Misleading info about Echo Summit work trying to be curtailed

By Kathryn Reed

The start of regular twice-weekly phone calls between Caltrans and Lake Tahoe officials began this morning.

South Shore folks are most concerned about the message that is being delivered by the media outside the Lake Tahoe Basin.

A KTVU-TV anchorwoman on the 10pm May 4 broadcast mentioned the closure over Echo Summit that begins May 11, but then erroneously added how there will be horrendous delays for weeks when the road is subject to controlled traffic.

The truth is this route in and out of the South Shore is wall-to-wall vehicles on any busy weekend – any season. What is different now is there is no snow to contend with, which means the other routes to get to the Bay Area and Sacramento will be an easy drive.

Caltrans is still not placing ads with local media outlets despite the fact that people outside the basin go to Lake Tahoe websites to get information about what is going on in Tahoe.

Caltrans has contacted media in Reno that has been delivering erroneous information.

Another meeting is scheduled for May 6 about outreach.

Mike Cook, local Caltrans project manager, told people during the May 5 conference call that contractor C.C. Myers has been mobilizing equipment. The pre-grade inspection with Tahoe Regional Planning Agency is Friday.

Although there is a chance for rain May 9, that is still the date slated for initial delays, with full closure beginning some time May 11. The road will be closed for 10-14 days, with motorists rerouted via Highway 88 past Kirkwood into the South Shore. It adds a scenic 35 miles to the drive to South Lake Tahoe.

Caltrans is planning to have a press conference in Placerville May 11. Another one – more like a party – is planned for the day the work on the rock wall is done and traffic resumes over Echo Summit.

Here is the contractor's Echo Summit schedule.

Here are Echo Summit closure facts.

Ex-STHS security guard admits guilt

By Kathryn Reed

Former South Tahoe High School security guard Larry Brown pleaded guilty last week to felony transportation of marijuana and misdemeanor contributing to the delinquency of a minor.

Brown, 64, was arrested in November 2009 in an incident involving marijuana and a 16-year-old female student. His employment with the school district was terminated shortly after his arrest.

Brown faces 45 days in jail and three years probation. He also must pay a $1,000 fine.

Other requirements per the settlement agreement include:

staying off the premises of STHS unless present with advance written consent of school administration, no contact with the victim, and not being in a vehicle with any female between ages of 14 and 18 unless another adult is present or he is related to the person he is with.

“We spent a considerable amount of time and effort trying to come to the right outcome here. I met with the defense several times and also spoke with the victim and investigating officer, as well as listening to the audio recording of the incident made by the investigating deputy sheriff at least three times,” Hans Uthe, El Dorado County assistant district attorney, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “We gave significant consideration to the victim’s thoughts and to the absence of prior convictions of the defendant, but also factored in the need to address the conduct at hand, which we considered to be reasonably serious. Mr. Brown appears to be extremely remorseful about what appears to have been some bad decisions he made at a difficult time in his life, which decisions resulted in very serious personal, professional and legal consequences for him, all of which were also taken into consideration.”

Funding withering away for Tahoe environmental projects

By Kathryn Reed

The money train known as SNPLMA (or Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act) is making its final run to the Lake Tahoe Basin.

What this means is the millions of dollars that have floated

to the region in the last decade will cease to exist after the round 12 dollars are allocated this summer and then distributed early next year.

More than $300 million has been spent in Lake Tahoe from the sale of federal land in Southern Nevada. The Lake Tahoe Federal Advisory Committee is taking comments until May 9 on proposed projects for the last round of money.



Fuels reduction projects are part of SNPLMA money -- with the idea of not having another Angora burn area. Photo/Kathryn Reed

These millions of dollars have gone toward the environmental improvement program that was started in 1997 after then President Bill Clinton’s visit to Lake Tahoe. That also launched the annual summer environmental summit.

Many of the 25 proposals received for round 12 funding are the same or similar in nature to previous requests. The themes are: forest health, watershed, water quality and habitat restoration, air quality and integrating science.

Here is some information about investments from 1997-2010.

The concern going forward is how the various agencies in the basin and local governments will come up with the necessary dollars to do the work required of them in the EIP.

“We’ll get pretty creative as partners,” said Jeff Marsolais, deputy forest supervisor for Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit.

Although Marsolais has been in the basin for less than a year, he is finding people willing to work together for the common good and not being territorial. Part of this change to be more collaborative and cooperative was the result of the devastating 2007 Angora Fire that leveled 254 houses.

Fuels reduction projects are a huge component of SNPLMA funding – especially in recent years. The preliminary recommendation is to spend $3 million of the $34.1 million total in round 12 on the Carnelian Hazardous Fuels Reduction & Healthy Forest Restoration project. These types of projects around the lake could be funded in round 12.

“I don’t think we enjoyed that support or focus pre-Angora because of some of the political winds blowing at the time,” Guy LeFever, fire chief of Tahoe-Douglas Fire Protection District, said of fuels reduction projects. “Things totally changed 180 since then.”

Marsolais uses the example of the basin fire chiefs who were unable to get SNPLMA money for a white pine project being able to work with the Forest Service to get money to demonstrate creativity.

He and others are saying partnerships like that is what will keep money coming to Tahoe.

With reauthorization of the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act languishing in Congress and odds the California water bond on the November ballot will fail, the money well is dry.

Marsolais said it’s time to stop looking at one entity as the

provider of money.

But specifics about where the millions of dollars are going to come from to keep up with state and federal mandates cannot be provided by anyone because the money isn't there.

Marsolais also pointed to everyone needing to tie projects together in order to leverage dollars.

However, that isn't exactly happening on the South Shore. The much talked about South Shore Hazardous Fuels Reduction & Healthy Forest Restoration project was stalled a bit under the previous LTBMU regime. Environmental documents on the project should be released by the end of this summer.

It calls for 10,000 acres to be treated in 10 years.

While the $1 million requested for the South Shore project in SNPLMA round 12 was not recommended by the Federal Advisory Committee in April to be funded, the Forest Service has socked away $16 million for the project for whenever it starts.

Had the wheels of government spun slightly faster, though, this project could have been done while South Lake Tahoe worked on its projects in the center of town – including the Lake Christopher project.

Settlement reached in Fla. boat accident that killed S. Tahoe woman

By Paul Pinkham, Florida Times-Union

Lawyers for five victims of a fatal Easter Sunday boat crash in Palm Valley two years ago have settled their lawsuit against the boat manufacturer.

Terms of the settlement, reached last week in mediation, are confidential, and lawyers for the plaintiffs and Crownline Boats declined comment.

Three injured people and two representatives of deceased victims sued the boatmaker in federal court shortly after the 2009 crash, claiming the design of the Crownline 225BR was inherently unsafe.

The 22-foot pleasure boat struck a tugboat moored in the Intracoastal Waterway just north of the Palm Valley bridge, killing five people and injuring nine.

Read the whole story

Victim in fatal Kingsbury Grade accident identified

Updated: May 4, 2011, 6:40am

The driver of the Chevrolet Tahoe was identified as Dan Steven Navone, a 56-year-old Gardnerville resident.

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A 56-year-old Gardnerville man died Tuesday night when his vehicle went over an embankment at the bottom of Kingsbury Grade in the Carson Valley.

The name of the victim is not being released pending

notification of his family.

Nevada Highway Patrol officers said a Chevrolet Blazer pulling a small trailer went over the side of the road near Foothill Road about 8:30pm April 26.

The lone driver was ejected and was pronounced dead at the scene. The vehicle and trailer traveled into a barn adjacent to the roadway and caught fire.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Placer County running out of water

By Ed Fletcher, Sacramento Bee

The agency that provides water to Placer County is expected to declare a water shortage emergency in a matter of days as a result of a recent canal failure.

The Placer County Water Agency has been able to meet customer needs while the weather is cool and demands are low, but agency general manager David Breninger predicts a “dire, catastrophic situation” once temperatures start to rise, if there is no fix.

About 150,000 customers in and around Auburn will be asked to significantly reduce water usage in order to keep water flowing, Breninger said.

“Basically, without a massive infusion of water very soon from PG&E to PCWA, thousands of our customers face a stark reality of little to no water in certain regions of our vast service

area," Breninger said in a prepared release.

Hardest hit will be the agency's 1,250 customers who use canal water for irrigation and farming, because a higher priority will be placed on treated water for public health and fire safety, Breninger said.

A 40-foot section of the Bear River Canal in a remote area near Colfax below Rollins Reservoir broke April 19, sending the water cascading down a steep hill and into the Bear River. The canal, maintained by Pacific Gas and Electric Co., normally is the main water source for Placer County Water Agency customers.

Read the whole story

South Tahoe on course to make capital improvements

By Kathryn Reed

A plan of action with clear priorities is being developed for South Lake Tahoe's infrastructure, facilities and equipment.

Jim Marino, who is in charge of the city's Capital Improvement Program, on Tuesday methodically laid out for the five council members the importance of creating a five-year plan, how getting money for projects today requires being shovel ready, and that each department in the city needs to have a master plan.

"The purpose of the CIP plan is to allow the City Council to accurately prioritize, fund, and implement projects that align with the strategic goals and objectives of the city, while

effectively maintain and extend lifespan of existing assets," Marino wrote in the staff report.

1999 was the last time a five-year plan was developed. But for the most part, work done in the last decade was based on where grant dollars came from – and little or no other reasoning was used.



Pot holes are evidence of the lack of attention South Tahoe has shown for capital improvement in the city. Photo/LTN

Water quality projects always got the priority because of regulations from the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board. Those two entities govern much of what the city and five counties in the Lake Tahoe Basin can do regardless of what local governments deem a priority. It's about lake clarity and reducing sediment – all other projects are secondary, according to these two regulatory bodies.

But to the city's discredit, until now it has not been proactive in devising plans that meld projects within the city or adjoining jurisdictions. Not having master plans for each

department is part of the problem.

Items that would qualify as capital improvement projects in the three categories include:

Infrastructure:

• Highway 50 streetscape improvements

• Sierra Boulevard streetscape

• Harrison Avenue streetscape

• Tahoe Keys Boulevard right turn lane

• Linear Park bike trails

Facilities:

• Bijou Golf Course driving range

• Regan Beach restroom/concession facilities

• Reconstruct general aviation apron

• Recreation center fitness center reconstruction

• Replace roof at fire station No. 2

Equipment:

• Fleet replacement

• Replace SWAT rifles

• Video conferencing system

• GIS system

• Replace police department body armor.

Another point that was brought up May 3 is the city does not allocate money for regular fleet replacement or maintenance

costs of projects.

Marino used the example of the three-year Highway 50 Trout Creek to Ski Run Boulevard project that starts this month. While Caltrans makes millions of dollars in improvements, it will be the city picking up the quarter of a million annual maintenance costs for landscaping, lighting and snow removal.

The council agreed maintenance and operation expenses need to be considered as projects come before them for approval. It's also an ongoing expense that must be budgeted.

It was stated that the Finance Department is going to have to figure out a different way of how it accounts for certain expenditures to make the budget work.

"Redistributing fees where they belong (is the first step)," Marino said. "Asset management software can collate costs over years. Excel spreadsheets can only go so far."

Another thing Marino and City Councilwoman Angela Swanson addressed is having true capital improvements part of this plan. Currently, items like guns for the police department and computer software are listed under CIP. This is not standard operating procedure for most cities or businesses.

Marino this week plans to start meeting with department heads to find out their list of priorities.

Health and safety concerns, along with regulatory compliance will be key reasons for a project to be at the top of the list. How to fund them will be another component.

Before the council is asked to put its blessing on priorities, the city's new Fiscal Sustainability Committee and the Planning Commission will review staff's list of priorities. Marino plans to have the list before the council this summer so priorities are in place as the 2011-12 budget is adopted.

In other action the council:

• Appointed the following people to the newly formed Fiscal Sustainability Committee – Jerry Bindel, Jill Stanton-Bricker, Dick Derby, Brenda Knox, Jon Kingsbury and Dan McHale.

• Without comment, approved the original $10,000 fee for the consultant working on specs for a snowblower at Lake Tahoe Airport. Cost to the city is $500. The rest is from an FAA grant. This is half the cost that was on the last council agenda.

• Approved wording on letters that will be sent to the Nevada Legislature supporting SB271 in the sense the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency needs to improve itself; and a letter to the board overseeing the League to Save Lake Tahoe. The final version of the latter is then intended to be sent to media outlets as an opinion piece.

Gaines wins husband's former Assembly seat

Results of a special election Tuesday means there is a Gaines in both branches of the California Legislature.

Republican Beth Gaines won the Assembly seat her husband, Ted, vacated after he was elected to the state Senate earlier this year.



Beth Gaines

Gaines was the favorite in the GOP-dominated 4th District that encompasses Lake Tahoe. She beat Democrat Dennis Campanale. Both candidates are from Roseville.

She received 55.4 percent of the vote with 38,958 votes. Campanale had 44.6 percent of the votes with 31,287.

The district includes parts of El Dorado, Alpine, Placer and Sacramento counties.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Calif. bill would shed light on TRPA board member conflicts

State Sen. Ted Gaines, R-Roseville, on Tuesday announced his legislation to create additional transparency and accountability within the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency cleared a major hurdle, passing out of the Senate Elections and Constitutional Amendments Committee with bipartisan support.

Senate Bill 593 would require each California member of the TRPA Governing Board to comply with the requirements of the Political Reform Act, and to file with the Fair Political Practices Commission a statement of economic interests.

“Currently, the California members of the TRPA can make decisions in which they have a conflict of interest and the public has no way of knowing,” Gaines said in a statement.

“SB593 would better enable the public to hold these members accountable and creates an important layer of transparency and oversight for this governing board.”

Rules put in place to grow medicinal marijuana in S. Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

The South Lake Tahoe City Council barely discussed the cultivation of medicinal marijuana at its meeting May 2.

Changes made from input given at the April meeting were incorporated into the policy the council is expected to approve at its May 17 meeting. The first reading of the ordinance was Tuesday.



Changes from last month include separating out the penalty structure for those who are found be violating the ordinance who have a permit and for those who don’t. Infractions will be harsher for those in the second category.

Only one person spoke during the public hearing.

Jerida Vochatzer said, “I don’t know where to start. I’m outraged. Druggies don’t follow rules.”

To which Mayor Hal Cole said, “I agree this ordinance doesn’t address smoking marijuana.”

Vochatzer responded, “Why are we allowing them to smoke pot?”

The ordinance the city has crafted has to do with allowing people to grow pot for medical reasons under the auspices of Proposition 215.

Councilman Tom Davis was still miffed the names of people with permits to grow the weed will not be public information unless they are found in violation of the ordinance.

Councilwoman Claire Fortier explained to him health laws are murky in terms of privacy issues, plus it’s a safety issue in not wanting people to break into a residence with a legal pot grow.

In other South Tahoe pot news, at the second meeting in June a draft ordinance regulating dispensaries is slated to be discussed. City Attorney Patrick Enright expects to have the document out in circulation in the next 10 days.