Nevada man arrested in South Tahoe on Bay Area homicide charges

By Gary Klien, Marin Independent Journal

A 77-year-old Nevada man was arrested Monday in connection with the slaying of a woman in Marin County in the 1970s and three other homicides in different counties, authorities said.

Joseph Naso, a Reno resident, was arrested in South Lake Tahoe following his release from the El Dorado County Jail in an unrelated case. He was transferred to Marin County Jail, where he was booked on suspicion of four counts of murder.

Read the whole story

Unmanned aircraft being used to fight wildfires

By Kimberlie Nitti, Emergency Management

A wildfire’s thick black smoke blots out the sun, cloaking the area in a premature dusk. Glowing embers spiral up through the haze. A small camera-equipped aircraft skirts a wall of flames on a dangerous mission to record hot spots and track the fire’s progression.

That is, it would be dangerous if an actual pilot was on board. But this is an unmanned aircraft, capable of venturing into areas too remote or deadly to risk human life. The

pilotless plane, also known as an unmanned aircraft system (UAS) or unmanned aerial vehicle, transmits collected sensor data to emergency response teams on the ground that use the information to strategically allocate fire fighting resources.

Unmanned aircraft are revolutionizing the aerospace industry. No longer solely for military use, UASs have increasing potential for civilian and commercial applications, particularly with regard to emergency response and relief efforts. They can be used for environmental research, law enforcement, border surveillance, search and rescue operations, damage assessment, and recovery efforts following natural disasters. Ideal for situations where it's too dangerous or difficult to use manned aircraft, unmanned aircraft often cost less and can stay in the air longer – as long as four days without refueling.

"Resources are always at a premium in an emergency situation," said retired Los Angeles firefighter David Badgett. "Sometimes it's best to drop water with a manned helicopter. Other times it's better to send in a UAS for observation. Unmanned aircraft give incident commanders more options, so they can select the most appropriate tool for any given mission."

Already in use in some states, UASs successfully performed search and rescue missions in Louisiana and Texas during the 2008 hurricanes. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration uses them to hunt down hurricanes and communicate data to the National Hurricane Center in Florida. Police departments in Houston and Miami have tested law enforcement programs using the systems. In California, NASA scientists developed an unmanned aircraft, called the Ikhana, which has proven useful in battling wildfires. Special heat sensors installed in the Ikhana map fire locations by temperature and transmit hot spot information to multiagency coordination centers and firefighters on the ground.

Read the whole story

Serene Lakes explosion prompts officials to evacuate area

By Barbara Barte Osborn, Sacramento Bee

SERENE LAKES – Emergency services officials on Sunday ordered an indefinite evacuation of a Tahoe area community after a propane gas explosion leveled a three-story house Friday and officials confirmed nearly two dozen more propane leaks in the area.

“We’ll notify homeowners through the media and by reverse 9-1-1 calls when the order’s lifted,” said Richard Simmons, program manager for Placer County’s Office of Emergency Services. “But we don’t expect that to be anytime soon – weeks at the earliest.”

The order affects Serene Lakes, a community of 850 homes near Donner Summit in Placer County. Only about 20 of those houses, however, are occupied by permanent residents. The others are ski rentals or are used occasionally by the owners for skiing, said Steve Lieberman, Truckee Fire Protection District Battalion Chief.

A shelter has not been set up during the voluntary evacuation, Simmons said, as “most are vacationers and they can leave; others can contact their insurance companies and go to a hotel.”

Read the whole story

California community colleges to slash enrollment

By Carla Rivera, Los Angeles Times

Facing a state funding cut of up to 10 percent, California's community colleges will enroll 400,000 fewer students next fall and slash thousands of classes to contend with budget shortfalls that threaten to reshape their mission, officials said Wednesday.

The dire prognosis was in response to the breakdown in budget talks in Sacramento and the likelihood that the state's 112 community colleges will be asked to absorb an $800-million funding reduction for the coming school year – double the amount suggested in Gov. Jerry Brown's current budget proposal.

As it now stands, the budget plan would raise community college student fees from $26 to $36 per unit. The fees may go even higher if a budget compromise is not reached.

Read the whole story

Lake Tahoe real estate in stabilization mode

By Susan Wood

Lake Tahoe real estate agents and sellers hope to spring into a new season of renewal in this hard-hit industry. But most admit in this economy, it will take a lot of special treatment and unique touches to get buyers through the door and on the deed.

“Consumer confidence is a little down affecting house sales in general. But the median price has stayed steady for 16 months now, and the inventory is a little low, but the buyer could be coming to the mindset that maybe now’s the time to buy,” said longtime real estate agent Deb Howard, who runs her own company in South Lake Tahoe. “The stabilization is huge.”

The median price of a single family home on the South Shore in March was $310,000, the South Tahoe Association of Realtors reported in its multiple listing service. The median was $7,500 more at this time last year. Over the year, the prices have hovered between this price and $328,000, making many wonder if this housing market recession has reached its bottom at least in Tahoe.

Howard believes it has. Her company has logged recent sales – with a $2 million home in escrow – that have prompted her to raise her eyebrows at the prospect of seeing the end of a true market correction from Tahoe’s heyday between 1999 and 2002 when buyers were in bidding wars over homes. Some bought without even stepping inside.

Gone may be those days. However, Howard has seen the international buyers poking around recently and activity is picking up. She’s placed more effort and energy into Internet marketing and learned catch phrases to use such as “getaway,” “exclusive” and “lifestyle” that tap into the desire for prospects to have a world-renowned mountain lake experience.

First-time homebuyers and even those with bad credit buying with cash have come around since “financing may not be possible” for the latter, Howard indicated.

Timing is everything. South Lake Tahoe announced last week it received approval for $800,000 in first-time homebuyer assistance awarded in California Housing and Community Development Department grant funds. The South Lake Tahoe Redevelopment Agency covers a portion of the administration costs, enabling a greater percentage of the funds to go toward the homebuyers.

Overall, the hope is spring will launch a new year of an upward swing. Month after month, national and statewide reports declaring drops in home prices and sales as well as billions tied up in banks with tight lending practices have prompted some to ponder the future of buying a home as the all-American dream. These reports don't necessarily represent the case for Tahoe, contends Howard, who serves on a resort community committee she once chaired for the National Association of Realtors. There are trends at work – and sellers at work doing the extras.

For one thing, Lake Tahoe has two peak real estate markets. They run from 4th of July to mid-October and New Year's to Easter. Baby boomers may either want to retire here with their recreational enthusiast war paint or transfer wealth at an astonishing rate to their children. Some of these so called "kids" got into the world of technology and are driving a new age of commerce, so they may not need daddy's money.

But nothing worth having comes easy. That's why, if sellers want to move their homes, they need to be creative like Mike and Sue Zanetell. To show their four-bedroom home at 927 Candlewood in South Tahoe that he built from the ground up, she makes cookies and lets a pot of minestrone soup simmer in the kitchen.

"See, you come here and get fed," Howard said, while Zanetell pulled out some pastries.

One unique selling feature has become a picture board of the

home. One stood next to the traditional fliers and compact discs of more photographs.

“It’s critical to let the buyer know what it looks like in all four seasons,” Howard said. Zanetell’s back yard that’s good enough to be on the local garden tour was on display. For that, they’ve added Forget Me Not wildflower seeds into a baggie as an added touch for those who view the home.

Signs are put up telling viewers they can “leave their shoes on.”



Sue Zanetell shows the cabinetry in her home. Photo/Susan Wood

Zanetell’s persona envelops the Craftsman home, which comes with impeccable detail that only a builder may insist on. They’re selling the home to move to Mendocino County to care for aging parents and plan to keep their cabin at Fallen Leaf Lake.

Listed at $529,000, Howard admits the price is higher than the average. But she’s confident the high end buyer is back in the saddle. Those with money know to be the first to set the trends, and they’re waited for the bottom.

Not your average seller or house

Entrepreneur and builder Chuck Bluth apparently got that same message. He's listed his 9,530-square-foot lakefront home in Incline Village with Chase International for $15.998 million.

To Bluth, the European home speaks for itself – with a bathroom that won an international award for the use of marble and a wood finish with five layers. More than 15,000 hours and 18,000 hours were placed in the masonry work and painting, respectively. If the privacy isn't enough to think of living in a resort, try owning a personal waterfall.

"Tahoe couldn't produce a house like this under $20 million," Bluth told *Lake Tahoe News*. "But someone coming from the Bay Area is used to this quality."

What's Bluth's reason for selling? He calls the Logan Shoals area house in Glenbrook the place he hangs his hat. To sell the Incline Village home, the former owner of the Cal Neva Resort and developer may assist as a lender to the ideal party.

"Basically, I sort of held off on marketing to some degree because the market had been so bad. There was no doubt the real estate market was hit hard, but what hit the wealthy especially hard was the stock market (plunge). But the market is back, and I believe this year's market coming into spring and summer is going to be a good market," he said.

Homes circling the Lake Tahoe Basin saw a 14 percent jump in the average price, according to Chase's last quarterly report comparing 2011's figures with the prior year. The median sales price increased 1 percent from $417,500 to $422,500.

"The Lake Tahoe market is showing definite signs of stabilization," Chase Vice President Sue Lowe said, echoing Howard's statements.

Even the U.S. real estate market has economists noticing recently.

The National Association of Realtors reported a 2.1 percent increase in pending home sales about a week ago.

“Pending home sales have trended up very nicely since bottoming out last June, even with periodic monthly declines,” NAR Chief Economist Lawrence Yun said.

Snow on gas line causes Donner Summit home to explode

By Maneeza Iqbal, News 10

DONNER SUMMIT – A Serene Lakes home exploded after a gas leak Friday around 10:30pm.

The explosion demolished the home and damaged a home next door, said Truckee Fire Protection District spokesperson Gene Welch.

The home was unoccupied and no injuries were reported.

Officials in the area have identified 21 homes with significant amounts of gas around them, Welch said. The homes were identified after high snow banks cut power to the area. Before restoring power, crews checked the homes for gas leaks.

Unfortunately, many of the vacation home residents were waiting for it to happen because of the record amounts of snowfall.

Read the whole story

South Tahoe schools make list for seismic retrofits

By Phillip Reese, Sacramento Bee

More than 200 school buildings in the Sacramento region appear on a state list of facilities with potentially dangerous seismic hazards, according to California Watch, a nonprofit news agency.

Local districts have spent tens of millions of dollars to repair buildings on the decade-old list, produced by the Division of the State Architect, though large earthquakes happen less frequently in Yolo, Placer, El Dorado and Sacramento counties than elsewhere in California.

Sacramento City Unified and San Juan Unified school districts had a combined 150 school buildings on the list, which logged buildings constructed before 1978 using certain materials prone to earthquake damage.

The city of Sacramento itself has no major known faults running beneath it. However, several faults within 30 miles are capable of producing large earthquakes, said Bill Bryant, a senior engineering geologist for the California Department of Conservation.

A magnitude 6.5 earthquake near Winters in 1892 was felt with high intensity in Sacramento.

Sacramento City Unified and San Juan Unified passed several construction bond measures about 15 years ago and devoted some of the proceeds to earthquake retrofitting. Officials at both districts say work has been completed at dozens of buildings.

“All buildings older than 25 years have been retrofitted,” said Sacramento City Unified spokesman Gabe Ross.

About 15 buildings at Elk Grove Unified, the region’s largest district, made the at-risk list.

“At the schools on that list, we’ve done about $40 million worth of work,” said Robert Pierce, the district’s associate superintendent for facilities and planning, adding that all district buildings now could likely withstand a quake.

Elsewhere in the region, fewer schools appear to have structural problems, but the threat of a large earthquake directly underfoot is higher.

The Lake Tahoe area sees the most earthquakes in the region, particularly Alpine County, south of the lake. Several hundred earthquakes have struck there in the past 40 years, most of them minor, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

Bijou Community Elementary in the Lake Tahoe Unified School District was cited on the state’s list of schools potentially at most risk from an earthquake. South Tahoe Middle School appeared on a list of high-priority seismic projects.

Workers retrofitted Bijou in 2000 and performed three separate retrofits at Tahoe Middle in subsequent years, said Steve Morales, director of facilities at Lake Tahoe Unified. Other schools have also been extensively renovated with bond money.

Work is still ongoing, Morales said, adding that past projects “were designed to offset catastrophic failures in the buildings. The upgrades do not bring the facilities up to the current building code.”

Pollock Pines restaurant owner released from jail

By Carlos Alcala, Sacramento Bee

Kevin Cairns, owner of Dante's on the River, east of Pollock Pines, was released on bail Friday after three weeks in jail.

Cairns had been jailed unexpectedly on $250,000 bail at his first court appearance March 15 related to charges of assault with a deadly weapon and felony vandalism for incidents in November and February.

He was denied a bail reduction April 1 but had his bond reduced to $87,000 Friday, which he was able to post with the assistance of friends, Cairns' wife Nancy said.

Cairns' jailing took place after a third incident the weekend before the March 15 court date.

The El Dorado County District Attorney's office filed amended charges that morning, although Cairns had not been arrested in that latest, nonviolent confrontation.

Cairns has argued he is only defending his property in the face of an onslaught of motorists who abuse his parking lot by vomiting or going to the bathroom there.

The restaurant is on a windy and isolated stretch of road.

Dante's restaurant has closed to avoid further incidents, Nancy Cairns said, and her husband is pursuing a business opportunity opening 10 restaurants with an old friend.

South Shore casinos report slight drop in gaming revenue

By Bill O'Driscoll, Reno Gazette-Journal

Gaming revenues tumbled yet again across Washoe County in February as the tourism industry recession showed no signs of easing its winter-long grip, the state reported today.

Casinos across the Reno-Sparks-north Tahoe region saw an 8.5 percent decline in gross revenues from the same month a year earlier, according to the Nevada Gaming Control Board's report.

It marked the fourth straight month of year-over-year declines for Washoe County.

Within the county, properties in Reno reported a 7.5 percent drop and in Sparks, revenues fell 10.2 percent. On the north shore of Lake Tahoe, casinos reported a 15.5 percent decline.

Statewide, gaming revenues fell 6.8 percent, pulled down largely on a 9.5 percent decline on the Las Vegas Strip, which alone generates more than half the entire state total.

Elsewhere in Northern Nevada, revenues in the Carson City-Carson Valley corridor fell 2.9 percent from February 2010, and at Stateline on Tahoe's south shore, casinos reported a 2.5 percent drop.

Federal government shutdown averted

By David Lightman, William Douglas, McClatchy Newspapers

Congress and the White House late Friday barely beat the clock and averted a partial government shutdown, agreeing to a last-minute deal to cut at least $38.5 billion from federal spending.

Congress will not vote on the deal, which would fund the government for the last six months of the fiscal year, until next week. In the meantime, negotiators agreed to a shorter-term stopgap spending plan to keep the government running through Thursday.

Approval was expected late Friday to keep the government open past midnight.

Read the whole story