

Inertia plagues South Tahoe council regarding sign rules

By Kathryn Reed

What's another two hours of discussion about South Lake Tahoe's sign ordinance when it's been on the books for the past 15 years?

The problem is the issue wasn't resolved at 9:15pm Tuesday when the talking ended. The council directed staff to come back with revisions to the law. It may be October when the next round of jibber-jabber commences.



If South Tahoe creates a historical sign category, Sno-Flake may qualify.

Photo/LTN

This was a continuation of the June 29 workshop. And like that meeting, everyone agreed inconsistent enforcement is a big issue.

"It shouldn't take six to 12 months to enforce the sign ordinance," City Attorney Patrick Enright said. Streamlining that process is something staff has been directed to do.

At times the heart of the issue seemed lost two nights ago as council members nitpicked about whether the U.S. flag should be used as promotional material and whether garage sale signs are a nuisance. The irony being the flag isn't even addressed in the ordinance, as staff had to point out to the five during the July 26 evening workshop.

Councilman Bruce Grego's hang up was believing all signs will look alike, making for a homogenous setting.

What to do about historical signs like Sno-Flake and Stardust is also an issue yet to be resolved.

Hilary Hodges, Community Development director, said if business and property owners would use a bit of creativity, plenty of sign diversity would exist.

The main issue, though it didn't receive much attention until Councilwoman Angela Swanson made a passionate speech, is how to address the signs in the way of Caltrans' Highway 50 project from Trout Creek to Ski Run Boulevard.

Hodges said 31 non-conforming signs, with seven of them being multiple business signs, exist in that area.

Staff came up with an incentive plan where the city would fund partial replacement of freestanding signs in that section of town at a cost not to exceed \$138,000.

While no action was taken at the meeting, it appeared the council wants to move in that direction. But it was also stated they want funding to be available for everyone as the roadwork phases continue.

To improve the roads, and put in curbs, gutters and bike paths is means signs need to be moved out of the right-of-way. The city needs to decide if it is going to allow the signs to be put back in or force the compliance issue during road construction.

Is now the right time to mandate enforcement of signs – therefore creating an expense for businesses or property owners – or is waiting until the economy improves more prudent? Those are questions the council is wrestling with.

A freestanding sign can cost \$10,000.

The smaller issue, though the one that gets more attention, is the use of temporary signs. The council is leaning toward allowing sandwich boards and banners for special events and limited time periods.

Structure fire quickly contained in Incline

A structure fire in Incline Village on Monday night left the occupants needing other accommodations. The Red Cross is working with the displaced residents.

The fire was on Wendy Lane.

North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District officials said the fire was quickly contained and limited to a portion of the exterior siding of the house.

The cause of the fire is being investigated.

No one was injured during the incident.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

S. Tahoe man arrested in death of roommate

By Kathryn Reed

The roommate of a South Lake Tahoe man who was found dead in their house Monday morning has been arrested on a second-degree murder charge.

Brad Macewan, 55, of South Lake Tahoe was booked into El Dorado County jail in South Tahoe early this morning. He was being held without bail.

The exact cause of Patrick Lee Rego's death has not been determined. Sacramento County coroner's office is doing the autopsy on the 52-year-old from South Lake. Based on caseload, results may be not available for a couple months.

It was Macewan who called police Monday at 3:15am saying Rego was not breathing and had sustained a head trauma.

South Lake Tahoe Detective Jeff Roberson told *Lake Tahoe News* weapons were found at the residence in the 3700 block of Forest Avenue, but they are not involved with this case. He would not speak about any unconventional weapons that were confiscated when a search warrant was executed the afternoon of July 25.

Roberson would also not comment on the exact relationship of the men.

He said Macewan has a criminal record, but would not elaborate.

Anyone with information regarding this investigation is asked to call Roberson at (530) 542.6134, using case No. 1107-2848.

Bears are back in town – and in some houses

By Guy Clifton and Jeff DeLong, Reno Gazette-Journal

A female black bear and her two cubs, tranquilized in a west Carson City neighborhood on Monday, are being returned to the wild, but a pair of marauding bears were euthanized over the weekend after separate incidents in Incline Village and Carson City.

The incidents come during the typical peak for bear activity in the Reno-Tahoe area as bears wander in search of food and often find trouble with people.

“It’s starting to get busy. The bears are moving around a lot more,” said Carl Lackey, a biologist and bear expert with the Nevada Department of Wildlife.

Department spokesman Chris Healy said a 2-year-old female bear that broke into a Carson City home and a 5-year-old male bear that grabbed a bottle of ketchup off a cafe table in the Raley’s Shopping Center in Incline Village were both euthanized after the weekend incidents.

On Monday in Carson City, the 11-year-old mother bear and her two 35-pound cubs – one male and one female – were tranquilized and were anticipated to be released into the mountains above Carson City either late Monday evening or early this morning, Healy said.

The mother and cubs were sighted in the 2300 block of Washington Street over several days last week. A live trap was set on Friday, but raccoons ate all the food and the trap had

to be reset on Sunday.

One of the cubs was captured in the trap on Monday. The mother bear and other cub remained near the trap and all three were tranquilized by wildlife biologists on Monday morning.

Read the whole story

Placer County campaign treasurer pleads guilty

By Cathy Locke, Sacramento Bee

Brian Jagger, who served as treasurer for Placer County District Attorney Scott Owens' election campaign last year, pleaded guilty Monday to one count of wire fraud in a scheme to embezzle more than \$20,000 from three campaign accounts of candidates who ran for political offices in Placer County in 2010.

Jagger, 32, of Roseville entered the plea in federal court in Sacramento.

The other two victims were county Auditor-Controller Katherine Martinis and county Supervisor Kirk Uhler, said Lt. Mark Reid, Placer County Sheriff's Department spokesman.

According to court documents, Jagger worked for each candidate and had signature authority over each one's campaign bank account.

Jagger used his position to convert their campaign funds to his own use, according to a federal Department of Justice news release.

S. Tahoe considers doing away with 3 fire division chief jobs

By Kathryn Reed

A fire department without upper management except for a chief who divides his time with the police department.

That is one scenario on the negotiating table in South Lake Tahoe.



The city has a \$1.5 million deficit gap to deal with before the next fiscal year begins Oct. 1. The reality is it must be closed in less than a month in order for staff to bring the budget to the City Council on Aug. 26. California cities must adopt a balanced budget.

In early spring when the council approved the five-year budget plan it included receiving concessions from the seven labor groups in the city to eliminate that \$1.5 million from the books. The city wants to save \$1 million in pension cost by having employees pay their share – 8 percent for non-sworn personnel and 9 percent for sworn. (Police officers currently pay 6 percent; all others have taxpayers foot the bill.) The city wants to save the other half million dollars by having employees pick up more of the health care premium costs.

Fairly regular meet-and-confer sessions between the city and

bargaining units have been occurring, but not everyone is at the table to do the heavy lifting that is necessary for the budget to be balanced.

The only contract that expires at the end of this fiscal year is the General and Public Works group. However, serious negotiations are not slated to begin with that group until Aug. 12 because the union changed representatives. This gives both sides limited time to reach an agreement before the council gets involved.

Two of the six groups that have agreed to negotiate a year before their respective contracts expire are the fire unions. One represents management – or the three division chiefs; the other group includes everyone else. (The chief is not in a bargaining unit.)

At the meeting July 22 with the fire safety management group, the city floated the idea of eliminating all three of their positions.

“There are all sorts of reasons why that is monumentally a bad idea,” Ray Zachau, fire marshal and division chief, said. “People seem to have forgotten we live in a fire prone area.”

He said building inspections, fuels reduction projects and public safety would be at risk with no division chiefs on staff.

Zachau emphasized the three at his rank have agreed to the pension and health care benefit concessions the city has asked for, but they don’t understand the thought process in eliminating their jobs. This group doesn’t understand why when they’ve done what the city wants, they are being targeted for elimination.

The one known staffing change is Police Chief Brian Uhler will also oversee the fire department starting Sept. 1 when Fire Chief Lorenzo Gigliotti leaves.

Because of labor rules City Manager Tony O'Rourke is not allowed to discuss specifics about what is or isn't being offered.

O'Rourke told *Lake Tahoe News* if all the groups don't step up to the plate, jobs would be cut throughout the city. He has said this from the get-go, with the council knowing it would happen based on the five-year plan they adopted.

Just how many jobs and which ones would be eliminated if concessions are not made remains to be seen.

"Our single largest cost center is personnel. We will have no other choice but to reduce our staff," O'Rourke said. "We are not going to raid the operating reserve."

He said doing so to the tune of \$5.2 million in the past was bad fiscal policy and allowed the city to not live within its means.

Compounding the problem is the city's fiscal situation is worse than in March when the five-year plan was adopted because property tax values keep going down. That revenue stream is one of three key pieces for South Tahoe.

Fire management and city negotiators are scheduled to meet again Aug. 1.

As for the rest of the fire department, union representative Dan Sullivan did not return calls.

Labor and anti-trust laws prevent all of the city's bargaining units from meeting as one to come up with a plan that would save jobs and help them negotiate as a whole.

At the Aug. 2 City Council meeting it's possible the five will be faced with the decision whether to go to the voters about what to do regarding pensions for city employees. If voters have a say, it may not matter what is or isn't negotiated.

Washoe County agrees to pay Incline residents tax refunds

By Susan Voyles, Reno Gazette-Journal

Washoe County Commissioners unanimously have agreed to pay 8,700 Incline Village homeowners court-ordered property tax refunds in a long-running battle that stems from prior rules used to judge Tahoe views and beaches.

But at the end of the discussion Tuesday night, County Commission Chairman John Breternitz said he is opposed to charging other taxing entities their share of \$6 million of interest costs on those tax refunds.

And that vote to charge the others their share of the tax refund is required to be unanimous, setting up an interesting debate on who's responsible for all that interest cost when then issue comes back for a vote on Sept. 13.

"From a moral standpoint, are we justified in doing that?" Breternitz said.

David Creekman, a chief deputy district attorney, said five other lawsuits pending by the Incline Village residents remain outstanding. A case before the Supreme Court filed in 2003 contends North Shore property values are pegged much higher than those at the lake in Douglas County, violating a constitutional requirement for fair and uniform taxes.

Creekman said that case has enormous fiscal impact if lost.

But the immediate question is paying roughly \$40 million in taxes stemming from a lawsuit supported by the Village League to Save Incline Assets for the 2006-07 tax year.

Lessons learned from California's recent drought

By Adam Kotin, California Climate & Agriculture Network

One thing can be said for certain about the 2007-2009 drought in California: it sure got a lot of attention. Both its natural severity and the complex set of political, economic, and social disputes yielded a drama of epic proportions that got people talking around the state and across the country.

But now that the dust has settled, the time has come to figure out what it all really meant, and how to prepare for when it happens again. Not surprisingly, the recent drought has enlivened the ages-old debate on water management in the state.

Two reports released in June, one from the Pacific Institute and one from the California Roundtable on Water and Food Supply, offer valuable insights and recommendations on how to reduce vulnerability and increase resiliency in the event of future droughts.

The Pacific Institute's report claims to provide "the most comprehensive and updated information on the impacts of the 2007-2009 drought." The authors crunched volumes of data on water and energy use, employment and poverty, crop insurance indemnities, precipitation, fisheries, and various other economic and political factors to guide their analysis.

Their overall conclusion is that while the drought certainly

had some devastating impacts on agriculture, they were neither as severe nor as widespread as had been previously estimated. While the all-time high gross revenue for California farms was reached in the midst of the drought (in 2008), significant revenue declines were seen in some counties. The state's overall harvested acreage, which has diminished annually for at least decade, actually slowed its decline during the drought. Some growers adopted effective and sustainable coping strategies, while others relied too heavily on groundwater pumping, according to the Pacific Institute.

Read the whole story

Website sheds light on pay-benefits of Nev. public workers

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – Anyone with an interest in what Nevada's state and local government employees make in salary and benefits can review the 2010 data that has been posted this month by a Nevada think tank.

The searchable database at Transparent Nevada does not yet contain all the local government salary information because not all cities and counties have responded, said Victor Joecks, communications director for the Nevada Policy Research Institute.

But most of the major cities and counties, as well as the state colleges and universities and the state of Nevada, have

provided the data as requested.

The Clark County School District provided its data as well, although NPRI is still waiting on the Clark County information, Joecks said.

"We will continue with some of the places that haven't sent us the data; we'll continue following up and looking at that data as the year goes on," Joecks said.

The data can be searched by name, occupation or in order of highest pay. Salaries and benefits, when provided, are listed separately, along with a column showing total compensation.

Joecks said some jurisdictions only provide base pay amounts, even though benefits can be as much as 40 percent or more of a public employee's salary.

A search of the site shows that many of the top paid public officials in Nevada work for the Nevada System of Higher Education, including UNR head football coach Chris Ault, who earned nearly \$527,000 in compensation in 2010.

In some other cases salaries were inflated because employees were retiring and received unused sick leave and vacation pay.

One example is Joseph Forti, who took a buyout last year and retired as North Las Vegas chief of police. His 2010 salary is listed at just less than \$76,000, but total compensation is listed at \$733,000. His compensation in 2010 included \$333,000 in sick leave pay, \$43,000 in annual leave and nearly \$231,000 in a category called "Premium, Certification, Bonus and Other."

Pay for firefighters, which has been a hot button issue in Southern Nevada, is included in the database as well, but only for North Las Vegas and Henderson so far. The data does show benefits make up a big part of a fire fighter's pay.

More than 30 North Las Vegas firefighters earned in excess of

\$140,000 a year in pay and benefits, according to the information provided by city officials and posted on the site.

“It’s just kind of incredible all the ways that government employees get paid,” Joecks said. “It’s not just about their salary, it’s not just about their benefits, it’s not just about their salary, benefits and retirement. All of a sudden you’re getting \$200,000 when you retire and that’s something that doesn’t happen in the private sector.”

Construction begins on first student union at STHS

By Kathryn Reed

Five years ago when Ivone Larson became principal of South Tahoe High School her dream was to get rid of the building in the middle of campus that originally housed the auto and wood shops.

That wish came true this summer. And an even bigger dream was realized Monday with the ceremonial groundbreaking for the Student Union. The nearly 20,000-square-foot L shaped building should be ready for students for the 2012-13 school year.



A year from
now a student

union will
cover the dirt
at South Tahoe
High School.
Photo/LTN

No one was particularly fond of the structure.

"The shop building was the biggest piece of crap on this campus," architect Steve Newsom said.

He added the new building will "reinforce the pedestrian traffic spine here. Ultimately, it would be great if that were a covered walk."

The structure is a joint endeavor between Lake Tahoe Unified and South Lake Tahoe because of the grant from the state to fund the building that is situated behind the gym and in front of the Stadium View building.

The city will have access to meeting room space, which is something the town lacks. The three rooms may be opened into one.

In 2008 when voters passed Measure G, the school facilities bond, the budget called for \$3.5 million to renovate the building. Then the prospect of the joint use grant from the state surfaced and was applied for. That brought in \$4 million in matching funds.

Now the budget for the Student Union is \$9.5 million. This is a rendering of the Student Union.

"This will pull people together," Superintendent Jim Tarwater said July 25 during the festivities.

This will be the first time there will be room to feed all the students. Plus, it gives them a gathering spot instead of being dispersed throughout the campus.

Tarwater said the student culinary arts program would be able to provide breakfast and lunch fare for meetings and events, with the district's food services backing up the students.

Nothing of the old building remains. It's a dirt plot waiting for a foundation. About 75 percent of the structure was able to be recycled at South Tahoe Refuse.

This will be the final entirely new building to be erected at South Tahoe High.

The sports medicine facility will be an 8,000-square-foot addition to the gym. Plans for it are headed to state agencies next week for approval.

In addition to the ground breaking, city and school district officials also toured the Theater Arts and Design Academy that will open next month at the start of the 2011-12 school year.

Expect the first performance in the new theater this winter – probably in December.