in units sold for more than a million dollars) and a 27 percent rise in homes sold.

Incline Village has the highest median home price (down 8 percent to $702,000) and South Lake Tahoe has the lowest median home price ($239,000, down 14 percent). Tahoe City saw the lowest drop in median home price (down 7 percent to $419,000) while the East Shore had the biggest drop in median home price (down 29 percent to $410,000).

There were slight variances in Truckee home sales. The median home price rose two percent to $445,000 while sales volume was up three percent and units sold increased six percent. Ski areas (Northstar, Squaw Valley, and Alpine Meadows) experienced an 11 percent drop in sales volume and nine percent rise in units sold. Homes selling for less than $1 million were up 24 percent.

The report compares sales from Jan. 1 through Sept. 30, 2012, to the same time frame of 2011.

— Chase International real estate

Declining property values at 'the hole' in South Lake Tahoe create $1.5 million problem

By Kathryn Reed

Deciding to disband redevelopment agencies throughout California has proved to be more cumbersome than many people anticipated and has necessitated the revision of laws and new ones created to help local governments comply with what Sacramento wants.

It has left South Lake Tahoe and El Dorado County battling over $1.5 million. It's Nancy Kerry as a member of the successor agency and Joe Harn, the county auditor who is supposed to oversee all the financial dealings with the agency, who are going after each other.

A meeting Oct. 11 of the South Tahoe Redevelopment Successor Agency board was heated and contentious at times. This is the board created after the state said redevelopment agencies must go away.

A lower assessed value on properties at the South Tahoe hole means a loss of $1.5 million. Photo/LTN

Hal Cole represents South Lake Tahoe and he is the chairman of the board. Other members include John Knight, El Dorado County supervisor; Kindred Murillo, Lake Tahoe Community College president; Vicki Barber, superintendent El Dorado County Office of Education; Randy Vogelgesang, South Tahoe Public Utility District board member; Nancy Kerry, South Lake Tahoe employee; and Coy Baugh, public member.

The battle over the nearly $1.5 million stems from property owners of the rebar and concrete that was supposed to be a hotel-convention center near the state line asked for their parcels to be reassessed. They were. It meant about $1.5 million less in property taxes having to be paid by those property owners.

But the problem is the county already allocated those funds. They went to the Redevelopment Agency before it was dissolved.

On Oct. 1, Harn said he would deduct the $1.5 million from the

2013 property tax disbursement.

On Oct. 9, city staff on behalf of the successor agency wrote a letter objecting to Harn's actions.

Kerry, at the Oct. 11 meeting, said she is not disputing the money is owed, but questions who gets paid first. She believes the money should be considered a debt the successor agency would deal with. Harn says that is wrong, that the money is a tax roll adjustment.

Harn said it's his job to make the correction without regard to who is affected by the action.

Kerry wants it as a debt because then the obligation to pay it back is secondary to the bondholders.

"It's crippling to take all of it at once. The successor agency is not questioning that the money is owed," Cole said.

In this post-redevelopment era, is it the county treasurer-tax collector who would determine if a payment plan could be structured. If it's not, then where the $1.5 million comes from remains unknown.

It was resolved at Thursday's meeting that the city on behalf of the successor agency would see if the county would work on a payment plan for the $1.5 million and that a meeting with the state Department of Finance would be sought so those people can weigh-in.

However, Mindy Patterson, lead analyst with the Department of Finance, on Oct. 11 via email confirmed the $1.5 million is a roll correction – not debt, as the city would prefer it labeled.

Having $1.5 million be wiped off the books also means the agencies that benefit from this property tax won't be getting their share. That includes South Lake Tahoe, El Dorado County, STPUD, LTCC and Happy Homestead Cemetery District.

It’s likely their share of funds from what was redevelopment won’t be seen for years based on all the debt the successor agency is now saddled with.

The one bright spot for the agencies is that at the Oct. 11 meeting on a 5-2 vote, with Cole and Kerry the dissenters, it was agreed the $1.4 million that had been set aside for the Aspens housing project will be returned to the successor agency coffers. And in turn it will be distributed to the government bodies listed above.

Fuel mixture likely cause of South Tahoe fatal plane crash

While the definitive reason a plane crashed in August while taking off from Lake Tahoe Airport has not been determined, preliminary data points to the mixture of fuel as the reason.

Five people from Fresno died Aug. 25 when the Piper Cherokee nose-dived into a field as it was taking off toward the lake. Witnesses had said they heard the plane sputtering before is crashed.

“While taxiing to the ramp, the airplane’s engine shutdown and it took numerous attempts for the pilots to restart it," according to the National Transportation Safety Board's preliminary report. "Upon parking, the pilots reported to the attendants that the airplane's fuel/air mixture was difficult to establish at such a high density altitude and that if you operate the engine too lean its temperature will exceed normal operation parameters."

On board were Francisco De La Mora, 43, owner and pilot of the plane; his wife Lorena De La Mora, 39; their 6-year-old daughter Esmeralda De La Mora; Harold Cardwell, 60; and his wife, Kin Cardwell, 41.

— *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

South Tahoe investment broker headed for prison

Lori Zoval, 47, of South Lake Tahoe was sentenced Oct. 12 to three years and eight months in prison for embezzling client money while employed as a licensed investment broker with a brokerage firm in Folsom.

A hearing is set for Nov. 2 to determine the restitution amount.

Lake Tahoe News first wrote about Zoval in February 2011.

A year ago, Zoval pleaded guilty to using her position of trust to embezzle at least $24,939 from the investment and retirement accounts of her clients between October 2005 and April 2006. At sentencing, however, the court found that Zoval had stolen more than $430,000 from these clients.

At sentencing, the court found that Zoval had fraudulently created documents making it appear that her clients authorized money transfers from their accounts and took steps to lull the victims into believing that she was making legitimate and profitable investments on their behalf.

U.S. District Judge Garland E. Burrell Jr. refused to grant probation, which is what her attorney requested.

Burrell, in a statement, said, "Her actions show a lack of respect for the law and her failure to accept full responsibility for what she did."

When Zoval gets out of prison she will be subjected to three years of supervised release.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Safeway's third quarter profits boosted by sale of Genuardi's

By Steven E.F. Brown, San Francisco Business Times

Safeway Inc. finished selling 16 Genuardi's stores for $80.4 million, and the $49 million of that left after taxes kept the company's third quarter profit above that of the same quarter a year ago.

Pleasanton-based Safeway earned $157 million on sales of $10.049 billion in the quarter ended Sept. 8. A year earlier the company earned $130.2 million on sales of $10.064 billion.

Per share earnings were 66 cents in the most recent quarter, up from 38 cents a year earlier. But the company had just 237 million shares outstanding in the most recent period, down from 343 million a year earlier.

Comparing income from continuing operations, Safeway earned $108 million in the most recent quarter, down from $130.3 million a year earlier.

Safeway spent $159.6 million in capital expenditures during the quarter. All in all, it closed 23 stores, including those 16 Genuardi’s that it sold.

The company still expects to earn $1.90 to $2.10 per share for the full year.

Environmental groups want stricter pesticide rules in California

By Robert Rodriguez, Fresno Bee

A group of environmentalists is calling for tighter government restrictions on pesticide use, saying current regulations are creating a health risk among children.

The Oakland-based Pesticide Action Network released a report Tuesday blaming pesticide use for a rising number of health problems among children, including developmental disabilities, autism and attention deficit disorder.

The report titled, “A Generation in Jeopardy: How pesticides are undermining our children’s health and intelligence” compiled existing academic and government research to make its claims.

The report was released in several cities across the country, including Fresno.

“The growing body of research tells us that pesticides, in combination with other environmental and behavioral factors, are creating a looming epidemic of diseases and disorders,” said Sarah Sharpe, environmental health director of Fresno Metro Ministry.

Sharpe said the report urges federal regulators to create tougher policies that would make it easier to pull existing pesticides off the market when scientific studies suggest they may harm children.

The report also calls for more support for farmers to help them transition away from using pesticides and to create a national goal for reducing pesticide use.

But state officials say some of what the environmental groups are asking for already is being done.

Lea Brooks, spokeswoman for the California Department of Pesticide Regulation, said the agency has spent more than $6 million since the 1990s to support 60 projects and 130 different organizations to reduce pesticides.

The department is also the only one in the nation that routinely does environmental monitoring of soil, water and air. It also tracks pesticide residue in fresh produce.

“And we use this information to determine if any further regulatory measures are necessary,” Brooks said. “Our job is to enforce the regulations on pesticide use to assure proper and safe use of pesticides.”

Brooks said the department's scientists are reviewing the report's findings.

Raley's says it has made final offer to grocery union

By Melissa Wiese, Sacramento Business Journal

Raley's Inc. says it has handed over its final offer to the union covering its workers.

The West Sacramento-based grocery chain has been in negotiations with the United Food and Commercial Workers for 14 months, according to a Raley's spokesman.

The proposal includes a health care plan that's almost the same as the one offered to other Raley's employees, including store directors, according to the store. And the offer doesn't get rid of paid vacation and holidays, unlike a union agreement recently made with Modesto-based Save Mart.

"We simply do not feel it is right to take away paid vacation and holiday time from our hardworking employees in order to reduce our expenses," John Seagale, spokesman for Raley's, said in a statement.

Despite Raley's statement of a final offer, the union isn't buying it.

"This proposal is inferior to what was already rejected by Raley's members during voting that also authorized a strike, if necessary," Jacques Loveall, UFCW Local 5 president, said in a statement on the union's website. He said mediators want to talk with the union and the grocery chain.

Raley’s recently announced it would temporarily halt store closures as it moves to save money through cutting expenses and increasing sales. However, it also said the chain needed an “immediate resolution on the union contract.”

Barton: Fungal meningitis not a threat locally

Barton Health officials are reporting there is no threat to patients of the South Lake Tahoe hospital to contract fungal meningitis.

“Barton Memorial Hospital does not purchase any drugs from NECC nor, for the nine-years that I have been the director of pharmacy, has the hospital ever purchased any drugs from that company,” Barry Keil stated in a memo. “The epidural steroids provided by the hospital pharmacy and used at Barton Hospital, come directly from the drug manufacturer and are not pre-prepared by an outside compounding pharmacy [such as the NECC].”

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention has reported 137 people with fungal meningitis linked to epidural steroid injections of the steroid, methylprednisolone and 12 related deaths. The contamination of these epidural injections was the result of contamination by a single compounding pharmacy in Massachusetts, New England Compounding Center.

The CDC is coordinating a multistate investigation of fungal meningitis among patients who received an epidural steroid injection with a potentially contaminated product.

State sanctions auditing firm used by TRPA, TTD

The auditing firm that Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and Tahoe Transportation District use has been sanctioned by the state because of its involvement with the city of Bell.

It had been recommended that Mayer, Hoffman and McCann have its license suspended for six months. That recommendation was stayed. The auditing firm per the state Board of Accountancy must pay a $300,000 fine and is on probation for two years.

“After the Bell story broke, we performed a review of MHM’s audit and were confident in the quality of performance by our MHM partner and his team,” Kristi Boosman, spokeswoman for TRPA, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “Our partner from MHM is Marc Davis who will be here conducting our audit later this week. … he and his team were not connected with the Bell audit.”

Lake Tahoe News first wrote about TRPA using this auditing firm in September 2011.

“If you will remember, the state controller alleged that the audit of the city of Bell was not performed in accordance with the majority of government auditing standards and he identified numerous deficiencies. He referred the matter to the state board,” Davis said in an email to Boosman that she forwarded to *Lake Tahoe News*. “We disagreed strongly with the state controller’s findings. In response, the state board conducted its own investigation and identified only eight areas where the audit documentation for the city of Bell could have been improved.”

– Lake Tahoe News staff report