Man shot at Stateline home

A Stateline man was transported Thursday night to Renown Medical Center in Reno via CalStar helicopter at about 11 after he was shot in the upper part of his right leg, the Douglas County Sheriff's Department reported Friday. He ended up having surgery on the injured right femur.

Deputies responded to a call of a gunshot incident at a residence in the 300 block of Quaking Aspen Drive in Stateline.

An investigation and statements from both parties revealed the subjects to be roommates. The subjects had allegedly been cleaning firearms together in a bedroom at the residence. During this procedure, one of the subjects accidentally discharged a firearm, a .41-caliber revolver, which had been reloaded with ammunition after cleaning. The discharged bullet struck the other roommate, causing the injury.

The incident has been deemed accidental, and no criminal charges are pending.

The sheriff's department declined to release the name of the injured party.

Fire weather station going up this summer

By Susan Wood

Come summer, Smokey Bear could be more accurate on forecasts than weather reporters. And he's probably kept his job longer

– since 1944.



The fire weather prediction station LTBMU will install this summer resembles this photo.

The Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit plans to erect in Meyers a fire weather station that looks like a cross between a tripod and a spaceship. Still, this $15,000 device reads levels of relative humidity, precipitation depth, fuel moisture, solar radiation, along with wind speed and direction. It sends those readings to a computer program that provides fire danger for the U.S. Forest. From there, Smokey Bear signs will indicate fire hazards that include the five levels: “low, moderate, high, very high and extreme.”

The most commonly seen sign exists in front of the South Lake Tahoe visitor’s center off Highway 50 next to Campground by the Lake. One may also call the LTBMU fire danger recorded line at (530) 644.6048.

In contrast, “red flag” fire warnings originate with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

A similar weather station now stands at the Meyers fire station, but it’s so old it no longer meets National Fire Danger Rating System guidelines, and it can’t be repaired.

Moreover, structure development has hindered the satellite readings from the 29-year-old unit referred to by the Forest Service as RAWS (Remote Access Weather Station).

Fire resources will be managed by the readings – including those crews out in the woods cutting. On dry days, machinery even intended to reduce fire fuel can start one.

“That’s where we locally see our fire dangers. It’s extremely important,” said John Washington, LTBMU fuels division chief.

The Forest Service aimed to find adequate space, ground cover, air flow and sunlight. At a mere $500 in costs, the new RAWS will be installed at the end of Mohawk Street near Lake Baron. It will take up 400 square feet and will be fenced in. When the snow completely melts in the area, about 200 feet of vegetation must be cleared from the site. Crews will need to take down 25 trees under the proposal, which already passed its required comment period.

“It definitely does help because it helps us compile all our available resources,” Lake Valley Fire Chief Jeff Michael said.

Much like the Lake Tahoe Basin sits at the cusp of heavy moisture between the El Nino and La Nina weather phenomena, the National Wildland Significant Fire Potential Outlook from April through July this year reports “equal chances” of a bad fire season in this region of the Sierra Nevada. Fire officials will sometimes say when it’s wet more fuel for the fire grows. When it’s dry, the terrain sparks easily.

Predicting is one thing. Prevention is quite another.

“(The RAWS) will help – but we still knew we were in a high fire danger and had a red flag warning during the Angora Fire. Sometimes we can have all the technology in the world, but it still takes preventing and doing what we can and telling others to do what they can. Fire’s going to happen,” said

Leona Allen, a former city dispatcher who was on the job when her father's home burned in the devastating fire in 2007 that consumed 254 homes. The lot is now home to a commemorative garden, and Allen works for Lake Valley Fire.

Much focus turning to Highway 50

Major changes are in store for Highway 50 in the coming months from Echo Summit to the Stateline area.

Among them, the groundbreaking is scheduled for April 26 on the first phase of the long-awaited Highway 50 project that for over a decade has called for curbs, gutters, sidewalks, landscaping, street lighting and a 6-foot wide bike lane alongside the major thoroughfare from Trout Creek to Ski Run Boulevard. The first phase alone is estimated at more than $48 million, with the city of South Lake Tahoe pledging $1 million.

The groundbreaking will likely beat the start of the highly anticipated work on the retaining wall at Echo Summit that's considered so extensive it will shut down traffic through the major entry into Lake Tahoe for two weeks. The $1.9 million project is funded through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

Weather permitting, the work is scheduled to begin the first week of May and may continue into the Amgen bike race, the California Department of Transportation announced this week. First, the contractor must make a "cast" of the existing, splintered wall. Echo Summit is not on the route, but tourism officials want to make it easy for thousands of visitors

expected to arrive for one of the largest anticipated events going into peak season. The Amgen Tour is slated for May 15-22.

Despite other reports to the contrary, Caltrans contends it never provided a definitive date of the work start date, so it is "not delayed."

"There has never been a definitive date. The earliest start was always the first week of May. It's all driven by the weather," Caltrans spokewoman Carol Herman said.

To assist in navigating the multitude of state roadwork planned over late spring into summer, Caltrans has created a brochure and a website highlighting an alternative route to circumvent the Echo Summit closure. The route from South Lake Tahoe covers Highway 50, 89 over Luther Pass to Highway 88 to Jackson. North of there, a motorist may take Highway 49 north to Placerville or Highway 16 through the Gold Country.

As for work closer to the Nevada state line, the City Council unanimously approved this week to mount safety signs directing pedestrians to avoid walking alongside Highway 50 next to the defunct Chateau at Heavenly redevelopment site, also known for years as the convention center project. Caltrans has diverted liability of the property issue with the city.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Japan hit with 7.1 aftershock

There were no reports of damage from the aftershock centered off the northeast coast of Japan.

Officials warned of tsunami heights of up to 6.6 feet, but the

warning was lifted after 90 minutes.

A nuclear plant in Miyagi lost three of its four power sources, while no damage was reported at the crippled Fukushima Daiichi plant.

—Los Angeles Times

Garrido decides to plead not guilty in Dugard case

By Sam Stanton, Sacramento Bee

In a surprise move today, Phillip Garrido entered a not guilty plea to charges that he kidnapped Jaycee Lee Dugard.

His wife Nancy entered the same not guilty plea after the judge indicated there were irregularities in the grand jury process that indicted the couple in September.

Stephen Tapson, Nancy Garrido's attorney, said the plan earlier this week was for Phillip Garrido to plead guilty but that a last minute hitch over the manner in which the grand jury selection was handled prompted the decision to plead not guilty.

Tapson would not elaborate on the problem, but said the matter arose when Phillip Garrido's attorney Susan Gellman brought the issue to his attention Wednesday night.

El Dorado County District Attorney Vern Pierson confirmed that there was a issue raised in the manner in which the grand jurors were selected, but said such claims are common and he expected the matter to be dismissed.

Read the whole story

Federal government shutdown could disrupt lives of Californians

By Cassie Myers, California News Service

The Border Patrol would remain on duty, mail would be delivered, and Social Security checks should go out on time. But a looming government shutdown could stall tax refunds, close national parks and museums, and put tens of thousands of Californians temporarily out of work.

Stopgap measures have kept government operations going since the current budget year began Oct. 1. The latest measure expires at the end of Friday, and with Democrats and Republicans unable to reach an agreement, the White House has told agencies to begin planning for a shutdown on Saturday.

California has a huge population of federal workers, roughly 170,000 according to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, nearly the same number as Washington itself.

Employees deemed essential, such as air traffic controllers, doctors at VA hospitals, border agents and military personnel, probably will remain on the job as they did during the last major shutdown in 1995. Others, such as Internal Revenue Service employees at 27 California locations, might find their offices closed on Monday.

None would be paid until the dispute is over, though essential employees are likely to be reimbursed with back pay.

Read the whole story

Bill seeks Nevada withdrawal from TRPA

By Guy Clifton, Reno Gazette-Journal

Supporters of a bill that would pull Nevada out of the bi-state Tahoe Regional Planning Compact said the TRPA is mired in bureaucracy and litigation and its governing board controlled by environmental special interests on the California side.

Sen. John Lee, D-North Las Vegas, who sponsored SB271, said the bi-state compact with California has become overly restrictive, leaving the TRPA as an agency "hamstrung by heavy-handed legal tactics by our partner (California)" and other groups.

"Nevada residents, users of the region, and the natural resource itself are stuck bearing the burden of what has become broken government, a jeopardized partnership, and by edict of the compact, a failed agency," Lee told members of the Senate Government Affairs Committee on Friday.

Senate Bill 271 would have the state withdraw from the Tahoe Regional Planning Compact and shift its duties for the Tahoe basin on the Nevada side of the lake to the Nevada Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

Sen. James Settelmeyer, R-Gardnerville, and Assemblymen Kelly Kite, R-Gardnerville; Pat Hickey, R-Reno and Randy Kirner, R-Reno, co-sponsored the bill and also spoke in support.

They said the restrictive regulations discourage businesses and frustrate property owners who sometimes wait for years to get permits.

“We have businesses up there that spend millions of dollars and years of time to get projects going,” said Kite, who added that the TRPA was created with good intentions, but has since ‘run amuck’ and become ‘an obstruction organization.'”

David Fabrizio, a South Lake Tahoe resident who said he lost his home in the Angora fire, agreed:

“You rake up the needles around your house for fire protection and you’re told that you have to put them back,” he said, “I had the forestry department come out and I had trees that were dead in my yard and I wanted to be able to cut down and TRPA says I can’t cut them down.”

Opponents of the bill, however, said Nevada would be “throwing out the baby with the bath water” if they decided to set up their own regulatory agency.

“We don¹t think this is the right way to go about the bill,” said Kyle Davis of the Nevada Conservation League. “Decisions that are made in Nevada do affect California and decisions in California do affect Nevada.”

Rochelle Nason, executive director of the League to Save Lake Tahoe, said Nevada pulling out of the compact would “make it impossible to keep Tahoe blue.”

“You can’t save one-third of a lake,” she said.

TRPA executive director Joanne Marchetta said her agency is caught in the middle of ‘two states with profoundly different philosophies.’

She said Nevada’s focus is on property rights, while California’s is on environmental protection, but she said despite these differences she believes the Compact should stay

in place.

“We may have much more to lose (from Nevada leaving the compact), than what can be gained,” she said.

TRPA board member Tim Cashman said pulling out of the compact could create a number of unintended consequences.

“We¹re likely to have more litigation that we have today,” he said.

TRPA’s Marchetta said the agency is anticipating $1 million in legal fees over the next two years.

Leo Drozdoff, director of the Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, said the state is neutral on the bill, but urged consideration of several steps before ultimately making a decision to withdraw from the pact.

They include:

o Allow Gov. Brian Sandoval and California Gov. Jerry Brown an opportunity to meet and discuss management of Lake Tahoe.

o The Legislature should begin an outreach process to counterparts in the California Legislature.

o The TRPA¹s involvement in residential oversight should be shifted to local governments.

Opponents of the bill also supported those moves.

“We believe bi-state cooperation in Tahoe matters is essential to continue ongoing programs targeting such issues as runoff of soil and other elements that threaten the clarity of the lake, and we support the role of TRPA inimplementing such programs,” said Jean Stoess, chair of the Toiyabe Chapter of the Sierra Club.

Lee said previous efforts to reach out to California’s Legislature have fallen on deaf ears.

WHAT’S NEXT

Though no action was taken by the Senate Government Affairs Committee, Sen. John Lee, D-North Las Vegas, said it would be discussed further in work sessions.

Snow, gusty winds return after short reprieve

The National Weather Service in Reno issued a winter weather advisory for Lake Tahoe starting at 11pm Wednesday through 11am Thursday.

Snow is expected to fall Wednesday evening into Thursday morning then turn to showers,with the heaviest precipitation being around midnight overnight.

Snow accummulations are predicted to measure 4 to 8 inches at lake level and 8 to 14 above 7,000 feet, which encompasses most of the passes.

Travel may be sketchy with possible whiteout conditions from the gusty winds. Road restrictions will probably apply.

South Tahoe’s mid-year

finances show improvement

By Susan Wood

In the quest for the green or even the black, South Lake Tahoe's government finances appear on paper to be much rosier than the figures tallied last year at this time – at least for now. The redevelopment picture could change that.



The South Lake Tahoe City Council received two critical financial reports Tuesday. Photo/Susan Wood

The City Council heard and filed a mid-year budget report by Finance Director Christine Vuletich Tuesday stating that the local government's general fund is down by $276,689 in unfunded expenses this year. This term means items not budgeted. Last year at this time, the city was forced to make up for $1.5 million in the general fund.

"Compared to last year, it's really minimal," Vuletich said to the council, sharing her excitement about the improvement.

Overall, she summarized the report as "good news." Revenues

show an $800,000 increase over this time last year – except for one area that's taken a major hit in diminishing property tax dollars during the recession.

"Most funds are up except the RDA," she said, referring to the Redevelopment Agency's $900,000 drop in revenue in one year.

"Flat is the new up," she said.

The city contends it has made inroads on containing costs, and Vuletich's optimistic about slight revenue gains showing a growth pattern, she later told *Lake Tahoe News*. The mid-year changes in total funds showed a net gain of $462,496. And city officials plan to follow a five-year strategic plan to prosperity.

City Manager Tony O'Rourke, who is most recently from the private sector, has shown no patience for government waste and business as usual.

When O'Rourke came on board, he took issue with 78 percent of the general fund being consumed by salaries and benefits. His aim is less than 65 percent. Just last month, 11 positions were eliminated.

The city had to pay out two top-level, former managers. Agreeing not to sue or disparage the city, Assistant Manager Rick Angelocci got $54,891 in severance, while Redevelopment and Housing Director Gene Palazzo received $44,748. These consent agenda items passed unanimously without discussion.

"I'm not happy about this," Councilman Tom Davis told *Lake Tahoe News* during a break.

But O'Rourke insisted the terminations were necessary over the long haul – calling the maneuvers a 23-to-1 savings when considering Angelocci's $144,360 annual salary.

The challenges continue. The city is scheduled to start labor negotiations in closed session at its meeting in two weeks.

O’Rourke appeared to breathe a sigh of relief with the city’s financials – that is, this year’s mid-year report and last year’s audit presented side by side before the council that afternoon.

Looking back at tough times

The city’s auditor, Cory Biggs of Maze and Associates based in Pleasant Hill, provided South Lake Tahoe with a reasonable bill of health on its finances evaluated over its 2009-10 fiscal year. And with no “discrepancies,” Biggs said he would rate South Lake Tahoe’s 190 separate funds it manages in the top tier of the 40 cities it combs over.

“If we found some, we would have been talking before this meeting,” he said.

Still, the city has worked to dig itself out of a hole.

In 2009-10, the audit presented a $2.1 million negative difference between the general fund’s revenues and expenses. Times have been tough. Another slide showed the history of the general fund starting with a $1.4 million overage in revenue in 2003. Growth continues until 2008, which reported a budget deficit of $1.2 million. And things went downhill from there.

Going from 2007 to 2008, the city even had to move $1.2 million in reserves to pay for general fund expenses.

The redevelopment story was bleak last year. State takeaways amounted to $2.1 million – and this year could be worse. Gov. Jerry Brown has suggested eliminating redevelopment agencies to ease the pain of its own budget woes.

“It’s an issue,” City Attorney Patrick Enright warned the council. The state’s threat also made the agenda as the city tries to absorb the ramifications of no state-supported funding for urban renewal. California’s possibility of being able to seize local assets and nullify loans represents a

worrisome moving target for this city.

The local government's Redevelopment Agency has struggled to pay back half the money owed to the general fund from the $7.2 million it borrowed a decade ago to complete the Heavenly Village project. It pays $500,000 each year, amounting to collected interest of $638,353. Over time, the interest almost doubles the amount owed.

Redevelopment is considered a tool for business and housing investment in town. But South Lake Tahoe's liabilities outweigh its assets, representing "a huge amount of debt," Vuletich announced.

In other money matters, the council:

-Approved rehiring Maze and Associates for future audit services.

-Authorized the pursuit of grant funding amounting to a total of $464,133 for 1.6 miles in bicycle paths.

-Allocated $40,000 in air quality funds for bus shelters.

S. Tahoe council meeting expected to be long

By Susan Wood

Huge money matters in South Lake Tahoe await the City Council Tuesday.

The board is expected to fiscally make adjustments to operations, receive last year's audit, approve severance payouts to two former, top-level staffers, go after money for bike trails and decide to put up pedestrian signs for safety where a failed redevelopment project sits.

This is among many other things on the agenda that could bring the meeting starting at 9am well into the afternoon, if not evening. It's scheduled in council chambers at 1901 Airport Road.

The annual audit conducted by Maze and Associates – which is also on the agenda for extending its services – paints an improved financial picture in 2010 with mixed results. While net assets totaling $61 million are up at year end, revenues were down by $3.9 million.

The mid-year budget comes with a note of caution.

While the city's general fund has received 33.5 percent of the budgeted revenue with an overall net increase of 5.8 percent amounting to $531,405 compared to the previous year, the unfunded expenses at the middle of the city's fiscal year shows some challenges.

The unfunded expense increases and revenue decreases total $276,689. According to the Finance Department, this discrepancy comes from higher animal control costs and retirement costs, along with an overinflated revenue projection on court citation fees.

The hope is the city's five-year strategic plan spells out prosperity and a reduction in expenses from the city's reorganization will make up differences in the long haul. For one thing, salaries and benefits before the ax fell last month on 11 positions have been steadily consuming 78 percent of the general fund. The high percentage didn't go unnoticed by new

City Manager Tony O'Rourke – whose aim was to bring that ratio closer to 65 percent like other cities.

With that comes another item on the consent agenda – which is designed for less dialogue.

The council may approve severance payouts to former executive staffers Assistant City Manager Rick Angelocci and Redevelopment and Housing Director Gene Palazzo – both of whom were let go by the city last month. If they agree not to sue or disparage the city, they'll each get at least $30,000.

Angelocci's amount is a mystery at this point as the six-page document does not give a final figure. City Attorney Patrick Enright said Monday night the dollar amount is coming Tuesday morning after the city figures furlough days and vacation time on his $144,360 annual salary. If council approves the payout, Palazzo will receive the more defined $44,748.

Palazzo leaves the post with the city's Redevelopment Agency saddled with a total, long-term debt for the year amounting to $114,000, the audit report adds. This decrease over the prior year is due in part to years of refinancing a debt accrued for projects and paying back the general fund amid diminishing revenues in bad economic times. For example, the agency borrowed $7 million from the general fund over nine years ago to pay for the Heavenly Village project.

And redevelopment could see even more trouble. City Attorney Patrick Enright will also discuss with the council California Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal to eliminate the agencies at the state level. The state provides funds for housing and urban renewal to local governments. If the proposal goes forth as planned this summer, the city will need to determine who will be the successor to that.

In other items, the council may:

-Hear a report on the South Lake Tahoe Recreation Facilities

Joint Powers Authority from former councilman John Upton, who has managed Measure S funds for years.

-Submit a grant application with the California Department of Transportation for fixing bike trails amounting to a total with city match of $464,133.

-Direct staff to put up advisory signs where pedestrians have been walking unsafely alongside Highway 50 at the defunct Chateau at Heavenly (aka convention center project). Caltrans has backed off of providing funding needed to open up the walkway, the staff report reads.

The afternoon “work” session for City Council includes discussion on the Highway 50 project and other capital improvement plans.