

T.J. Maxx signs lease for South Lake Tahoe store

It's signed. That would be the lease between T.J. Maxx and the property owners at the Y in South Lake Tahoe.

Now the interior improvements can begin. Those are expected to take three to four months, with the discount retailer able to open in the fall.

This means the store will open in time for the holidays – even though it will be nearly a year after the retail chain originally intended to open.

The manager and assistant manager positions that were posted on the store's website in May are still online.

No one from the Massachusetts-based company was available for comment Wednesday night.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Police investigating homicide at Stateline area motel

A welfare check of a woman at a South Lake Tahoe motel turned into a coroner's case Wednesday afternoon.

South Lake Tahoe police officers entered the Stateline area motel on June 20 and found a 40-year-old woman deceased on the bed.

No one from the Lone Pine Lodge would speak to *Lake Tahoe News*

on the record and police are keeping mum other than to say they are treating the death as a homicide at this point.

A toddler had been heard crying in the room, which prompted the welfare check. Child Protective Services is caring for the child.

Police said more information should be released on Thursday.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Firefighters douse small blaze at Bijou disc golf course

A small fire at the disc golf course in South Lake Tahoe was quickly extinguished Wednesday afternoon.

While the fire was only 5-feet by 5-feet, three agencies responded in case it were to have grown. South Lake Tahoe, Lake Valley and the U.S. Forest Service responded to hole 22.

A witness told firefighters he saw some kids in the area before he saw the fire. He also told crews he was able to put out a small fire a couple days earlier.

Karl Koeppen, shift commander with South Tahoe, told *Lake Tahoe News* there is no definitive cause of how the June 20 fire started.

Firefighters throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin and region are on heightened alert because a small fire can grow into something unmanageable in short order. Plus, there have been a number of

red flag days – which is unusual for this early in the season.

While June 20 was not one of those days, Thursday has already been labeled a red flag day because of the expected 40 mph gusts.

Koeppen said with how dry everything is the threat of fire increases as the winds increase.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Shrinking snowpack may impact electric bills

By Craig Miller, KQED

While much is uncertain about California's warming climate, there is little doubt that it's already changing the fundamentals of how most of us get our water. In fact, the Bureau of Reclamation has estimated that the Sierra snowpack could be reduced by half as soon as a decade from now.

And that has some far-reaching implications that could even show up on your electric bill.

"When you hear people talk about a depleted snowpack, it's because of warmer temperatures and the snow just cannot stay in the hills," says Robert Shibatani, a hydrologist and consultant to numerous government agencies. He says the "hydrograph" for California – the "usual" pattern of precipitation and runoff – is already changing. "There's no question about it," he told me in a recent interview. "That's not an if. It's not even a when, because I can tell you the when. It's happening now."

Shibatani says it's not that we'll get less precipitation, necessarily, but warming temperatures will mean more of it falling as rain at higher elevations. And the relatively steady runoff we've come to count on to fill the reservoirs and spin the turbines throughout the summer and fall will be compressed into the late winter and early spring.

"What it's gonna mean is that we're gonna spill more often," says Einar Maisch, strategic planning director for the Placer County Water Agency. "And that means we're gonna lose generation."

Read the whole story

Police release details of suspicious package found near Safeway

Updated: June 20, 2012, 7:25am:

Details released Wednesday morning from South Lake Tahoe police: What was found was a large dark colored piece of luggage, about 2-feet wide, 4-feet long and 2-feet deep. In part, an unsigned note accused specific federal, county, and city law enforcement and court officials in the Midwest of committing a violent crime against the unknown person who had left the package.

Safeway was evacuated, as were all the rooms of the Best Western Timber Cove Lodge that faced the highway.

There was miscellaneous packaging, photographs and clothing in the container, but no explosives were found.

A suspicious device caused officials to close down Highway 50 in South Lake Tahoe in front of Safeway on Tuesday night.

Tahoe Douglas bomb squad officials were called out to determine if the device found near the bus stop was an explosive.

Eric Guevin, spokesman for Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District, told *Lake Tahoe News* his crew X-rayed the item; this confirmed it was not an explosive device.

“We want to err on the side of safety and not make any assumptions,” South Lake Tahoe Police Chief Brian Uhler said as to why the bomb squad was called June 19. “We try to keep things as safe as we can. We don’t want our citizens or officers in harms way.”

A Safeway customer service rep said, “We are not at liberty to say anything.” She deferred comment to the closed corporate offices. So it’s not known if the excitement disrupted business.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

RGJ photographer on assignment roughed up by deputies

By Scott Sonner, AP

RENO – The executive editor of the *Reno Gazette-Journal* was

preparing a formal complaint to local law enforcement Tuesday after he said one of his veteran photographers covering a brush fire was roughed up by sheriff's deputies who forced him to the ground and cited him for obstructing public officers.

Photo editor Tim Dunn, 60, was taking photos of the fire that destroyed two homes north of town in Sun Valley on Monday afternoon when Washoe County sheriff's deputies confronted him and detained him for more than a half hour, Executive Editor Beryl Love said.

"In the process of delivering the citation, he was forced to the ground," Love told the *Associated Press*, adding that the "excessive force" was a violation of Dunn's rights.

"He was handcuffed and left standing there for 30 or 40 minutes while the deputies were deciding whether to give him a citation. This was after he was complying with deputy's direction and was in the process of walking to the area he told him," he said. "His face was pushed into some gravel. "

The newspaper was investigating, but the three deputies involved appear to be the only witnesses to the incident other than Dunn, who said he did not provoke the treatment, Love said.

Washoe County sheriff's Deputy Armando Avina confirmed Dunn was detained for less than an hour near the scene of the fire Monday before he was issued a misdemeanor citation for resisting a public officer.

"The deputies on scene used their discretion and did not arrest and book Mr. Dunn, a citation was issued in lieu of arrest," Avina said Tuesday.

Barry Smith, executive director of the Nevada Press Association and a longtime area newspaperman, said he doesn't remember any such incident in the past 20 years.

"There are occasionally disagreements over where people should be and how much access there is, but I've never heard of a deputy actually beating up a photographer," he told AP. "I'm outraged."

A photo of Dunn on the *Gazette-Journal's* website Tuesday afternoon showed his cheek and right hand with large scrapes.

Dunn, an award winning photographer and chief photo editor with 37 years in the business, said he had been told to leave the area and was directed to another location farther away from the scene. He said he ultimately was taken to the ground by two deputies – one who shoved his foot on his back, and the other who pushed his face in the gravel.

Dunn said the deputies accused him of trying to impersonate a firefighter because he was wearing yellow, protective fire gear, a helmet, and goggles. But he noted that area fire personnel who conduct annual training emphasize the need for media to wear such clothes while covering wildfires.

"I kept thinking this was not really happening," Dunn said.

"There was no way I was obstructing any activity at that fire. It was in mop-up mode," he told AP Tuesday night, adding he didn't get the names of the deputies. "It's hard to write when you're in handcuffs."

Love said the newspaper was preparing a formal administrative complaint and advising Dunn on possible civil actions "appropriate for the injuries he sustained." He said it wasn't the first time his staff had run into trouble with authorities while trying to cover wildfires.

"We have had several instances during the past year when our reporters and photographers were not given access to fire scenes where we clearly had a right to be. But this goes above and beyond press access," Love said in a statement later Tuesday.

"The brutal nature in which Tim, a veteran photographer with more than 20 years of experience, was treated by sheriff deputies is beyond comprehension. Their use of excessive force on a fellow professional who also has an important job to do is shocking. His rights were clearly violated."

Avina said sheriff's Capt. J. Spencer made initial contact with Dunn at 5:15pm and instructed deputies to detain him one minute later. He said the captain asked a dispatcher for a formal case number for resisting a public officer at 5:22pm, issued Dunn a misdemeanor citation and told him he was free to leave at 6:05pm.

Avina said he couldn't comment further.

Smith said he spent much of Tuesday researching relevant state statutes, rules and regulations. He said fire officials and law officers "clearly do not have the authority to order the media around at any kind of an emergency site." He said obvious exceptions include "if somebody is obstructing the firefighters from getting to the scene or doing their job, or there is some imminent danger the reporter or photographer is not aware of – and in that case, they should be advising them."

"Nevada journalists are trained how to respond to wildfires," said Smith, who intends to support the newspaper in its action. "It sounds to me like the fire officials and deputies need to be trained on how to respond to the media."

Smith called it "absolutely preposterous" that Dunn could have been mistaken for a firefighter. He said his gear is specifically called for in the 20-page Sierra Front Media Fire Guide published by an interagency coalition that includes the U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Bureau of Land Management, Nevada Division of Forestry and others.

"Please keep in mind appropriate attire when you are covering fire operations. ... We cannot guarantee that the supply unit

will have sizes of fire clothing that will fit you. It is always best to come to a wildfire fully equipped," according to the guide. It also states, "Remember that the decision to assume risk remains with the journalist."

Smith said, "The whole idea of 'move or you're going to be arrested' is way outside that policy."

Fire investigators determined Tuesday the fire was caused by sparks from power lines in high winds that ignited dry grass at about 4pm Monday. The four-alarm blaze destroyed two homes and damaged a third.

Funding for road improvements requires S. Tahoe to take loan

By Kathryn Reed

A series of decisions by South Lake Tahoe's City Council on Tuesday is designed to begin improving the look of the area as well as the functionality.

The city will borrow close to \$6 million to fund \$5 million in improvements. The other million bucks is for debt service and the cost of issuance of the certificate of participation.

It's anticipated the interest rate will be less than 5 percent. The bonds are expected to be sold in early July, with the city having its cash by July 20. The city is able to use its roads as collateral for bondholders. In other words, if the city defaults, somehow the bondholders will own the city's streets.



South Lake
Tahoe streets
will be torn
up and put
together like
new this
summer.

Photo/LTN file

The bulk of the money will be to fix 12.5 miles of city streets – 8.5 miles called collectors, the remainder residential.

The remaining money will be used to improve Harrison Avenue – assuming property owners agree to a plan. If they don't get on the same page this summer, the city is contemplating how to spend that \$1.5 million – buying fire trucks, sprucing up the recreation center are some ideas.

The remaining quarter million being borrowed will be used to revamp Linear Park.

Harrison Ave. and Linear Park are slated for improvements to be made next building season while planning and design are wrapped up in 2012.

Alice Jones, CFO with Tahoe Keys Property Owners Association, pointed out how it would be nice if the city conferred with her group when work will be done on streets in their neighborhood. This is so projects can be coordinated.

The Keys board on Saturday approved replacing the water line on Venice Drive to coincide with the city repairing the street

so the asphalt is dug up once.

In other council news:

- The council approved a 10-year agreement with Tahoe Sports and Entertainment to operate the ice rink. An automatic additional 10 years would be added if the concessionaire puts in \$500,000 worth of improvements – which it plans to do in the next few years. That means TSE will eventually have close to the 20-year agreement it sought earlier this year but was denied.
- Letters to Tahoe Regional Planning Agency regarding the Regional Plan update were approved.
- A rest room with state money will be built at El Dorado Beach. Even though there is one at Lakeview Commons, this one is expected to be open year-round and help handle the crowds. It could be done by October. It will also include an office for the aquatic invasive species program people. (El Dorado Beach boat launch will open this summer, but it's not certain if it will before July 4. Launching fee is \$13, with the city getting one-quarter of that and the concessionaire the rest.)

S. Tahoe council disagrees on eminent domain for loop road

By Kathryn Reed

Just as the South Lake Tahoe City Council appeared to be on

the same page regarding how to approach the divisive loop road project, bickering and stubbornness took hold.



All five agree a letter needs to be written to the Tahoe Transportation District with strong language encouraging that bi-state agency to investigate more than one proposal for the loop road.

It is highly unusual for an environmental impact report or environmental impact study (both are being done) to delve into just one idea. While a preferred alternative is common, usually the document looks into more than one plan.

Not so when it comes to the loop road.

The project would reroute Highway 50 in South Lake Tahoe to go through standing businesses and residences in South Lake Tahoe, then behind Harrah's and MontBleu in Stateline.

Highway 50 from about where it intersects with Pioneer Trail on the north side of town would become a city street through the casino corridor.

Perhaps because the discussion started negatively June 19 with Mayor Claire Fortier wondering why the item was even on the agenda it should not have come as a surprise that Councilman Tom Davis would not budge on his motion.

The motion called for more alternatives to be studied, acknowledgement the current council would not use eminent domain, and the request that an independent economic study be conducted.

The vote was 3-2 with Fortier and Councilwoman Angela Swanson in the minority. These two don't want to lock the city into saying no to eminent domain when it's possible an alternative for the loop road the council likes could require that taking

of property.

Fortier and Swanson went so far as to say they will not sign the letter.

The juvenile banter returned at that point after what had been a fairly professional discussion. Davis said he might want to withdraw his name from letters he didn't agree with. Fortier said the issue will become a political point of contention in the November council race. (Bruce Grego and Hal Cole's seats are up.) Grego said maybe the voters should be asked to make the decision on the loop road. (He has clients with property in the area who could be affected if the current proposal goes through, but has yet to recuse himself from any of the discussions.)

Fourteen members of the public spoke at Tuesday's meeting before the bickering council members deliberated. Another 16 letters were part of the day's record, too.

The loop road will be on the July 3 agenda for the council to talk about commenting on the draft relocation plan. Comments will be due a week later.

City staff told the council that the document lacks specifics, especially when it comes to businesses, and really just meets the basic requirements of federal law. Still, the relocation of people and businesses are the main sticking points with locals, and is what's at the heart of the eminent domain discussion.

In the end, it really doesn't matter what the city says or thinks, the TTD board – of which Swanson is a member – can do what it wants. That board is expected at its July 20 meeting to discuss looking at more alternatives. Swanson will be absent and her alternate, Grego, will be city's rep. However, TTD does not have eminent domain authority; the city and Caltrans do.

2 birds in South Lake Tahoe found to have West Nile virus

Two American robins from the Tahoe Keys area tested positive for the West Nile virus.

The birds were found June 6.

The El Dorado County Environmental Management Department released the news June 19.

To date, no human cases of the virus have been reported in 2012.

When a dead bird or squirrel is found, call the state West Nile Virus Hotline at 877.968.2473.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

No contest plea by retired El Dorado County sergeant

By Max Ehrenfreund, Sacramento Bee

Don Atkinson, the former president of the El Dorado County Deputy Sheriff's Association and a retired sergeant, pleaded no contest on felony counts of embezzlement, fraud and

perjury, according to Lynda Gledhill, a spokeswoman for the California Office of the Attorney General.

Prosecutors allege Atkinson stole money from the Deputy Sheriff's Association, filed perjured campaign finance reports and stole \$100,000 from an elderly woman by securing a loan from her under false pretenses.



Don
Atkinson

As part of a plea agreement, Atkinson will be sentenced to five years in state prison. He will pay \$338,348.14 in restitution to the Deputy Sheriff's Association, and he will repay the \$100,000 he is accused of stealing from the woman, Gledhill said. In addition, she said, he will direct the California Public Employees' Retirement System to pay \$1,000 per month from his retirement account to the victims while he is in prison and on parole.

Atkinson was arrested in March after an investigation by the California Attorney General's Office and the El Dorado District Attorney's Office. He will receive his sentence July 30, Gledhill said.

Atkinson spent a number of years patrolling streets in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

He is the detective who in 2006 handled teacher Karsten Gronwald's child pornography case on the South Shore. In 2007, he was widely quoted admonishing then Sheriff Jeff Neves for shuffling assignments that put search and rescue responsibilities in the hands of Placerville deputies.

Atkinson was vocal with the Board of Supervisors when it came to budget cuts.

– *Lake Tahoe News contributed to this story.*