Kirkwood making strides to tie into PG&E electric lines

By Kathryn Reed

KIRKWOOD – While utility rates are not likely to go down for decades at Kirkwood, the reliability of the lights staying on will increase by tapping into PG&E's lines.

About a dozen people showed up Saturday to voice their concerns and opinions about the four proposals being studied by the U.S. Forest Service. (One option is to do nothing.)



Rick Hopson and Sue Rodman of the Forest Service listen to questions April 30 about the Kirkwood-PG&E project. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Kirkwood Meadows Public Utility District wants to build and operate a 34.5-kilovolt power line. Twenty-eight miles away is where the power would come from – PG&E's hydroelectric plant at Salt Springs Reservoir in Amador County. That is alternative 2 – the Forest Service's preferred route.

However, it will be up to Forest Supervisor Ramiro Villalvazo to make the final decision.

Most of the transmission lines would be underground. But lines would be above ground from the reservoir to Lower Bear River Reservoir. Near the subdivision is where a substation is proposed.

Clint Selby, who is on the board of directors for the Bear River Summer Homeowners Association, said his group voted unanimously for alternative 4 because the substation would be farther from cabins than other proposals.

Bear River residents were initially concerned it would interfere with the forest experience because it comes with a 12-foot fence.

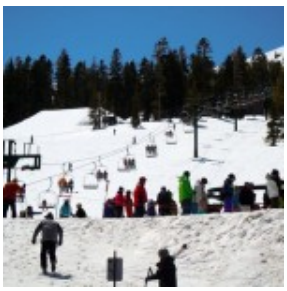
The group is not in favor of no action “because we want Kirkwood to have power.”

The power supplier is going to change this summer when the purchase agreement between KMPUD and Mountain Utilities, an investor-owned utility regulated by the California Public Utilities Commission, go through. The deal was signed in April 2010 for Mountain Utilities to be the electric service provider for the residents of Kirkwood and the ski resort.

An environmental impact study was required because 85 percent of the area is on the Eldorado National Forest.

“We would need to give them a special use permit,” Rick Hopson, USFS district ranger, told *Lake Tahoe News* during a break.

The other concern of the Forest Service is that with about two-thirds of Kirkwood Mountain Resort being on federal land, the agency wants to ensure riders have lifts that keep running.



Plenty of power for chairlifts at Kirkwood on April 30.

That hasn’t always been the case at this resort that straddles El Dorado, Amador and Alpine counties off Highway 88. One of the worst situations was in January 2010 when the powerhouse burned to the ground and skiers were stuck on inoperable lifts.

(The powerhouse should be rebuilt by the start of next ski season and would act as a backup once PG&E is on board. Since January 2010 diesel generators on flatbeds have been keeping the lights on and lifts turning.)

Michael Sharp, Kirkwood Meadows PUD assistant manager, said during the April 30 meeting that not having to rely on the diesel generators would help the entire area in terms of reliability and costs.

“We want a more stable rate in the future,” Sharp said.

With a bond needed to pay for the multi-million dollar project, that won’t be paid off for 20 to 30 years. While that is outstanding, ratepayers won’t see a drop in rates.

Right now Kirkwood’s rates range from 35 cents to 60 cents per kilowatt-hour. The peak was 97 cents in July 2009.

“These rates are four to 10 times greater on average per kilowatt-hour than charged by Pacific Gas & Electric,”

according to the draft EIS.

The plan is for Kirkwood to secure enough electricity to power the valley at full build-out. When that will happen depends on whose real estate-economic crystal ball one looks at.

But resort officials know what it will look like. Currently there are about 700 electric customers – it will max out at 1,400. Maximum peak overnight guests is 3,000 and could double in the future. The mountain can handle 6,932 skiers a day, which is projected to grow to 10,300. Current use is 7,000-megawatt hours; which is projected to more than triple.

It's possible the line could be put in starting summer 2012.

To review the draft environment impact statement, go online. Comments may be sent to comments-pacificsouthwest-elderado@fs.fed.us.

Another meeting will be May 3 from 7-9pm at the Amado County Board of Supervisors office, 810 Court St., Jackson.

Susan Wood contributed to this story.

JC Penney Express to open outlet in South Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

JC Penney is coming to South Lake Tahoe – sort of.

The national retailer is launching JCP Express – an answer to dying catalog sales and demand for online purchases.



“A national transformation for JC Penney is going on. We will be like a department store for them minus the inventory,” explained Dave Newell, owner of Blue Lake Flooring and Paint in South Lake Tahoe.

The service will be available this summer. Newell learned last week his store on James Avenue will be the headquarters for the Lake Tahoe Basin version of the program.

Gone is the catalog service like what Ace Hardware used to do.

People will be able to order any JC Penney merchandise from Newell’s store or online from home/work, then have it shipped to his store. This saves people the expense of shipping it to their house.

Newell foresees this program as a boon for second homeowners who buy something at the retailer but don’t want to haul it to Lake Tahoe. For locals it means free shipping.

Payments will be able to be made at the South Tahoe outlet and returns will also be handled there.

El Dorado County receives failing mark for ozone pollution

By Rick Daysog, Sacramento Bee

In its annual “State of the Air” report released this month, the American Lung Association ranks Sacramento as the fifth-

worst metropolitan area in the country for ozone pollution during the 2007-09 period. The area is tied for 11th worst for short-term particle pollution during the same three-year span.

Bonnie Holmes-Gen, senior policy director of the American Lung Association in California, noted the local region is improving due to efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from cars and wood burned in fireplaces.

Read the whole story

South Shore fighting Caltrans' Echo Summit closure date

By Kathryn Reed

South Shore officials are fighting Caltrans' decision to close Echo Summit four days before the largest professional cycling event in North America starts in Stateline.

State Sen. Ted Gaines, R-Roseville, has stepped into the fray – again. He has arranged for a conference call for Monday with local officials and Caltrans District 3 Director Jody Jones.

"Shock is the word being used. This totally caught people by surprise. There wasn't even a phone call. Just a press release went out and that's that," said Steve Teshara, chairman of the South Shore Transportation Management Association.

This agency that has been in existence since 1994 is taking the lead on changing the start date for the closure. Teshara

said anytime after May 15 would be acceptable.

The California Department of Transportation announced April 29 that starting May 11 Highway 50 over Echo Summit would be closed for two weeks to replace the dilapidated rock wall. This route is the main artery between the South Shore and points west.

With about 35,000 spectators expected at the start for the Amgen Tour de California, many would presumably be coming over Echo Summit.

Although there are alternative routes to get to South Lake Tahoe, what has South Shore tourism officials worried is people will skip their end of the lake and instead opt to be on the North Shore. Northstar is where the first leg ends and Squaw Valley is where Day 2 starts.

While the Echo Summit project has been talked about for years and for more than a month people knew it could start any time after May 1, Caltrans gave no reason why May 11 was picked.

Caltrans officials were not available for comment Friday.

The criteria had been the need for a window of 10 straight days of clear weather. The contractor also faces penalties if the full closure extends into June. Plus, the road will be open during Memorial Day weekend.

May is traditionally an iffy weather month in Lake Tahoe, with 2010 full of snowy days.

Tourism officials have already had to deflect misinformation that has been published. The May-June issue of *Via* magazine wrongly stated Echo Summit would be closed through June. The reality is after the two week closure, it will be subject to controlled traffic for up to six weeks. Construction will end at noon on Fridays and the road completely open Memorial Day – and if work is still going on, Fourth of July.

“With respect to this project, the community has been continuously misled. They said they understood how important Amgen is and it doesn’t seem important at all,” Teshara said of Caltrans.

Teshara once was an advocate for the Echo Summit project starting in May. He wrote a letter to Caltrans saying as much. But this was before the region knew it would be hosting multiple stages of the bike race.

At a March 9 meeting with Gaines, Caltrans, Sierra-at-Tahoe General Manager John Rice, Andrew Strain of Heavenly Mountain Resort, B Gorman with Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce, reps from contractor C.C. Myers, South Tahoe Councilman Tom Davis, and South Tahoe staff member Nancy Kerry, it was revealed Caltrans picked May based on Teshara’s letter. They thought he was speaking for the basin, even though at the time he was speaking on behalf of the North Shore – which is a likely beneficiary of an Echo Summit closure.

Caltrans, according to people at the meeting, did not ask for other input. But Amgen announced in February how the Tahoe area would be part of this year’s race, so Caltrans has had time to adjust any internal time line it may have had.

While May is a traditionally slow time throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin, it has been well documented events literally drive people to the basin. That was an impetus for striving to be part of Tour de California.

What worries South Shore officials is Caltrans’ decision to close Echo Summit pre-Amgen will drive them elsewhere.

Lake Tahoe Boulevard's future in El Dorado County's hands

By Kathryn Reed

Doing nothing is not an option. That was the message delivered Friday night by El Dorado County officials when it comes to Lake Tahoe Boulevard.

More than 80 people sat or stood through a two-hour meeting about the proposed changes on this stretch of road on the South Shore between Clear View Drive and D Street.



Lake Tahoe Boulevard may not be four-lanes in coming years. Photo/LTN

Issues are whether the road will be reduced to two lanes from four, what types of bike trails and/our routes would be developed, and if the speed limit would be altered.

While some bemoaned not knowing about the April 29 meeting, others had been giving written input for weeks. *Lake Tahoe News* reported on the meeting April 10 and had posted an item on the Events page prior to that.

More information about the alternatives is online.

What was new is a sixth alternative was announced, which will be online next week. Comments will be taken until May 6.

The meeting was a bit of a free-for-all, with people shouting from the audience, engaging speakers in a bit of a debate, applauding, booing and everyone being passionate about their stance.

It was a much less contentious meeting than fall 2008 when county officials were caught off-guard by the overwhelming backlash to keep the status quo. At that time the emotions from the 2007 Angora Fire were still raw. Lake Tahoe Boulevard is one of the main routes to the burn area.

While some still spoke of the need to keep four lanes for emergency vehicles, that did not dominate the conversation.

The project is billed to reduce sediment flowing into Angora Creek and the Upper Truckee River. Water quality is a major impetus for doing the project. This includes decreasing sediment runoff and storm zone restoration.

Safety is another overriding concern – for motorists and cyclists.

John Runnels said a long ago settlement requires the road to stay four lanes. While county officials disagreed with this after the meeting, they said legal counsel will resolve issues like the one Runnels raised.

Brendan Ferry, project manager for the county, also dispelled the falsehood that this environmental improvement project has anything to do with compensating for the Tahoe Keys debacle of paving over the most sensitive marsh in the basin in the 1960s.

Now it’s up to county officials to decide which alternative is preferred. Scales are tipping toward Alternative 4 – which is in detail on Page 18 of the draft that is being discussed. It

would maintain two lanes of striped 4-foot Class II bike lanes from Clear View Drive to Tahoe Mountain Road. From Tahoe Mountain Road to Sawmill Road it would go from four to two lanes with 4-foot Class II bike lanes. It would remove 6 feet of pavement on each side of the road. The forest trail from Lake Tahoe Boulevard at Sawmill Road to D Street would become a paved 8-foot Class I bike path.

The county expects to pick a preferred alternative this summer. Then begins the environmental document phase. During that time the public will have more opportunities to comment. That could be completed by fall 2012. Design would be in 2013. Construction would be that year or in 2014.

It's expected to cost between $880,000 and $1.5 million. Although not all the money is in hand, what is secured is from grants. None is from the county's general fund.

More Calif. high schools blend college, career prep

By Laurel Rosenhall, Sacramento Bee

For years, high schools have prepared some students for college and others for work. Now there's a push at the highest levels of state government to meld the two, so that as students learn job skills, they're also fulfilling course requirements needed to get into college.

You can see the concept at work at Cosumnes Oaks High School in Elk Grove, where a licensed contractor teaches college-prep engineering classes.

“I know I have a lot of students that aren’t going to college, but my goal is still to prepare them because ultimately they have to be critical thinkers, whether they’re in the workforce or they go to school,” said Tim McDougal, a college-educated teacher who owned a contracting business for 12 years.

His approach is part of a trend in California high schools: blending college preparation with career preparation. The goal is to offer more hands-on classes that will engage students turned off by the traditional academic approach, while infusing the college-bound curriculum with more real-world applications.

The number of career-oriented classes that meet admissions requirements at the University of California and California State University has skyrocketed in recent years, from fewer than 300 a decade ago to more than 8,300 today.

Sen. Darrell Steinberg has quietly helped fuel the growth through his role as the Senate’s president pro tem.

Read the whole story

Armed man arrested in Douglas County

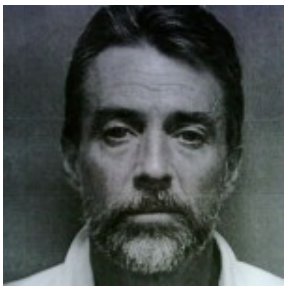
By Reno Gazette Journal

A man who was the subject of a dragnet in two counties on two days was arrested today without incident in Douglas County, a Washoe County Sheriff’s Office spokesman said.

Deputy Armando Avina had few details about the arrest of Wade Richard Kelly, 52.

“He is in a Washoe County patrol car on his way from Douglas County to Reno,” Avina said.

Avina did not have information yet as to what charges Kelly might be facing in Reno. He is alleged to have fired several shots during a fight with his brother Friday morning at their mother’s home in the 16600 block of Callahan Road off the Mount Rose Highway.



Wade Kelly

Read the whole story

Echo Summit off-limits to cars for 2 weeks starting May 11

Caltrans today announced it will temporarily close Highway 50 at Echo Summit for two weeks beginning May 11.

This means the route to the South Shore will be less direct for those coming to the area for the Amgen Tour de California cycling event May 15.



The wall on Echo Summit will be replaced starting May 11. Photo/LTN file

The closure is part of the first stage of a safety enhancement project that will remove damaged rock walls and replace them with a barrier that meets current safety standards. The project is funded in part ($1.9 million) by the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009.

There will be one-way controlled traffic on May 9-10, and Mondays through noon on Fridays for up to six weeks after Highway 50 is reopened.

The highway will be open with no restrictions on Memorial Day weekend.

Alternate routes around the closure take travelers through the Gold Country of El Dorado and Amador counties. Motorists should allow approximately one hour extra travel time during the two-week full closure to reach South Lake Tahoe.

Alternate routes are:

• From Sacramento: Exit at Power Inn Road and take Highway 16 east to Highway 49 south, at Highway 88 in Jackson, turn left (east). Take that to Highway 89 and turn left again (north), and follow it back to Highway 50 in South Lake Tahoe.

• From Placerville: Exit at Missouri Flat Road and take Highway 49 south. Follow it to Highway 88 in Jackson and turn left (east). At Highway 89 turn left (north) and follow it back to Highway 50 in South Lake Tahoe.

Motorists coming through the Stockton area can exit Highway 99 as usual at Highway 88 east, continuing onto highways 88/49. In Jackson, turn left to continue on Highway 88 east. At Highway 89 turn left (north) and follow it to Highway 50 in South Lake Tahoe.

Caltrans will place electronic message signs at key positions on all of these highways to direct travelers. During the temporary full closure, Highway 50 will be open for visitors to Placerville and other locations as far east as Sierra-at-Tahoe Road near Echo Summit.

Caltrans has a website (www.Way2Tahoe.com) featuring a map, up-to-date information about the project, information about the alternate routes and sites to visit along the way, live traffic cameras, and answers to frequently asked questions.

Governments consider cuts to once off-limit pensions

By Michael Cooper and Mary Williams Walsh, New York Times

When an arbitrator ruled this month that Detroit could reduce the pensions being earned by its police sergeants and lieutenants, it put the struggling city at the forefront of a growing national debate over whether the pensions of current public workers can or should be reduced.

Conventional wisdom and the laws and constitutions of many states have long held that the pensions being earned by current government workers are untouchable. But as the fiscal crisis has lingered, officials in strapped states from California to Illinois have begun to take a second look, to see whether there might be loopholes allowing them to cut the pension benefits of current employees. Now the move in Detroit — made possible, lawyers said, because Michigan's constitutional protections are weaker — could spur other places to try to follow suit.

"These things do tend to be herd-oriented," said Sylvester J. Schieber, an economist and consultant who studies pensions.

The mayors of some hard-hit cities have said that the high costs of pensions have forced them to lay off workers: Oakland, Calif., laid off one-tenth of its police force last year after failing to win concessions on pension costs.

Read the whole story

Chopper replaces mechanical equipment for fuels reduction

By Kathryn Reed

If and when a fire erupts at the Y, a natural fuel break will have been established in the middle of South Lake Tahoe so it doesn't destroy the entire city.

That is the purpose of the nearly 50-acre fuel reduction project at Lake Christopher near Trout Creek and Pioneer Trail. It's the final project to create a break for when the

next catastrophic fire strikes. Areas above and below have been treated in recent years.



A helicopter April 28 removes cut trees from the Lake Christopher area. Photos/Kathryn Reed

When the U.S. Forest Service gets around to its much talked about South Shore Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project, this part of the city that borders on the fed's property will have been treated.

Much of what is being cleared from this stream environmental zone looks like bad firewood. Not much of it is logs. A lot is slash. A few Jeffery pines are being removed, but mostly it's lodgepole because they love wet areas.

Men on the ground felled the trees with chain saws. Today is the third day pilot Matt Turner is using a helicopter to lift the debris to one of three landing areas.

"This way is better than pile burning," explained Dave Mercer, the contractor for the project. "There is going to be a little disturbance. People don't understand what a forest should look like."

He’s out in the woods with his crew making sure everything is going according to plan. One eye is on the men securing the chokes to the piles of wood and another on the helicopter hovering above.

This method Mercer proposed means no big machines on the ground. So, even though the ground is not pristine because trees have been felled, it looks nothing like when skidders, harvesters and other equipment are used.

A few acres by South Tahoe Public Utility District headquarters will have mechanical means used to clear the area, but it’s not in an SEZ.

With Lake Christopher being a stream zone and snow still on the ground, it may never have been permitted if equipment had to be brought in. As it was, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency deferred the permitting process to the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board even though the memorandum of understanding between the agencies defers the permitting to TRPA. TRPA officials were not available to explain why they were unable to do their job and asked someone else to do so.

“TRPA wanted to pile burn,” Mercer said.

South Tahoe Fire Marshal Ray Zachau agrees with Mercer’s assessment about people not understanding what a healthy forest looks like. He hired a forester to plan this project for fuels reduction and creating a healthy forest.

“If we can keep a fire on the ground, we can put it out,” Zachau said. “Once it’s in the canopy, we really can’t stop it.”

Both men get an earful from people who don’t want any trees removed. But without fire coming through to naturally thin the forest, the stands are overgrown and create more of a threat. Plus, it’s not good for plant and animal species.

This $147,000 project is being funded by a Forest Service grant and money from the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act. The entire project is supposed to take about three weeks, with four to five days of flying.

Mercer isn’t sure what he’ll do with the chips. Some may stay in town for a construction site’s erosion control measures. Some may go to a cogeneration plant in Susanville.

There’s no money in selling this material – the market has dried up. It’s to the city’s benefit if the contractor could make money off the end product because then the bid would have come in lower.

Still, this type of removal is more economical than mechanized, according to Zachau.

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