Fire district wants judge to block county from taking money for Incline residents

By Susan Voyles, Reno Gazette-Journal

The North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District is asking a judge to stop the county from taking district property tax revenues each month to pay for court-ordered tax refunds to Incline Village homeowners, saying the money is needed to run emergency services.

District lawyer Geno Menchetti of Incline Village filed a legal document on Friday seeking to block the county from taking $6.5 million in district funds – its share of $43 million in property tax refunds owed to Incline Village homeowners. District commissioners voted on Thursday to take the issue to court.

In the filing, Menchetti is asking Washoe District Judge Patrick Flanagan to order county Treasurer Tammi Davis to stop diverting property taxes from the district as those taxes are needed for fire and ambulance services.

In November, $689,055 or almost half the money collected by the treasurer was diverted to pay for the tax refunds.

If this continues, Menchetti wrote, the district would be unable to budget for the upcoming year or "at worst, be placed in a position of a severe financial crisis."

"It's likely our fire district, our only emergency service here, might have to close a substation, cut service and personnel," Menchetti said Friday after the filing.

Read the whole story

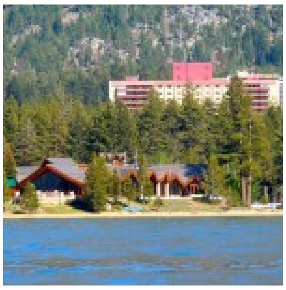
Douglas County's master plan takes control from TRPA

By Anne Knowles

MINDEN – The Douglas County Commission approved an update to the county's 15-year-old master plan, paving the way for the county to take over permitting in its portion of the Lake Tahoe Basin from the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

"The TRPA wants to get out of the permitting process," Douglas County Commissioner Nancy McDermid, who also serves on the Governing Board of the TRPA, said during the Jan. 5 commissioners' meeting. "And as chair of the (TRPA's) local government committee, I'm telling you it's going to happen."

The revision calls for the county to work with the agency on the update of its long-awaited Regional Plan and ordinance codes and "explore the feasibility" of taking over permitting responsibility through a memorandum of understanding.



With Douglas County taking more control of permitting in the Lake Tahoe Basin, it may have more of a say of what Edgewood Companies does with its land in Stateline. Photo/LTN file

Some of the work to update the county's local plans cannot be completed until the TRPA delivers its Regional Plan update, promised by year-end. That's because any plans for the Lake Tahoe Basin must comply with the TRPA's yet-to-be-completed plan, said Candace Stowell, planning manager for the county, during a presentation to the commission.

"Well, yes and no," McDermid said. "The city of South Lake Tahoe has adopted a plan and say they will comply" with the TRPA update after the fact, once the plan becomes available.

"We can't make changes until the TRPA comes out with a plan," Stowell replied.

Brandy McMahon, senior planner for the county, added that she has been working closely with the TRPA Planning Director John Hester and Regional Planning Coordinator Arlo Stockham, but said local plans can only be updated after the TRPA plan is finished.

"The message we get from the TRPA is different than what they tell the staff," McDermid said.

South Lake Tahoe adopted its updated General Plan in May 2011, with the caveat that it would change the plan where necessary in order to comply with the TRPA Regional Plan update. A month later, the League to Save Tahoe filed suit in U.S. District Court, claiming the city plan was out of compliance with the TRPA Regional Plan. In December, South Lake Tahoe City

Attorney Patrick Enright said he expected Judge Garland Burrell to rule on the case in early January. There has been no ruling to date.

Douglas County's master plan update also calls for the county to assist in the completion of the Stateline-to-Stateline Bikeway and to work with South Lake Tahoe, Caltrans and others in the planning and implementation of the Highway 50 Stateline Corridor/South Shore Community Revitalization Project.

The Highway 50 revitalization project will get more attention at the Jan. 10 meeting of Douglas County Planning Commission, when the commission gets status reports on the master plan changes and TRPA Regional Plan, according to Jo Etta Brown, chair of the commission.

Brown and fellow planning Commissioner Kevin Servatius were reappointed to the commission by the board of commissioners during its meeting. Public comment was unanimously in favor of reappointing the pair. Some spoke about the lack of representation of the lake on the board, but agreed that it was more important to keep people already up to speed on the complex issues facing the county. Bob Cook, project coordinator for the Chimney Rock chapter of the Nevada Fire Safe Council, had also applied.

"Bob lives at Stateline and we live in the valley, but there's no requirement to have someone from the lake and there never has been," Brown told *Lake Tahoe News*. "We know Lake Tahoe needs our help. And 90 percent of the problems at the lake are problems here in the valley, too."

The commissioners also added an action item saying the county would work with other stakeholders in the completion of the South Shore Vision Plan, a $70 million project to overhaul traffic routes, both pedestrian and vehicular, around the casinos. The item, proposed by Zephyr Cove attorney Lew Feldman, was approved but not before being changed to read that the county would incorporate the plan rather than adopt it.

Other master plan update items affecting the lake include changes designed to increase affordable housing throughout the county and development of green building codes.

Nevada’s largest casinos lose $4 bil. in 2011

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – Nevada’s major casinos saw total revenues increase to $22 billion last fiscal year, but the 256 properties reported a net loss of just less than $4 billion, the Gaming Control Board reported Friday.

It was the third year of losses in a row. Before that the only loss since records have been kept came in 2002, the year after the terrorist attacks.

The report, called the Nevada Gaming Abstract, analyzes those casino properties grossing $1 million or more in gaming revenue for the year ending June 30, 2011.

It shows that total revenues increased by just more than $1.1 billion from fiscal year 2010, but the total dollar value of the loss reported by the properties increased as well, by $600 million from the $3.4 billion loss reported in 2010.

The abstract shows that 2008 was the last year the major casinos in Nevada turned a collective profit.

Michael Lawton, senior research analyst for the control board, said the report shows mixed results for the gaming industry.

“Really there are two sides to this income statement and the first side obviously is revenues,” he said. “Revenues did increase. They are at $22 billion compared to $20.8 billion last year. That’s the first increase we’ve seen since fiscal year 2007, however it’s still about 13 percent below the peak levels we saw in fiscal year 2007.”

The expense side continues to show volatility, however, Lawton said.

The report shows that visitors are coming to Nevada and Las Vegas casinos, but they are spending less on gaming and more on other amenities, he said.

“Total revenue” is the money spent by patrons on gaming, rooms, food, beverage and other attractions. “Net income/loss” is the money retained by casinos after expenses have been paid but prior to deducting federal income taxes and prior to accounting for extraordinary expenses.

Gaming revenue accounted for nearly $10.2 billion of the $22 billion in total revenues, or 46.2 percent of the total. The 256 casinos paid $792.4 million in gaming taxes and fees, equating to 7.8 percent of their gaming revenue.

On a county-by-county basis, Clark County had 148 casinos grossing $1 million or more in gaming revenue during FY2011, which generated a combined net loss of just under $4 billion from total revenues of $19.5 billion. Washoe County had 30 casinos, which reported a combined net loss of $44.5 million from total revenues of $1.4 billion.

Nevada Gaming Abstract 2011 – Selected Statistics By Gaming Market

Area	Net Income/Loss	% Change from FY2010	Total Revenue	% Change from FY 2010	Gaming revenue from FY2010	% Change from FY 2010
Statewide	-$4 bil	+16.4%	$22 bil	+5.6%	$10.2 bil	+2.6%
Clark County	-$4 bil	+18.7%	$19.5 bil	+6.8%	$8.7 bil	+3.8%
Las Vegas Strip	-$2.2 bil	-14.1%	$14.5 bil	+9.3%	$5.5 bil	+6.4%
Downtown Las Vegas	-$59.9 mil	-18.7%	$900 mil	-0.6%	$496 mil	-2.4%
Washoe County	-$44.5 mil	+61.9%	$1.4 bil	-4.6%	$739 mil	-5.2%
Reno/Sparks	-$54.1 mil	+156%	$1.2 bil	-4.8%	$662 mil	-5.1%
Stateline	-$24 mil	-72.7%	$344 mil	-6%	$198 mil	-9.1%

In FY2011, 69 casinos owned by public companies accounted for 78.2 percent of the total gaming revenue generated statewide during the fiscal year.

El Dorado County man dies in mobile home fire

By Cathy Locke, Sacramento Bee

Fire officials are investigating the cause of an early morning fire at a mobile home park in Pollock Pines in which a 68-year-old man died and his wife was injured.

The El Dorado County Coroner’s Office this afternoon confirmed that the man found dead in the mobile home was John Harlan, said Battalion Chief Mike Pott of the El Dorado County Fire Protection District. He said Harlan’s wife, Virginia, was taken to Marshall Medical Center in Placerville, where she was treated for smoke inhalation and minor burns, and released.

Firefighters were called to the Wagon Wheel Mobile Home Park at 24 Hub St. at 12:19 a.m. The mobile home park is across the street from a district fire station. Medics arriving at the Hub Street address reported that fire was visible through the front door and flames were coming out the rear windows of the single-wide mobile home.

Read the whole story

Election law changes cumbersome for counties

By Gus Thomson, Auburn Journal

Placer County elections chief Jim McCauley said Tuesday that, early in the election season, his office has been sorting out state mandates and new election rules.

“Laws were passed that seem to conflict with what is already there,” McCauley said. “There is a lot of confusion and different opinions from one county to the next.”

The primary election is June 5.

One new election rule requires ballots for election-day voting to be printed for 75 percent of all registered voters, while 60 percent of Placer County's voters are pre-registered to vote by mail and don't need them, McCauley said.

"We're going to be throwing out thousands and thousands of ballots," McCauley said.

McCauley said he's also concerned about U.S. Postal Service plans that could close the Reno mail distribution center.

"If people drop it in the mail on Friday (from Lake Tahoe), there is not guarantee, we'll get it on time," McCauley said.

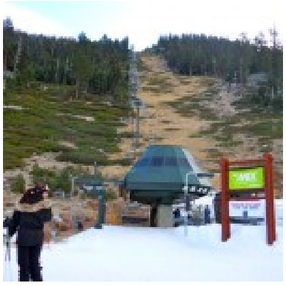
Read the whole story

Lake Tahoe not the only region in search of snow

By Marnie Hunter, CNN

Lane Kommer should be skiing this week. Instead he postponed a trip to Colorado because the snow situation just isn't looking good.

"We've been keeping a close eye on the weather the last few weeks and keeping our fingers crossed, hoping for some good snow and it just got to the point where we decided it's better to reschedule and pay to change our plans than to go out there and be disappointed," said Kommer, who was planning to fly from Dallas to meet up with friends at Beaver Creek Resort. Now they're planning to go in February.



Heavenly has concentrated its snowmaking efforts farther up the mountain. Photo/LTN

It is a decision faced by skiers and snowboarders across the United States as ski resorts scramble to make the snow that Mother Nature isn't providing. December 2011 yielded the 11th least extensive snow cover in the United States in the past 46 years, according to climatologist David Robinson, a professor in the geography department at Rutgers University.

Weather patterns are moving in and out too quickly and nothing is locking in to produce significant snowfall, he said.

"It doesn't look like there's going to be huge improvement the next two weeks and we're getting halfway through winter by then. But still, hope springs eternal for late January into early March. One would expect that we're going to see at least some interruption in this progressive fast-moving pattern," Robinson said.

Any snow would be a welcome change for the Lake Tahoe area straddling California and Nevada, where odd spring-like weather has plagued snow seekers. Base snow averaged about 14 inches at seven area resorts on Thursday, with summit averages of a little more than 19 inches. The annual average summit snowfall at one of the resorts is 350 inches.

Revenue at Lake Tahoe resorts over the peak week between Christmas and New Year's was down 20 percent to 30 percent after a tremendous ski season across the United States last year, according to estimates from the National Ski Areas Association.

Read the whole story

Skier visits to Vail Resorts down 15% so far

While visits are down this season throughout the six Vail Resorts ski areas, the company is not downgrading its earning projections with three-quarters of the season still remaining.

"However, we would acknowledge that those targets will be more difficult to achieve given the results over the holidays," Vail Resorts CEO Rob Katz said in a statement.

Promised Land lift at Northstar opened Dec. 20 with dirt surrounding it. No snow has fallen since then. Photo/LTN

The Colorado-based company that operates Heavenly Mountain Resort and Northstar in California as well as four ski areas in the Rockies released an interim data report this week.

Highlights:

• Season-to-date total lift ticket revenue at the company's six mountain resort properties, and including an allocated portion of season pass revenue for each applicable period, was up approximately 0.6 percent through Jan. 2 compared to the prior year season–to-date period ended Jan. 3, 2011.

• Season-to-date revenue for ski school was up 0.9 percent, while dining was down 5.6 percent. Not all facilities are open. Even so, it shows the same number of people are not on the mountains to buy food.

• Fiscal year-to-date retail/rental revenue, which includes preseason ski sale events, was down 0.7 percent through Jan. 2 compared to the same period in the prior year.

• Season-to-date total skier visits for the company's six mountain resort properties were down approximately 15.3 percent through Jan. 2 compared to the prior year season-to-date period ended Jan. 3, 2011, including fewer season pass holders accessing the resorts.

Katz said, "We have had some very unusual weather so far this season. For the first time in 30 years, a lack of snow has not allowed us to open the back bowls in Vail as of Jan. 6, 2012, and, for the first time since the late 1800s, it did not snow at all in Tahoe in December."

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

NHP beefing up patrol in crosswalk zones

In light of the recent accidents involving pedestrians who have been struck and killed, and the fact that pedestrian-related crashes in Douglas, Lyon and Washoe counties were higher in 2011 compared to the previous year, troopers from the Nevada Highway Patrol will be concentrating their enforcement efforts on pedestrian and crosswalk violations over the next several weeks.

Troopers will be at various intersections in Northern Nevada specifically looking for drivers who do not yield for pedestrians at crosswalks as well as identifying pedestrians who choose to cross a street unsafely or by jaywalking.

In an effort to illustrate awareness, the NHP is issuing these safety reminders to motorists and pedestrians:

For pedestrians:

• Be certain to only cross a street or highway in a marked crosswalk

• Make sure that each driver approaching the intersection is yielding or has stopped for you before entering the street or crossing the entire roadway – especially on multiple-lane roadways

• Even when you have the signal to cross safely, scan both directions of travel and look for moving or approaching vehicles

• Don’t assume that every driver will see you in a crosswalk and be aware of all approaching traffic

• Be extra careful when crossing the road at nighttime and especially when there is little or no lighting.

For motorists:

• Pay attention at all times when operating a motor vehicle with special emphasis near intersections and marked crosswalks for pedestrians who may be crossing the roadway

• If you notice a vehicle in the adjacent or opposing lane slow down or stop, ask yourself why? There may be a pedestrian crossing the street that you don’t see or another type of roadway hazard not immediately visible

• When making a left or right turn at an intersection, always check to be certain that no one is attempting to cross the road adjacent to you

• Do not change lanes near an intersection where a motorist immediately in front of you is slowing down or stopped.

This list of 2011 crashes is provided by the NHP.

Lawsuit prevents Homewood from starting development

By Kathryn Reed

Homewood Mountain Resort’s desire to reinvent the West Shore ski resort is an “ill-conceived, inadequately studied, and environmentally-disruptive development project … threatening one of our nation’s iconic landscapes.”

At least that is what documents filed Jan. 5 in U.S. District Court in Sacramento say.

An artist's rendering of what Homewood's owners would like it to become.

Earthjustice on behalf of Friends of the West Shore and Tahoe Sierra Club is suing to stop the project that was approved Dec. 14 by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board.

Defendants in the suit are TRPA, Placer County, Placer County Board of Supervisors, Homewood Village Resorts and JMA Ventures. The latter is the San Francisco-based company that owns the ski area.

While approval of the project has been unanimous in every vote taken by everybody that had a say in the development and master plan for the ski resort, it has always been controversial.

Today the area is a throwback to years gone by. The resort, when one drives by on Highway 89, looks like something a Warren Miller movie would show to reflect skiing of yesteryear. What Art Chapman, JMA’s CEO, envisions is a fivestar resort.

There is no doubt the look, feel and type of visitor would dramatically change. That's what Chapman wants to happen. It's not what the Friends of the West Shore want.

"We welcome a revitalized Homewood Ski Area, but the current project is simply too large," Mason Overstreet, conservation director of Friends of the West Shore, said in a statement. "A smaller resort in scale with the surrounding community would still bring in hundreds of jobs for residents and millions of dollars in revenue. We must be careful not to destroy the beauty that attracts visitors to Lake Tahoe in the first place."

The plaintiffs want the environmental documents to be declared invalid.

The lawsuit says, "… the Environmental Impact Report and Environmental Impact Study (EIR-EIS) prepared jointly by TRPA and the county failed to properly study and mitigate the project's effects on traffic, air quality, water quality, noise, scenic resources, groundwater, and soil conservation, in violation of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the Compact. Thus, the Homewood amendments and project stand to make matters worse."

Joanne Marchetta, TRPA executive director, said in a statement, "It's unfortunate that this lawsuit could divide the community at a time when we need to work together more than ever. TRPA continues to believe that lawsuits are not the best path to sustainability in the Tahoe basin."

A major issue for challengers is TRPA's allowing amendments to its codes – essentially disregarding the current Regional Plan, which in effect is the bible by which TRPA is supposed to live by – and by de facto, everyone in the basin's law book.

The 1987 Regional Plan was supposed to be updated in 2007. The current date for expected approval is December this year, with draft environmental documents associated with it released in March.

Some of the changes expected in the Regional Plan Update – like to the height and density rules – are being incorporated into projects through amendments. Such amendments were part of the Boulder Bay project that passed TRPA muster last April and does not face a legal challenge.

The Governing Board and TRPA staff believe the project would be a boon for the environment. That was the overriding reason for approving the development.

Brown proposes $4.2 billion in cuts to California budget

By Kevin Yamamura, Sacramento Bee

Gov. Jerry Brown proposed Thursday slashing nearly $1.4 billion in welfare and child care aid for the poor while holding voters liable for $5 billion in education funding with a November tax measure.

The Democratic governor announced his January budget plan this afternoon after his proposal was inadvertently leaked on his Department of Finance website. He estimates the state faces a

$9.2 billion general fund deficit through June 2013, which he proposes to bridge with mostly cuts and taxes.

Brown will ask voters to pass a $6.9 billion ballot measure in November that raises taxes on sales and income starting with single filers earning $250,000 a year.

“With the tax program, we will eliminate the budget deficit finally, after years of kicking the can down the road,” Brown said.

With or without the taxes, Brown is calling for a base level of $4.2 billion in cuts, including the $946 million to welfare-to-work and $446 million to subsidized child care. He also would save $842 million in Medi-Cal by moving recipients into managed care plans.

Read the whole story