

Fires keep USFS, others busy in the basin

The U. S. Forest Service today responded to two wildland fires.

The first was Friday morning near D.L. Bliss State Park.

Forest Service wildland firefighters, along with CalFire and Meek's Bay Fire Protection District kept it to one-tenth of an acre.

The cause of the fire is under investigation.

In the afternoon, three Redding smokejumpers parachuted in to respond to a 45 by 40 foot fire near Dick's Lake in the Desolation Wilderness.

The cause of the Dick's Fire is under investigation.

Smoke visible in the Lake Tahoe Basin is likely from the Long Fire in the Eldorado National Forest.

Consolidating services may improve efficiency, but comes with headaches

By Anjeanette Damon, Las Vegas Sun

When times are tight, the cry for consolidated – read, cheaper – government services grows louder.

Witness North Las Vegas, on the brink of receivership, studying whether to consolidate everything from after-school programs to fire inspection services with Las Vegas.

Most recently, the two cities signed an agreement to consolidate their fire-training operations.

But consolidation isn't always a panacea for cash-strapped governments.

In fact, in what may be a cautionary tale for Southern Nevada governments exploring consolidation, Washoe County is working to free itself from a contract with Reno to provide fire-protection services.

Instead of saving the county money, commissioners say the opposite is occurring.

"We just can't afford to maintain the agreement that we currently have with the city of Reno," Washoe County Commissioner John Breternitz said.

The two fire departments aren't technically consolidated. Rather, for the past 10 years, the county has contracted with Reno to provide fire protection services.

Read the whole story

NTSB: Air frame separated from plane at Reno Air Races

By Steve Timko, Reno Gazette-Journal

The National Transportation Safety Board confirms some of the

air frame to Jimmy Leeward's P-51 separated at the Reno National Championship Air Races as his airplane crashed.

The NTSB reports 10 fatalities on the ground and the death of the pilot and said 74 people were injured during the crash last Friday at the Reno-Stead Airport. It reports 66 of the injuries were serious.

The NTSB this morning released its preliminary report on the crash.

Read the whole story

S. Tahoe pushes back adoption of complete 2011-12 budget

The South Lake Tahoe City Council has canceled its special budget meeting set for Sept. 27 because of all the comments and questions raised at and since the Sept. 15 meeting.



A special meeting will still be conducted Tuesday – but at 4pm. This is to pass a 31-day interim budget because the fiscal year begins Oct. 1. Here is a copy of the Sept. 27 agenda.

The 2011-12 budget is tentatively set to be passed Oct. 11 at 6pm.

Grant allows more lead to be stripped from S. Tahoe homes

By Kathryn Reed

A \$2 million grant will allow South Lake Tahoe to continue with its program to remove lead paint from dwellings in the city limits.

South Tahoe was one of five communities this month to be awarded money from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development. The others are San Francisco, Pomona, Alameda County and Fresno.

The money is expected to arrive in January.



The Reno Avenue house without lead paint.



A house on Reno Avenue before the

paint
overhaul.
Photos/Provided

The city received \$1.5 million in January 2010. One reason South Tahoe qualifies for the grants is 85 percent of the homes were built before 1980, which means most are likely to have lead in either the exterior or interior paint.

Accomplishments with the first round of money include:

- Nearly \$170,000 has been spent on construction with local contractors
- 31 completed projects
- 13 projects in progress
- 141 homes inspected for potential lead paint hazards
- 93 contractors trained in lead safe practices
- 8 contractors completed extensive supervisor training and are now able to bid on these projects.

It is anticipated by Tracy Franklin, who coordinates the program for South Lake Tahoe, that the second round of funding will remediate 126 homes. Renters can also qualify, along with apartments, duplexes and single family residences.

First preference is given to people who have children, and everyone must meet financial criteria.

For more information, go online for call Franklin at (530) 542.6093.

TRPA defends using same auditor city of Bell employed

By Kathryn Reed

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency is using the same auditing firm the financially ruined Southern California city of Bell used.

While the bi-state regulatory agency entered the agreement in May 2010 – six weeks before the mayor of Bell resigned – the agency chose to stick with the controversial firm when the news about that city spread like wildfire.



The auditor contract says TRPA could terminate the agreement with 30-days notice.

The three-year \$173,350 contract also covers audits for Tahoe Transportation District and the now bankrupt South Tahoe Area Transit Authority.

And while Kristi Boosman and Jeff Cowen – spokespeople for TRPA – vehemently maintained the one audit Mayer Hoffman McCann has done to date was thorough, they also said that it wasn't the same group of auditors working on the TRPA that did the Bell audit.

However, on Page 7 of the 24-page document it shows that TRPA was working with the Irvine office of Mayer Hoffman McCann – the same office Bell used. This doesn't mean it's the same people doing the audit, but the firm does have offices in Northern California.

Several cities stopped using the international accounting firm after California's controller issued a scathing indictment of the firm.

State Controller John Chiang on Dec. 21, 2010, said in a press release, "MHM appears to have been a rubberstamp rather than a responsible auditor committed to providing the public with the transparency and accountability that could have prevented the mismanagement of the City's finances by Bell officials. Had MHM fully complied with the 17 applicable fieldwork standards, it would have led them to identify some – if not all – of the problems my office has uncovered since August."

MHM President Bill Hancock that same day in a press release said, "Clearly the events in Bell are tragic and outrageous. Mayer Hoffman adheres to the highest standards, and we have forged a reputation for integrity and quality throughout our 50-year track record of service. But in those 50 years we have never seen anything like the pervasive collusion of so many individuals acting in concert to deceive auditors, as happened at Bell."

Why does this matter?

There are several reasons an audit is important, with one of the main ones being it is a document for elected officials – appointed in the case of the TRPA Governing Board – to know if their staff is running a financially sound operation.

The auditor should work directly for the City Council, Board of Supervisors or Governing Board.

This was not the case with the firm hired by the TRPA. The decision to hire Mayer Hoffman McCann was done through a request for proposal, but the Governing Board never voted on it, according to Cowen. This is because, according to Cowen, the board only needs to vote on items not in the budget or that are more than \$100,000 a year.

Governing Board Chairman and El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago did not know MHM was the same firm Bell used until *Lake Tahoe News* called her. She said the administrative team at TRPA handles the audit, with the operations committee

having a say.

John Breternitz, who is chair of the operations committee and on the Governing Board as Washoe County's representative, said, "We picked the same firm we used last time."

It's true this year's audit will be done by the same firm because of the three-year contract, but this is the first time MHM has had a contract with TRPA.

When Breternitz was asked if he knew about MHM's work in Bell, he said, "I think that was mentioned." When pressed further, he said, "I guess I don't know all the details about the Southern California city."

Boosman, the TRPA flack, wanted the former CFO instead of someone on staff to speak for the agency in terms of what happened once it came to light about the firm and Bell.

Executive Director Joanne Marchetta had a phone interview set up with this reporter for Sept. 20 that she canceled that morning and her assistant has not responded to an email to reschedule it.

Other things

C.G. Uhlenberg LLP was the firm TRPA used prior to MHM.

"I found TRPA's prior auditors to be unorganized and they did not communicate well with one another. That led to them wasting public resources (my staff's time). They also were not on top of the professional standards the way I thought they should be," Rhonda McFarlane, TRPA's former chief financial officer, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "As a CFO, I have always used the auditors as my professional resource for questions and information I may need on generally accepted accounting principles or best business practices. Unfortunately, I was more knowledgeable than the prior auditors, and thus they were unable to provide me the support I needed to be effective in

my job.”

In a Nov. 1, 2010, *LTN* story, El Dorado County Auditor-Controller Joe Harn said of the much overdue STATA audit, “This is the worst (audit) I’ve ever seen for an organization this size. The weaknesses in internal control are the worst I’ve ever seen.” But that had to do with the information STATA gave to the auditor, not about the auditor.

McFarlane says through the RFP process and her experience with MHM at a prior organization she was confident in their abilities.

She told Jim Brockett, her boss at the time who also is no longer at the agency, about MHM’s connection to Bell.

There is no evidence, though, the Governing Board was ever told.

Hallye Jordan, deputy controller with the state, said her agency couldn’t recommend a private company be used or not used. Nor could the state office say if the situation with MHM in Bell might be an anomaly.

“We can’t say whether that means there are problems like that elsewhere,” Jordan told *LTN* in analyzing the situation in Bell.

The officials who took over for the disgraced Bell leaders called in the Controllers Office to do an audit. The audit the office is doing on the city of Montebello that was announced Thursday was triggered by consistently late reports regarding gas tax money and its redevelopment agency, Jordan said.

How a city, county or special district uses state and federal money could also trigger an audit by the state controller, Jordan said.

Vail Resorts revenue tops \$1 billion

By Denver Business Journal

Vail Resorts Inc., parent company of Heavenly Mountain Resort and Northstar-at-Tahoe, posted a 30.4 percent increase in revenue for its fiscal year, which ended July 31, bringing the number up to \$1.17 billion.

The Broomfield, Colo.-based ski resort operator posted revenue of \$894.8 million in its prior fiscal year.

Net income increased to \$34.5 million from \$30.4 million during the same period.

Vail Resorts properties attracted 6 million skier visits during the year, a 16.3 percent increase. The company's Colorado resorts drew 5.1 million skiers, a 4 percent increase.

[Read the whole story](#)

Tourism focus groups know little about Nevada

By Richard N. Velotta, Las Vegas Sun

State tourism leaders trying to figure out the best way to

brand Nevada to attract visitors may have a bigger challenge on their hands than they thought.

In six focus groups in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Salt Lake City, participants demonstrated little knowledge of the Silver State and its tourism attractions.

David Bratton, founder of San Francisco-based Destination Analysts Inc., which conducted the focus groups, updated the Nevada Tourism Commission on the results Wednesday. Destination Analysts is gathering research for Seattle-based GreenRubino, which has been contracted to develop a brand identity for the state.



Tahoe is one area of Nevada people know about.

Photo/LTN file

Bratton told commissioners members of the focus groups listed “explore Nevada parks,” “have an adventure” and “sense of exploration” as the top three experiences travelers could have in Nevada.

They also listed “gambling,” “enjoy nightlife” and “visit Reno as well as other state attractions” as the bottom three experiences.

In a map exercise in which group members were asked to give their impressions of the state by drawing on an outline of a map, one respondent drew “Vegas” in the middle of the state

and labeled the rest of it as “empty desert.” Another placed Las Vegas in the southern end of the state and Lake Tahoe, surrounded by images of mountains and then a circle around the rest of the state labeled “not a whole lot.”

Another map-maker located “Vegas,” “Beautiful Tahoe,” Winnemucca, Wendover and Area 51 in approximately the right locations, labeling the rest of the state as “nothing.”

Yet another may have a future as a meteorologist, labeling eastern Nevada as “windy and hot,” the center of the state as “hot and dry” and Southern Nevada as “hell-like,” with the area around Las Vegas as “more hell-like.”

An attractions analysis indicated Great Basin National Park, Lehman Caves, Lake Tahoe, ghost towns around the state, Las Vegas and the Ruby Mountains near Elko as the state’s most interesting attractions.

Read the whole story

Dugard files complaint against federal government

By Sam Cohen, FOX40 News

A girl held captive for 18 years, enduring horrific abuse and neglect, filed a complaint against the U.S. government.

The complaint filed on behalf of Jaycee Lee Dugard does not seek a specific amount for the circumstances she endured, but rather asks a judge to make a settlement decision after a case is presented.

Dugard was kidnapped in 1991 from her South Lake Tahoe street when she was 11 years old. She was then held captive and repeatedly abused at the Antioch home of Phillip and Nancy Garrido. Dugard had two daughters during her 18-year captivity, fathered by Garrido.

According to a release from attorneys representing Dugard, she has tried to set up private mediation with Government officials in this matter, but those requests were denied. They filed the lawsuit with the Federal Government because they ultimately had parole supervision responsibility over Phillip Garrido when he was released from jail in 1988 until the State of California assumed responsibility in 1999. It was during this time that Dugard was kidnapped.

Read the whole story

Taylor Creek spill almost completely cleaned up

By Kathryn Reed

Used oil is what was dumped into Taylor Creek, according to water samples taken from the South Shore tributary that leads to Lake Tahoe.

The contamination has been isolated and almost fully contained.

The booms that were put in place by Lake Valley firefighters will remain until Friday. This is in case when the U.S. Forest removes the contaminated vegetation today any oil that may be dislodged will be caught.



Booms in
Taylor Creek
are scheduled
to be removed
Sept. 23.
Photo/LTN

Dave Johnston, hazmat supervisor with El Dorado County Environmental Services, told *Lake Tahoe News* once the booms are removed, that would be the extent of the cleanup required. His agency is the lead on the cleanup.

The Forest Service is trying to find the person or people who dumped the nearly 2 gallons of oil into the pristine water.

Cheva Heck, spokeswoman for the USFS, said no can or other container has been found that might provide clues as to who is responsible for dumping the contaminant.

The spill was first noticed Sept. 17 by a Forest Service employee who works at the Taylor Creek Visitors Center on the South Shore off Highway 89.

Officials have said the minor spill should have no impact on the kokanee salmon that this week began their migration up the creek to spawn.