

Nevada highway deaths increasing

By John Potter, Channel 2 News

Recently, the Nevada Strategic Highway Safety Plan was developed, with the goal of zero traffic deaths on Nevada roads. But the numbers are going the opposite direction, just ahead of a dangerous season for drivers.

Spend a few minutes on Nevada roads and highways, and you'll quickly discover that many drivers really could use a remedial course in drivers education. The way the statewide accident numbers are looking this year, it's becoming a serious, dangerous issue.

Statewide, traffic fatalities are up by nearly a 3rd this year compared to the same time last year. So far in 2012, 77 people have died in Nevada traffic accidents...18 more than last year. Nevada traffic fatalities:

2012 to date: 77.

2011 same period: 59 (246 total for year).

It's a gruesome head start, and it comes right before the most dangerous time on the roads. Warmer weather brings more pedestrians, bicycles, and motorcycles, mixing in with too many drivers who just hit the gas and throw out the rules of the road. As motorcyclist Scott Alquist told us, "Cars just don't see bikes. We're invisible."

Read the whole story

South Tahoe continues to tweak sign ordinance

By Kathryn Reed

Small town politics reared its head at Tuesday's South Lake Tahoe City Council meetings as verbal sparks flew regarding the city's sign ordinance.



The underlying issues were posturing for political gain and protecting business clients.

The overt issue was whether the council would hear appeals of decisions made by the Planning Commission regarding historic signs.

It was agreed on a 5-0 vote that if three members of the council want to hear an appeal, it would be heard. This only pertains to the old signs, of which less than a dozen are estimated to fall into this category.

Planning Commissioner Judy Brown, who is also a former mayor of the city, asked for the item to be pulled from the council's April 17 consent agenda.

She and fellow Commissioner Austin Sass questioned the council's timing of revising its sign ordinance that was originally passed in October. This week's agenda item was the second reading of the revision that would have allowed an appeal of historic signs no matter what.

It was Councilman Hal Cole who suggested the majority of the council would need to agree on the hearing.

Sass, who intends to run for the City Council again, questioned why the owners of Stardust Lodge asked for the hearing before the Planning Commission be delayed until after this specific council meeting.

He said there is an appearance of impropriety.

Councilmen Bruce Grego and Tom Davis have been extremely vocal in their desire to have the electeds hear the appeals. Grego is the attorney for the McCarthys, who own the Stardust. However, if an appeal did come before the council, he would have to recuse himself. Davis is in the lodging industry.

Jan McCarthy, who had to have her personal attacks on Sass curtailed by City Attorney Patrick Enright, said she doesn't believe the Stardust's sign would receive a fair hearing with Sass making this a personal issue, and having allegedly voiced his intent to vote for the sign to not be allowed to remain standing.

S. Lake Tahoe operating in the black despite TOT shortfall

By Kathryn Reed

Even though hotel taxes are down considerably because people stayed away from the barren ski slopes, South Lake Tahoe's midyear budget report was positive.



“We are living within our means,” City Manager Tony O’Rourke told the council April 17. “We no longer have financial icebergs looming.”

A year ago the council created a five-year budget, plus business and strategic plans designed to put the city on stable ground, improve infrastructure and move the city into the 21st century. Those measures appear to have righted the listing mother ship to put its 23,000 residents on a voyage filled with fewer rough seas.

While the city is not financially out of the woods because it is dependent on tourism and many properties are bank owned, O’Rourke believes the bottom has been reached and things are on the upswing.

“We need to continue to make an investment in the community,” O’Rourke said.

That is why \$ 3 million is being put into a capital improvement program reserve. This is coming from the city’s undesignated reserve fund. That pot of money per city ordinance is to be at 25 percent of the general fund and has grown to about 36 percent – thus the reason money can be reallocated.

South Tahoe’s three main sources of income are property tax (22 percent of the budget), TOT (16 percent), and sales tax (11 percent).

MaryAnne Brand, interim director of finance, said projections in property taxes are for growth to be 1.5 to 2 percent each of the next five years.

But she told *Lake Tahoe News* after the Tuesday meeting, “It’s a moving target, it’s so volatile, but no major changes are

expected.”

A chunk, though, of property taxes that could go away in two years is what’s being collected from the would-be convention center site. Through the Teeter law the city for five years is entitled to its \$350,000 worth of property taxes from the county even though the owners are not paying their bill. Technically, now the successor agency to the Redevelopment Agency receives that cash. It goes to pay debts associated with redevelopment.

The drop-in visitors to the area during the winter have reduced the projected hotel tax by \$298,000. The dissolution of the Redevelopment Agency compounds the lack of projected TOT to date to \$573,000.

Councilman Tom Davis, who is part owner of Tahoe Keys Resort, said bookings for the three summer months are higher than a year ago. This could swing the TOT pendulum in the other direction.

With the dissolution of the Redevelopment Agency per state order, the city received a little more than \$1 million from the housing segment to be used in the general fund. This money is offsetting the losses in the 2011-12 budget so there is a temporary surplus of \$145,029.

This “extra” cash also compensates for the loss of \$278,000 in projected income from beach parking. That plan was derailed earlier this year.

Changes in expenses that were approved Tuesday include taking the savings from eliminating the fire marshal position and unfreezing two firefighter positions; reclassifying the community outreach-volunteer coordinator to marketing and outreach coordinator; making the PIO the assistant to the city manager; and bumping the deputy city attorney up a rung.

O’Rourke said the reclassifications are to reflect what the

people in those positions are actually doing.

Another unforeseen expense was the \$30,000 to repair the compressors at the ice rink. While a private company operates the arena, the current lease has the city being responsible for certain maintenance issues. The contract with TSE is slated to be back before the council on May 1.

In other city news:

- City Manager Tony O'Rourke, while having interviewed for a job in southern Oregon, told *Lake Tahoe News* it is probably not the best fit. He plans to do the job in South Tahoe for the foreseeable future.
- The old 56-acre steering committee will be reconvened in May, with topics to include El Dorado County's desire to rename Lakeview Commons and what to do with the campground side of the project.
- The city Planning Commission approved a design change for the driveway for the Raley's gas station because the landlord of the larger center wanted \$10,000 a month for use of their property.

Placer County allocates \$3 mil. for Tahoe-area projects

The Placer County Board of Supervisors last week approved spending \$3 million by the North Lake Tahoe Resort Association for four capital and transportation projects.

NLTRA is contracted with the county for transportation and infrastructure development, and tourism and visitor information service.

The four projects are:

North Lake Tahoe Historical Society Black Bear Exhibit (\$10,000). The funding will go toward an interpretive display in the Gatekeepers Museum in Tahoe City;

Auburn, Truckee and North Lake Tahoe Visitors Centers (\$112,000). This project will allow for development and installation of two visitor-oriented displays in Auburn, Truckee and the moving and upgrading of the existing visitor center in Tahoe City;

North Lake Tahoe Water Shuttle Pilot Program (\$380,000): This is funding for a three-year pilot program that will use water shuttles on the lake to connect the West Shore, Tahoe City, Carnelian Bay and Tahoe Vista; and

Lake Tahoe Regional Multimodal Pedestrian and Safety Improvement Project (\$2.5 million): The project, formerly known as the Kings Beach Commercial Core Improvement Project, will upgrade and repair a 1.1-mile stretch of Highway 28 through Kings Beach. The TOT funds will help fund construction of curb, gutter, sidewalks and storm water drainage elements.

S. Tahoe cops clamping down

on drivers using cell phones

How often do you see drivers texting or talking with hand-held cell phones and wish they would be stopped and cited? California's second annual Distracted Driving Awareness Month this April will once again find law enforcement in the South Lake Tahoe joining in statewide zero tolerance enforcement efforts for illegal cell phone use and texting violations.

A ticket for violating either the hands free or no texting law costs a minimum of \$159, and subsequent tickets cost \$279.

South Lake Tahoe Police Department will join hundreds of police and sheriff departments plus the CHP to conduct distracted driving enforcement operations.

Drivers who use hand-held devices are four times as likely to get into crashes serious enough to injure themselves, officers say. Younger, inexperienced drivers under 20 years old have the highest proportion of distraction-related fatal crashes. In addition, studies show that texting while driving can delay a driver's reaction time just as severely as having a blood alcohol content of a legally drunk driver.

There are simple measures drivers can take to minimize distractions in the vehicle:

- Turn your phone off or put it out of reach before starting the car.
- Alert callers that you are unable to take calls when driving by changing your voicemail message.
- Make it a point not to call or text anyone who may be driving, such as during the commute to and from work or school, especially parents calling teen drivers.
- If you do need to make an important call or respond to a text message, pull over to a safe place to do so.

- If going cold turkey is too much of a stretch and you just can't turn your phone off, consider using one of the available mobile phone apps that holds calls and incoming texts.
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Comments sought on final phase of Blackwood Canyon

The public comment period on the Blackwood Canyon project along the West Shore has been extended to May 10.

The Lahontan Water Quality Control Board is considering a mitigated negative declaration to comply with CEQA requirements.

Work on this Placer County project has been going on for a number of years. The last phase by the U.S. Forest Service is expected to reduce excessive bank erosion and channel incision, improve floodplain connectivity, enhance wildlife habitat and restore degraded riparian plant communities.

The Forest Service through its NEPA process found no significant impacts for the project. However, the water board staff determined additional mitigation measures and information are needed to comply with California environmental regulations.

Copies of the documents may be obtained by calling (530) 542.5400 or going to the water board office at 2501 Lake Tahoe Blvd., South Lake Tahoe.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Court denies appeal of gambling cheat included in Black Book

By Cy Ryan, Las Vegas Sun

CARSON CITY – The Nevada Supreme Court has denied the appeal of Brent Eli Morris, convicted of illegally entering Las Vegas casinos while a member of the Black Book and cheating at craps.

Morris says he was never notified he was included on the list that bars individuals from going into Nevada casinos.

He says he was in prison in February 1994 when the Nevada Gaming Commission placed his name in the list of excluded people. He was serving a seven-year term for cheating at a Lake Tahoe casino.

After a four-day trial in Las Vegas in March 2011, he was convicted of four counts of violating the exclusion by the Black Book at the Orleans, Gold Coast, Excalibur and Caesars Palace.

He was also convicted of two counts of cheating at craps for placing bets after the dice was thrown. He received an 8- to 20-year prison term.

Read the whole story

Drought expands throughout the United States

By Doyle Rice, USA Today

The U.S. hasn't been this dry in five years.

Still reeling from devastating drought that led to at least \$10 billion in agricultural losses across Texas and the South in 2011, the nation is enduring more unusually parched weather.

A mostly dry, mild winter has put nearly 61% of the lower 48 states in "abnormally dry" or drought conditions, according to the U.S. Drought Monitor, a weekly federal tracking of drought. That's the highest percentage of dry or drought conditions since September 2007, when 61.5% of the country was listed in those categories.

Only two states – Ohio and Alaska – are entirely free of abnormally dry or drought conditions, according to the Drought Monitor.

The drought is expanding into some areas where dryness is rare, such as New England.

"Conditions are starting to worry us now," said Keith Eggleston, a climatologist with the Northeast Regional Climate Center in Ithaca, N.Y.

According to the U.S. Geological Survey, stream flow levels are at record or near-record lows in much of New England. The Drought Monitor lists all of Vermont as "abnormally dry," just six months after the state's wettest August on record that stemmed mainly from disastrous flooding by the remnants of

Hurricane Irene.

Read the whole story

'11 vintage has winemakers apprehensive; '10 looks OK

By Kathryn Reed

SOMERSET – Take a bottle of Zinfandel from any two years and they won't taste the same. In large part that is because the weather wasn't the same those two years.

While winemakers can work some magic with fermentation and blending, Mother Nature plays a huge role in what comes out of the bottle. But there is usually a consistency in flavors from an individual winery. The exception plays out with extreme weather. The 2011 vintage may just be that exception. The answer will be known down the road.

With the last two years being wetter and cooler than normal, many wineries in El Dorado County are certain the flavors will be less fruit-forward than years past. And the number of bottles will likely be less for 2011 because some of the grapes could not be harvested.



Wineries are

hoping the
2012 harvest
is better than
a year ago.
Photos/Kathryn
Reed

The area received 60 to 70 inches of rain the previous two winters. About 26 inches have fallen this winter. Pam Miller with Single Leaf Winery said 30 inches is what the vines like to have.

"We lost an enormous amount of crop last year," Miller told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Zinfandel, which by the ton is the No. 2 grape in El Dorado County behind Cabernet, has a thin skin. Bunch rot can set in quickly. Then the season is over.

"I'm very reluctant to speak of 2011. Some is OK, some will take a lot more cellar work," Single Leaf winemaker Scott Miller said.



Scott Miller, right, of Single Leaf talks about his wines with Pam Valentine and Tom Ward.

However, both Millers are excited with how the 2010s are coming out. Some started to be bottled a couple weeks ago. The

Zins won't be released for three years, but the Barbera will be out late summer.

"Our '10s are just spectacular," Pam Miller said.

Elliot Graham at Busby Cellars told *Lake Tahoe News* the 2010 and 2011 vintages are not going to have big fruity flavors.

"2010 and '11 are different than any (before) because it never got warm," Graham said. "So, it will be a different style."

He is starting to bottle some of the 2010 vintage.

At Skinner winery the 2010 Mourvedre was being poured during the first weekend of Passport – the annual two-weekend wine tasting put on by El Dorado Winery Association. Only 800 acres of this varietal are planted in California, with 3 acres belonging to Skinner.



Elliot Graham of Busby is cautiously optimistic about 2010 and 2011.

"We are excited by the '10 whites," Chris Pittenger, Skinner winemaker, said. "They are pretty elegant wines."

He's in the process of doing blending trials with the reds.

Pittenger isn't sure how the 2011 vintage will fare, but said with the similarity of weather to 2010, it might be better than people anticipate.

John Latcham, winemaker at Latcham Winery, is optimistic what ends up in the bottle from 2011 will be good, but he shakes his head thinking about what it took to make it through the harvest.

"Last year was a devastating year to the wine industry. We were picking between raindrops," Latcham said. "We literally handpicked every bunch."

That takes time and is an expensive process.

His crew was out there regularly putting down a mildew spray. But the rains came and just washed it away. It became a daily application.

The most upbeat winemaker was Rich Rorden at Cantiga.

"I've never witnessed a bad year, just differences," Rorden said. "If all the wines tasted the same, we would be Gallo. The weather always plays a role, but the grapes always ripen."

Facts from El Dorado County's 2010 harvest (the most current year available):

- \$4.9 million, the total value of grapes based on average open market prices
- 2,200 acres of wine grapes (this is twice the acreage of 12 years ago)
- \$1,279, average price per ton of wine grapes. This was a slight increase compared to 2009.
- 4,700 tons, amount of wine grapes grown.

Info:

Tickets are still available for Passport by going online. They are \$70, which includes the whole weekend – April 21-22. Thirty-two wineries are participating. The event is 11am-5pm each day.

California cutting back on prescription drug monitoring

By Sarah Varney, NPR

This is a story about what can happen when no one is looking. For the patients at Universal Pain Management, a medical clinic in northern Los Angeles County, Dr. Francis Riegler is always looking.

Riegler huddles with the clinic's nurse practitioner over a computer printout. The one-page report from the state's drug-tracking system shows that a patient was on the hunt for more Vicodin, a powerful pain reliever that he was already getting from Riegler's clinic.

California has the oldest continuous prescription-drug monitoring program in the U.S., dating to 1939. It used to rely on carbon copies: one for the pharmacy, one for the doctor and one to be sent to the state's Department of Justice. The system went online in 1998, and that's when its full power was realized. Now, Riegler and other physicians can log in and see which prescriptions their patients have filled

anywhere in California.

“I think it’s fair to say that we were able to weed out a significant number of people who were either abusing or diverting their medications or hoarding them where we simply had no idea,” he says.

So alarm bells went off among doctors and law enforcement when California Gov. Jerry Brown announced last year that, for budget reasons, he was eliminating the Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement, which had long managed the prescription-drug monitoring program. Dr. Scott Fishman, chief of pain medicine at the University of California, Davis, is among those fearful that if California’s system closes down, the Golden State could attract pill pushers from around the country.

“The rest of the country is developing prescription monitoring programs, not abandoning them,” Fishman said.

Read the whole story