

Fire destroys house in Incline Village

An alert neighbor helped keep a residential fire in Incline Village from spreading beyond the lone structure on Wednesday.

North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District officials said the cause of the fire at 665 Country Club Drive is still being investigated. The loss has not been quantified in dollars.

The neighbor reported seeing smoke at 3:40pm Jan. 18.

Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District and Sierra Fire Protection District also responded.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

1 man's campaign to upend Nevada's tax structure

By Michael Squires, Las Vegas Sun

A Las Vegas attorney will launch a legal and political effort this week aimed at establishing and funding a parallel state budget, beyond the reach of the Legislature and governor.

Kermitt Waters seeks to place on the November ballot a proposed constitutional amendment calling for a sweeping overhaul of Nevada's tax system – abolishing property taxes on single-family homes among other things while identifying and allocating new tax revenue.

Waters said last week his proposal is borne of frustration

with the status quo in Carson City. The state's 63 lawmakers represent the powerful interests who fund their campaigns, he said, not the voters who elect them.

"The people of Nevada don't have a Legislature. Mining and gaming have a Legislature," Waters said. "If the Legislature could get their hands on this money, none of this would ever happen."

Waters will begin his effort in the courts, where he says he will file suit this week targeting the law that limits citizen initiatives to a single subject. That restriction would prevent his sweeping tax proposal from reaching the ballot. He will ask that the so-called single-subject law be eased or overturned.

Should he succeed in court and then gather enough signatures for his proposal to win a place on the ballot, voters would consider an initiative that would remove property taxes on single-family homes, and institute a 20 percent levy on mining and a gross-receipts tax on businesses with revenue of over \$1 million a month. Gaming companies and nonprofits would be exempt, as well as food for home consumption.

Read the whole story

Curriculum not set for gay history in California schools

By Diana Lamber, McClatchy Newspapers

SACRAMENTO — A controversial California law approved last July amid heated debate isn't likely to affect California

classrooms any time soon.

The Fair Education Act adds lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Americans, as well as people with disabilities, to existing state law that requires that the contributions of women and minorities be taught in California social science classes. It also prohibits materials that reflect adversely on people because of race, gender or other characteristics.

The law officially took effect Jan. 1. But the California Department of Education hasn't laid out a companion curriculum, and state officials say they are leaving it up to school districts to determine how to comply.

While some local districts are working to design new curriculum, many others are simply waiting for the state's next adoption of new history and social science textbooks, scheduled for 2015. School officials say they have received little direction and have few resources – financial and otherwise – to do much else.

“Right now we don't have any funding to do the curriculum we need,” said Christopher Hoffman, superintendent of the El Dorado Union High School District. “We aren't going to add anything.”

Hoffman said the district will wait for the next round of textbooks or direction from the state.

Read the whole story

Death of redevelopment in

California a complicated tale

By Kathryn Reed

A \$5 billion a year “industry” that has existed in California since 1945 is about to die.

South Lake Tahoe’s redevelopment agency is one of more than 400 that must be dissolved by the end of the month because the state is eliminating property tax increment as a financing tool.



Embassy Suites and Heavenly Village are projects some say would not have been built without a redevelopment agency.

Photo/LTN file

Gov. Jerry Brown wants the money cities collect through redevelopment to go to education and public safety. Cities wonder how they will offer the basic services those dollars fund.

Cities made money via redevelopment projects by having them in special districts where the property tax was essentially

frozen for the entities receiving those dollars. When the assessed value went up – aka tax increment – all that money stayed with the jurisdiction where the redevelopment occurred.

For South Lake Tahoe, that has meant more than \$60 million since 1988, with another \$12 million set aside for affordable housing.

City officials would argue the more than \$600 million in private investment in the last 24 years would not have occurred without the redevelopment agency.

The state will take in more money by having property tax disbursements be divvied up as though redevelopment never existed. This means school districts in particular will get more money. Voters want schools to be funded at certain levels, most notably with the passage of Proposition 98. But the state has not always kept that promise. The state should have more to dole out to all levels of education with redevelopment agencies being dissolved.

But the state doesn't get that "extra" money until the debt is paid off. South Lake Tahoe has another 25 years to wipe that slate clean.

Figuring out the assets

How the city comingles its money does not help with clearly separating what goes where. When the South Lake Tahoe Redevelopment Agency was set up in 1988 it was a distinctly separate entity from the city, as required by state law. However, the people overseeing the agency have always been the City Council members, and the head of it has always been the city manager.

Instead of the agency having a simple budget, there are more than a dozen budgets within the main budget. They represent various projects.

Instead of the City Council approving two budgets – one for city business and one for redevelopment – it's all tied into one.

About \$83,000 from the redevelopment budget pays for various employees in South Tahoe. The city allocates percentages from various entities to cover an employee's salary.

That cash will have to be absorbed by the general fund. But the general fund's bottom line will increase because of the way housing dollars have been allocated prior to the dissolution. The exact impact to the general fund is not known – but city officials predict it could be a net gain.

Dissolving redevelopment agencies is not as simple as redirecting where the money goes or having the state own the assets or collect the proceeds from selling them.

For a city like South Lake Tahoe, detention ponds are on the list of assets. Who would buy a stormwater facility like that? What price tag would be put on it? "Probably no one" and "who knows?" are the answers.

"Some of our assets are liabilities. They require operation and maintenance money," Councilman Hal Cole said at the Jan. 17 meeting.

The city also owns spaces in the garage at the corner of Highway 50 and Ski Run Boulevard. Diamond Resorts might be a buyer for those.

The city also owns the vacant parcel on that corner. Its value might be \$1 million today. The state mandate is sell assets expeditiously and for the most amount of money. In this real estate market, those sentiments contradict one another.

The council at its Jan. 17 meeting asked for a list of assets to be available at the special meeting at the end of the month. This will also include items like computers.

Going forward

One thing in the city's favor is no one works for the redevelopment agency. This means no more job losses. However, throughout the state there is the potential of about 1,500 jobs going by the wayside, according to the California Redevelopment Association.

South Lake's agency once employed nine people. In last year's reorganization employees were reassigned even though the work of the agency went on.

What the change effective Feb. 1 means to South Tahoe is the \$5.7 million it pays each year to service its redevelopment bond debt won't be able to be paid without some help. The city's tax increment collections fall about \$1 million short of what's needed to pay the debt.

One thing that remains is transient occupancy tax dollars will continue to fill the gap to pay the Tax Allocation Bonds. This is because that's how the bond documents were written. As long as tax increment is insufficient, TOT will fill the gap for these bonds. This is only case in which TOT is used for debt.

Also in the must-pay column is the outstanding debt left from the \$7.2 million the redevelopment agency pilfered from the general fund to make Heavenly Village a reality. The balance is \$3.5 million.

In dissolving the redevelopment agencies, the state has said counties must loan the successor agencies the amount needed to pay the debt.

County governments are in no better financial shape than cities or the state, so how this will happen remains to be seen.

An irony with El Dorado County coming to blows with the city regarding Redevelopment Area 2 is that the tax increment from

that area will help the city be able to pay back the county faster.

The successor agency is the name the state has given to whoever takes over for the redevelopment agency. It does not have to be the city where the agency is. However, in South Tahoe's case, the city is the successor agency. This was done by a vote of the City Council on Sept. 27.

"One purpose of the successor agency is to pay the debt," Nancy Kerry, city redevelopment expert, told the council Jan. 17. "Money will still come in, but it is solely to pay the debt."

At a special Jan. 30 5pm council meeting the electeds will be asked to list the debts and assets of the redevelopment agency and transfer them to the successor agency. A fund must also be created to receive the tax increment and pay the debt.

The successor agency has four layers of oversight created by the state. The first is an oversight board that must be created by May 1. That board will be comprised of the mayor, a city employee appointed by the mayor, an El Dorado County supervisor, a county appointee, and one appointee each from Lake Tahoe Community College, Lake Tahoe Unified School District, and South Tahoe Public Utility District.

Successor agencies exist only until the debt is paid off. Once the debt is paid off, the taxing entities will receive their greater share of the tax increment. Essentially it goes back to pre-redevelopment shares. Those entities are members of the oversight board as well as others like Happy Homestead Cemetery District.

The other layers the state created are having the county auditor involved, then the state Department of Finance, and the state controller as the last set of eyes.

Affordable housing

A component of redevelopment agencies is affordable housing. At the Jan. 17 council meeting, the five agreed to set up a separate housing agency.

Money tied to the disbanding of redevelopment and grants in the pipeline would fund South Lake Tahoe's housing program for one or two years. It is possible two one-time funds could come from the state to the city for housing.

Had the council not taken this action the money and program would have been transferred to the county.

It remains to be seen what will happen to the Aspens project that is planned for near the corner of Ski Run Boulevard and Pioneer Trail.

On the horizon

Three issues could alter things. One is if Senate Bill 659 passes in the next two weeks. That would postpone the dissolution of redevelopment agencies to April 15.

Senate Bill 654 would transfer the housing fund balance to a new local housing agency when redevelopment agencies are dissolved.

Cerritos has filed a lawsuit seeking an injunction of Assembly Bill 26, the redevelopment dissolution law.

Brown to call for less testing in schools

By Kevin Yamamura, Sacramento Bee

Gov. Jerry Brown will call for less statewide testing and expanding classroom focus beyond math and English in his annual State of the State address tomorrow, according to his top education adviser.

Sue Burr, executive director of the State Board of Education, told hundreds of school finance officials today that Brown will seek to reduce student testing and push districts to focus on a broader array of subject areas. She spoke at an annual workshop produced by School Services of California, which advises districts on how to budget for the next school year.

"We think there's way, way too much testing in our system right now," Burr said. "Just as an example, a 10th grade student takes 15 hours' worth of tests. So that sophomore is losing 15 hours of their instructional program."

Burr said that while some testing is necessary for measuring schools, Brown will ask lawmakers to "take (hours) away from testing and give it back to instruction."

Read the whole story

League appoints board member as executive director

The League to Save Lake Tahoe board has picked one of its own to take over the organization.

Darcie Goodman-Collins, who has been on the board since 2009, is now the executive director. She has been affiliated with League since 1996 when she was an intern.

Goodman-Collins takes over for Rochelle Nason who abruptly left last fall. The League under Nason's guidance paved a path to multiple courtrooms in an effort to keep the conservation group's philosophies at the forefront of all matters concerning development or redevelopment in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

A criticism heard over and over again is the League doesn't play well with others.

In a prepared statement, the incoming executive director is taking a more tempered approach.

"There are two lessons that I'll bring with me into this position. The first I learned at Save the Bay. It is that collaboration, both outside and inside the organization, is critical for success. The second I learned as a board member at the League. It is that sound science must play a crucial role in decision-making if we are to make wise choices on how we engage with and preserve our outdoor treasures for all of us," Goodman-Collins, 32, said.

Goodman-Collins grew up in South Lake Tahoe. She was the community's youth representative at the first environmental summit when President Bill Clinton was here.

Since then, Goodman-Collins has earned bachelor's degrees from

UC Santa Barbara in biology and political science, and earned her doctorate at UCSB in environmental science and management. Her dissertation was how environmental restoration and science can integrate with community engagement and public policy.

She has worked with the UC Davis Tahoe Environmental Research Center and the Tahoe-Baikal Institute. Most recently she was habitat restoration director at Save the Bay.

Besides being passionate about science, Goodman-Collins likes to water and snow ski, snowshoe, and hike.

She and her husband plan to move to South Lake Tahoe.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

With 38 pipes draining into Lake Tahoe, are lake clarity efforts worth a billion bucks?

By Anne Knowles

Current efforts to improve the clarity of Lake Tahoe are not only a waste of time and money, they are a fraud.

That's the claim made in the inaugural newsletter of the Tahoe Pipe Club, a secretive coalition of "citizen, business owners, scientists and engineers," according to its website, who are fed up with what it says is more than a billion dollars

squandered on misguided scientific techniques which have failed to reduce lake turbidity.



One of 13
drains in
South Lake
Tahoe that
reach Lake
Tahoe.

Photo/LTN file

In its newsletter and on its website, the group points to “ineffective watershed management practices,” consisting of mechanisms such as road gutters and storm drain systems, often installed in flood-prone areas that do not impact the lake.

“As justification to use lake clarity funds, the public was told that these erosion control and BMP (best management practices) retrofit projects would clean the water which they do not, and these public relations campaigns were the genesis of the hoax which persists still today,” reads the newsletter entitled “Turning Tahoe Black?”

The club advocates using infiltration methods in which stormwater is absorbed into the ground via swales and basins rather than filtered and conveyed back into the lake, and to focus on only those watersheds that have a direct link to the lake in order to best utilize dwindling lake clarity funds.

The newsletter also grades eight clarity projects based on six categories. Only the Montgomery Estates project in South Lake Tahoe received a passing grade and was judged to provide a

benefit. The Luther Pass to Meyers project, for example, got an A for urban restoration, a C for hydrologic connectivity, and an F for the remaining criteria.

“The declining water quality and clarity of Lake Tahoe after spending a billion dollars and having ignored what matters most, the urban runoff from highways, streets, roads, and drainage and its discharge directly into Lake Tahoe through culverts and pipes, which account for an estimated 75 percent of the TMDL (total daily maximum load)” spurred members to form the club in 2010, John Runnels, a club member, said in an email to *Lake Tahoe News*.

The club won’t release member names or numbers. One member using the pseudonym Tyler Durden, from the book and film “Fight Club,” posts to the website and sends out the group’s newsletter. In an email to *Lake Tahoe News*, he says the focus should be on the club’s ideas, not its adherents.

“Pipe club is about the idea of sustainable effective urban actions to get to predevelopment clarity,” Durden said in an email to *Lake Tahoe News*. “Nothing will please us more than disbanding. We agree to dissolve when our goals are met.”

Those goals, as outlined at the website, include replacing conveyance-based approaches to water quality with infiltration methods, stopping unnecessary river realignment, no more land coverage tracking for water quality purposes, and an end to road sweeping and the paving of the Lake Tahoe Basin.

The club gets its name from the hundreds of drain pipes that feed into the lake, which the group is documenting in photos and videos at its website and in annual calendars.

“This 2012 Lake Tahoe Storm Drain Calendar is dedicated to the hundreds of urban outfall pipes which chronically discharge toxic storm water directly into the perennial streams of Lake Tahoe and Lake Tahoe itself every time it rains or snows,” reads the website.

The group has identified 38 pipes it says are a priority: 13 in South Lake Tahoe, including the three El Dorado pipes; 10 in McKinney Bay; four in Tahoe Pines; three in Kings Beach; two in Incline Village; and one each in Carnelian Bay, Marla Bay, Meeks Bay, Sunnyside, Tahoe Vista and Tahoma.

"The pipe club is compiling all this evidence of pipes putting dirty water into the lake," said Dylan Eichenberg, a senior at UC Berkeley who is studying conservation and resource management, grew up in Tahoma and supports the pipe club's goals. "The pipes are by far one of the most significant impacts on the lake."

Eichenberg is not a member of the club, but knows some of its members, has followed its work and supports it, and studied the same issues for his term paper entitled "Urban Impacts on Lake Tahoe". He would like to see what he calls "rain gardens" installed at the lake, which stormwater would flow into instead of storm drains.

"There could be trenches or basins every couple blocks as needed," Eichenberg said.

Tahoe Pipe Club is also routinely taking Secchi depth measurements and posting the results to Twitter and Facebook. Secchi depth measurements gauge water clarity using a dinner-dish sized-disk lowered into the water. Clarity is measured at the depth at which the disk is last visible to the naked eye.

The club hopes by posting the data and other related science it can raise public consciousness on the issue and influence lake clarity work and the resources supporting it. The group has no plans to raise money or initiate projects, and it does not attend public meetings such as the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, although it keeps the TRPA informed of its work.

For its part, the TRPA says it is aware of the group but defends its focus on water quality treatment based on the existing conveyance approach.

“TRPA appreciates Tahoe Pipe Club’s dedication to the water quality of Lake Tahoe,” the TRPA said in a statement provided to *Lake Tahoe News*. “The problem is not what comes out of the pipes, but what goes in. That is why TRPA is committed to supporting environmental redevelopment projects that include erosion control efforts for treating stormwater runoff in our built environment, from which science tells us is where 72 percent of the pollution entering Lake Tahoe comes. As water quality science evolves, TRPA will continue to support the most effective techniques for treating storm water on both public and private property.”

Incline hit with rash of vehicle burglaries

In the last three months of 2011, there were 26 vehicle burglaries in the Incline Village area.

Authorities say even in a big city, 26 burglaries in three months is unacceptable, but in an area such as Incline Village it is a matter for concern.

In Incline the thefts are mostly to vehicles that have been left unlocked.

“Basically, these burglaries could have been easily prevented if the vehicles had been locked,” Washoe County sheriff’s Deputy Armando Avina said in a statement. “Criminals are using

these unlocked vehicles as their own personal slot machines.”

Avina stressed that vehicle burglaries are crimes of opportunity. Criminals look for easy targets such as unlocked cars or valuables left in plain sight.

Burglaries of unlocked cars are also harder for authorities to investigate because there is typically little or no evidence left behind to provide leads, Avina said.

Avina said it’s also important not to leave anything of value, or any trace of valuables, visible in unattended vehicles. He advised against trying to hide purses, wallets or other valuables after parking a vehicle. If potential thieves are watching the parking lot, which is always a possibility, they’ll know that something valuable is in the vehicle and exactly where it is hidden.

Common vehicle burglary prevention tips include:

Lock the door when leaving the car.

Don’t leave valuables in the car.

If you need to leave valuables items in a vehicle, place them out of sight before reaching your destination,

Don’t leave any sign that there might be valuables hidden in a vehicle by leaving items such as docking stations or connector cables visible.

Be sure to set the car alarm or anti-theft devices.

Keep windows completely closed.

California adopts wildfire rules surrounding power lines

By Steve Timko, Reno Gazette-Journal

California adopted new rules Thursday aimed at preventing wildfires sparked by power lines.

In light of the Caughlin Fire blaze that destroyed 30 homes and forced 10,000 people to evacuate, Assemblyman Pat Hickey said laws like those adopted by the California Public Utilities Commission might have merit in Nevada.

"It will be worthwhile for Nevada lawmakers to look at what and why the California PUC came up with regarding new precautions to protect us from wildfires," said Hickey, whose assembly district includes many of the homes destroyed or threatened by the Nov. 18 fire.

The Reno Fire Department is continuing its investigation into what caused the Caughlin Fire, city spokeswoman Michele Anderson said Thursday. Initial indications are that winds faster than 70 mph whipped power lines in the Caughlin Ranch area and sparked a fire. The fire department has not reached a conclusion yet.

A series of fires in 2007 that destroyed more than 1,500 homes and killed 17 people prompted the California changes. The PUC believes wind-blown power lines caused many of the fires.

Read the whole story

Efficiency rules for batteries set by California regulators

By Rick Daysog, Sacramento Bee

California will become the first state in the nation to require greater energy efficiency in the battery chargers that millions of consumers use to power their cellphones, laptops, power tools and other electrical devices.

The California Energy Commission on Thursday unanimously approved new standards for battery chargers, which the agency says waste nearly two-thirds of the energy they collect.

Thursday's decision is the latest in a series of actions by the commission imposing first-in-the-nation energy standards on appliances and consumer products. In 2009, the commission adopted new rules for flat-screen TVs.

Since 1976, the commission says, its efforts to make appliances more energy-efficient have shaved \$36 billion from Californians' energy bills.

Energy commissioners said the new rules for chargers will save consumers roughly \$300 million a year, conserve enough electricity to power a city the size of Bakersfield and remove 1 million metric tons of greenhouse gas from the atmosphere – the equivalent of taking about 75,000 cars off the road each year.

Read the whole story