Senators want safety review of Calif. nuke plants

By Foon Rhee, Sacramento Bee

As Japan struggles with nuclear reactors crippled by the earthquake and tsunami, California's two U.S. senators called on federal regulators today to make sure the state's two commercial nuclear power plants are safe.

Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer pointed out that about 7.4 million people live within 50 miles of the San Onofre plant in San Diego County and about 424,000 live within 50 miles of the Diablo Canyon plant near San Luis Obispo.

Read the whole story

Clean Tahoe gives old hotel items a second life

Recycling took on new meaning this week as items from C&M Lodge in South Lake Tahoe were given to Clean Tahoe for redistribution.

Edgewood Companies, which owns the C&M Lodge on Bonanza Drive, is working with Clean Tahoe and other nonprofits on the South Shore to place the items for community benefit.



Jeff Pollitt and Lou Graves of Clean Tahoe on March 14 load up furniture. Photo/Provided

“Clean Tahoe’s Dinner Table Project serves our community by providing recycled furniture to those receiving assistance or who are in programs with the South Lake Tahoe Women’s Center, Tahoe Youth & Family Service and Child Protective Services,” explained Ellen Nunes, program director for Clean Tahoe. “Many of these families are in crisis and transition, and some without any belongings. The Dinner Table Project acquires its furniture through private donations from the community and through Clean Tahoe’s daily mission of keeping the city and county clean.”

It also means saving money on dump fees and not filling up landfills.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Catalytic converters being

stolen for scrap metal

Five catalytic converters have been stolen this week on the South Shore.

A South Lake Tahoe resident started his 1994 Toyota pickup Tuesday morning and immediately heard an unfamiliar loud rumbling sound. He thought the muffler had fallen off. He discovered the loud exhaust sound was unrelated to his muffler, but was actually due to his missing catalytic converter.

Three of these thefts occurred in South Lake Tahoe and two in El Dorado County. In each case, the thief crawled underneath the vehicle and used some sort of cutting tool to remove the converter, according to officers.

A catalytic converter functions as part of a vehicle's exhaust system. As poisonous and polluting gasses collect within its chamber, the precious metals inside the converter "catalyze" a chemical reaction that alters them into less harmful and cleaner vapors. This reduces harmful exhaust emissions by up to 90 percent.

Thefts of catalytic converters are on the rise across the country, according to officers.

"Thieves are looking for these devices which have ceramic cores coated with platinum, rhodium and palladium. Crooks turn in the metals for cash at metal recycling centers," police Sgt. Brian Williams said in a press release.

Anyone with information is asked to contact Detective Jeff Roberson at the South Lake Tahoe Police Department at (530) 542.6100.

Nevada leads country in number of houses underwater

By Bob Brundage, Reno Gazette-Journal

One of the many real estate issues homeowners in the United States face is negative equity, which occurs when homeowners owe more on their homes than they are worth.

It’s a more significant problem here in Nevada than it is in any other state.

According to a recent report from CoreLogic, 55.6 percent of all homeowners with a mortgage in Reno-Sparks owed more than their homes were worth at the end of 2010.

An additional 4.4 percent were in the near-negative equity category or at less than 5 percent equity.

The data showed Nevada as the runaway leader in the nation, with 65 percent of all mortgaged properties underwater. Arizona is second at 51 percent followed by Florida (47 percent), Michigan (36 percent) and California (32 percent).

In Las Vegas, 69 percent of all residential properties with a mortgage were in negative equity at the end of 2010, according to CoreLogic.

“From a lender’s perspective, there are a lot of people we can’t help refinance,” said Pam Robinson, a sales manager/loan officer for Eagle Home Mortgage in Reno. “Also, long-term, property values could decline more – I hope they don’t. Because there would be more people underwater, there could be more foreclosures.”

For homeowners in near-negative or negative equity, there are some refinancing options available.

Read the whole story

More charges filed against El Dorado County restaurant owner

By Carlos Alcalá, Sacramento Bee

Restaurateur Kevin Cairns was in custody Tuesday with bail set at $250,000 after the El Dorado County District Attorney's Office unexpectedly filed new charges.

Charges of disturbing the peace were added to two accusations lodged in November and February that Cairns assaulted travelers in the parking lot of his Dante's on the River, a restaurant along Highway 50 east of Pollock Pines.

Cairns was not arrested or cited by law enforcement in the latest incident, which took place Friday.

He's accused of yelling at a family of motorists and calling them "black pigs" after they asked for a napkin to clean up after a child got sick in their car, said Deputy District Attorney Dale Gomes in his first comments to the *Bee* about Cairns.

Read the whole story

California coast less susceptible to tsunami than Japan

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

Much of California is less vulnerable to the kind of tsunami wreckage caused today in Japan because the state's coastline is generally steeper, a University of California quake expert said.

Steven Ward, a research geophysicist at UC Santa Cruz, said there are exceptions to that statement, including the Los Angeles coastal plain, many harbor areas, and any place where a major river enters the sea, such as the Moss Landing area at Monterey Bay.

But in general, he said California's steep bluff-encrusted shore would block the kind of broad waves that swept buildings and ships far inland in Sendai, the Japanese city of 1 million people near the epicenter of today's quake.

Ironically, he said it is the San Andreas earthquake fault that keeps California's coast so steep.

"Even big waves typically can't go very far inland because you have bluffs and whatnot," said Ward. "So the actual inundation zones are fairly limited. We're lucky that way."

Read the whole story

LTCC’s personnel struggles causing unrest on campus

By Kathryn Reed

Leadership, or the lack of it, is creating a fissure at Lake Tahoe Community College that some say is bringing harm to the two-year institution.

The turnover in presidents, other administrators and personnel leaving by choice by having found a new job or retiring are taking a toll on what had been a stable institution.



Sue Niehoff at the March 15 Lake Tahoe Community College board meeting. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The 30-plus-year-old college is on its fourth president – this one interim. Two of the five board members have been seated since the beginning.

“I don’t think you realize how important good leadership is

until you don’t have it,” board member and college founder Roberta Mason said. When asked to elaborate, she said, “I was thinking of Guy (Lease). I think we relied an awful lot on Guy. Maybe we didn’t do the research on our own that we should be expected to do.”

Lease was president of LTCC from 1990-2008. Prior to that he was dean of Business Services.

After him came Paul Killpatrick, who never was embraced by the college community. Now Steve Maradian is at the helm; hired to be interim president for this academic year.

Special board meeting

On March 15 the boardroom was full for a special 8:15am meeting. This in itself is an indication of the friction because seldom is anyone in attendance at the regular meetings.

The board, with member Molly Blann absent, started in closed session at 7:45am Tuesday. On the consent agenda for regular session was the notification of dismissal/discipline/release of the interim president and vice president of Business Services. This item was approved 4-0; with the only discussion in whispers among board members whether it should be open to public comment. It never formally was.

This was the second week in a row Sue Niehoff, the VP of Business Services, found out she was on the agenda when the paperwork came out instead of being afforded the courtesy from Maradian to be told before the masses found out.

Last week it was her annual review, for which she made about a two-minute appearance in closed session before being sent home by the board because she was ill. According to board member Karen Borges, Niehoff’s evaluation will be discussed further at the March 22 meeting. On March 15 it was notification Niehoff may be out of a job when her contract expires June 30

that came as a surprise to her when she saw it on the agenda.

Maradian told *Lake Tahoe News* after the meeting it is state law that non-faculty members under contract must be given reduction in force notices by March 15 if there is a chance their contract will not be renewed.

“It is a notice that provides the board maximum flexibility,” Maradian said.

However, the college has not operated this way in the past.

Maradian said without this notification, both of their contracts would be automatically renewed for a year beginning July 1.

Now the board must tell Maradian and Niehoff by May 15 if they will still be getting a paycheck from LTCC after June 30.

As much as the board members who spoke to *LTN* mentioned the state budget being a factor in all of this, the truth is California’s budget won’t be passed by May 15. Nor would the three who spoke express whether this is solely about Niehoff or more about reorganizing the administrative team. The college has employed Niehoff since January 2010.

Maradian’s contract was always supposed to be for one year. The college is in the process of looking for a president. The selection committee plans to meet March 24 to narrow the applicants to 10 to be interviewed in April, with the board interviewing three to five finalists in May.

One of the issues regarding Niehoff’s evaluation, which has not been provided to *Lake Tahoe News* because it is a personnel issue, is the scope of it.

Per Board Policy, Chapter IV, Policy 4.25, “All new academic administrators will undergo comprehensive evaluation two consecutive years after appointment.”

Maradian denied that is the policy.

“Board policy on evaluations is that every three years you have a comprehensive review and other reviews are annual reviews,” Maradian said.

The policy clearly states he is wrong.

If Niehoff had been given a comprehensive review, it would have meant being evaluated not just by Maradian, but also several faculty, classified, adjunct and other administrators.

In effect, she has been denied her due process outlined in board policy. On top of that, Maradian did the annual evaluation even though he has only worked with her for six months.

What the board has to say

Board members Fritz Wenck, Mason and Borges spoke with *Lake Tahoe News* after the meeting. All believe Maradian is doing a good job and support the direction he is taking the South Lake Tahoe institution. Board member Kerry David did not return calls and Blann is out of town.

“I think Dr. Maradian has done an excellent job in the areas we asked him to work on,” Wenck, the board president, said.

Those areas Wenck said are:

• Evaluating and implementing the Datatel system; (There is a relaunch of that program Thursday at 9am in the board room. The person running the program was let go in January per Maradian’s recommendation.)

• Self-study for accreditation; (This must be done by June; with the site visit in October.)

• Possible reorganization of the administrative team.

“I know there is a lot of uncertainty on campus and that

always creates not a good morale climate," Mason said. "We hope to bring in a new person as president … that will be one of their jobs, to help bring the campus together."

None of the board members could or would pinpoint what has brought the college to the point of having employees send emails to *Lake Tahoe News* that say, "I believe Sue is clearly a target for retribution after having been a 'whistle-blower' against Steve. I wish I wasn't such a chicken s—, but I can't risk being similarly targeted in this job market. Sue is the best VP of Business we've had in over a decade. She deserves better."

Borges and Mason did not hesitate to acknowledge morale is less than spectacular.

"I would say there is a lack of harmony. And we are trying to understand people's points-of-view. We are trying to look into it and see what we can do," Borges said.

She would not share what people on campus are saying to her.

"There is a climate on campus and people are afraid to speak in front of each other," Mason said.

At the board meeting Tuesday only one person spoke – Denise Russell. But she has nothing to fear because her last day of managing the LTCC bookstore was March 10. She told the board there is a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness on campus.

"I don't know if this is what you want – employees living in fear," Russell told the board. "There are concerns about leadership."

What Niehoff has to say

Though holiday lights may seem like an innocuous subject, it escalated into a heated exchange between the two college administrators that resulted in Niehoff writing a detailed memo to the board Nov. 29, 2010.

Mason and Borges remember the package of paperwork Niehoff provided them, while Wenck has no recollection. In the stack of papers are emails between the interim president and vice president of Business Services, a summary of lawsuits filed against Maradian while employed elsewhere, and the three Los Angeles Superior Court decisions that mostly involve sexual harassment judgments against Maradian.

When asked why they hired someone with such a checkered past, Wenck said, “I don’t know anything about it.” Then he added, “There were some allegations, but the board did not feel they rose to such a point that it would deter him from doing the job.”

Niehoff in her letter to the board four months ago, which they have never talked to her about according to her, says, “Dr. Maradian’s pattern of abusive and hostile behavior shows up in several publically available court documents which date back to at least 1996. He is now continuing this pattern of behavior at LTCC. Several other employees can corroborate the hostile work environment he is creating for this college.”

In a conversation with *Lake Tahoe News* after the March 15 meeting, Niehoff said, “When you look at him and listen he sounds articulate and engaged, but he clearly doesn’t like to be challenged, to be questioned. The board doesn’t see it because he has one personality for them and another on campus.”

When asked to describe his relationship with Niehoff, Maradian said, “I don’t describe personnel matters.”

Niehoff said their relationship soured after she questioned the expense of holiday lights and the religious nature of them.

Apparently an exchange of emails went back and forth between the two last fall. Authority over the whole college versus responsibility for all fiscal matters is a large part of the

dialogue. The escalation and tone of the emails is what led Niehoff to write her letter to the board.

The board on Tuesday granted Niehoff permission to speak to them at the March 22 meeting in closed session. She wants it to be just her and the board, though Borges will be out of town.

Niehoff is considering her options. To begin with she still has a job and may be offered a contract to carry on her services. For now, she said she will do the job she was hired to do, but on July 1 she doesn't know where she will be.

Flooding, mudslides just outside Lake Tahoe Basin

By Cathy Locke, Sacramento Bee

Heavy rain battered the foothills during the late afternoon and early evening today, with reports of road flooding and rock and mudslides in El Dorado, Placer and Nevada counties.

Some of the heaviest rain in the past six hours was along the Highway 49 corridor, with a little more than an inch in Pilot Hill and 1.11 inches in the Auburn area.

About 1.75 inches of rain was recorded at Blue Canyon on Interstate 80 during the 24-hour period ending at 5pm, said Angus Barkhuff, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Sacramento.

Read the whole story

Scam leaves S. Tahoe store short on cash

A bait and switch scam at the South Lake Tahoe Rite-Aid has police warning retail workers to be on the lookout for similar transactions.

Officers said the suspect on March 12 gave the clerk five $20 bills in exchange for a $100 bill. The clerk took his money and gave him a $100 bill.

The suspect turned and began to walk away. He then turned around and pulled out a $10 bill from his waist area and told the clerk she accidentally gave him a $10 bill, officers said.

The clerk gave him another $100 bill and he gave her the $10 bill, causing a loss of $90 for the store. The shortage was discovered when the drawer was counted.

The suspect is described as a black man, 20 to 30 years of age, between 5-8 and 6-foot, weighing 235 to 260 pounds. He has short black hair, was wearing a gray sweat shirt with “Swamp Lager” on front, a white T-shirt and gray pants.

Truckee police find body of missing 18-year-old

Updated March 15 at 3:09pm

The body of 18-year-old Andre Simonpietri was located this morning by a local Truckee resident.

Truckee police working with members of the Nevada County Search and Rescue team were contacted by a local Truckee resident at about 11:01am Tuesday. Andre Simonpietri's body was located in the Glenshire subdivision of Truckee near where he lived.

No foul play is suspected in the death.

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Andre Simonpietri, 18, of Truckee has been missing since March 13 when he left his residence in the Glenshire area about 11am with the family dog.

The dog was found later that day wondering the woods east of Glenshire by a passerby. The dog was reunited with the Simonpietri family on March 14. Simonpietri has not been heard from since he left home.

Assistance was requested from the Nevada County Search and Rescue team which began operations Monday night.

Simonpietri is a white male, 5-feet-6, 154 pounds.

Anyone with information is asked to call the Truckee Police Department at (530) 550.2320.