S. Tahoe council to discuss Heavenly Village agreement

By Kathryn Reed

At the last South Lake Tahoe City Council meeting, Bruce Grego asked for an item to be on the March 15 agenda that would address whether the city should continue being a member of PADMA.

The city councilman referenced the March 17, 2010, letter the city sent to the Park Avenue Development Maintenance Association board saying the city intended to withdraw from the agreement as of Jan. 1, 2011. City Manager Tony O'Rourke extended that date in an attempt to work with PADMA to revise the agreement.

Although the letter signed by City Attorney Patrick Enright from a year ago outlines irregularities and legal problems with the 30-year contract, it is still a contract that cannot just be nullified just because a different council has been seated from when the document was signed in 2002.

PADMA officials have agreed to look at the contract and possibly offer concessions to the city in return for in-kind help such as relief with the parking garage fees and assistance with bringing events to Heavenly Village.

The council meets March 15 at 9am at Lake Tahoe Airport. The PADMA board next meets April 18.

Dante’s on Hwy. 50 becomes restaurant from hell for couple

By Carlos Alcalá, Sacramento Bee

Kevin and Nancy Cairns moved to El Dorado County hoping for a piece of heaven on the American River.

They got a taste of hell.

They opened Dante’s on the River seven years ago on an isolated stretch of Highway 50, east of Pollock Pines.

“It’s a beautiful piece of property,” Kevin Cairns said.

But since they opened, they say they’ve been besieged by people who violently demand to use the restaurant bathroom or just do their excretory business in the parking lot. Other motorists pull over to vomit and move on.

“Nobody’s ever offered to clean it up,” said his wife.

As a consequence, Cairns has taken to asking people to leave the lot unless it’s an emergency or they’re coming to the restaurant.

Read the whole story

BlueGo deficit demands route

and fare adjustments

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – To stop a projected annual deficit of $449,500, overseers of the South Shore public bus system on Friday agreed to proceed with route changes and fare increases.

Although ridership numbers are 8 percent higher than projected, the people on the BlueGo buses are not paying full price because they are seniors, disabled or youths. This is making income from the fare box less than expected.

“Eighty-five percent of the ridership is discounted,” consultant Gordon Shaw told the Tahoe Transportation District board March 11. “Thirty percent of that is ADA. The others really need the service especially with how hard it is to get around on foot in this community in the winter.”



Heavenly is the largest contributor to the BlueGo bus system. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Those facts coupled with the private funding partners that had been part of the bankrupt-lawsuit riddled South Tahoe Area Transit Authority not agreeing to put their money with Tahoe Transportation District has created the red ink on the ledger.

TTD Executive Director Carl Hasty told his board he is meeting with MontBleu casino officials next week in an attempt to get them back on board. Harrah's and Harveys remain on the sideline when it comes to putting in money for public transit.

"If we get back to the level of private sector participation, which I think we will, then we wouldn't be having this discussion," Hasty said.

Shaw outlined a plan to stem the cash flow problem, which would bring BlueGo within about $95,000 of having a balanced budget. The board agreed to the changes, which staff will iron out. The intent is this spring the route changes and fare increases will be implemented.

No longer do these types of changes have to be approved by the South Lake Tahoe City Council. That stipulation had been part of the operating agreement the city had with STATA. However, as a formality, Hasty said he wants to bring the plan to the council and Douglas County commissioners so the electeds know what is going on. Both those entities pay into the operation of BlueGo.

One of the first things that will be put in place is what's called the Triangle Plan. It will replace routes 20X and 21X with a circulating route between the South Shore, Carson City and Minden/Gardnerville.

Shaw pointed out how the Nevada Department of Transportation is the largest public funder of BlueGo at $470,000 year. NDOT bases its allocation on the percent of miles driven by buses in Nevada. This is one reason the consultant urged not to pare down availability of buses in the Silver State.

With Heavenly Mountain Resort's $850,000 contribution, it is the largest contributor of any entity – not just the private sector.

Cutting the oncall hours 10 hours a day to 26 hours will also

save money. No longer will it be available on weekends from 12:30-5:30am.

“We can’t afford to be a taxi cab service,” Shaw said.

Shaw said Ridge Tahoe guests, Lake Tahoe Community College students and BlueGo employees may use the oncall service for free. To which he added this is not standard operating procedure in other bus companies and recommended doing away with this practice.

“This is probably the most complicated fare system I have seen,” Shaw said of the various fees.

He wants to eliminate tokens. To this idea a bus driver in the back of the room said to someone else in the audience this is a good idea because a number of fake tokens, many from arcades, pass through the BlueGo fare box.

Most of the rate increases affect the oncall service.

Shaw is not recommending the base one-way fare be increased.

Board member and South Lake Tahoe City Councilman Bruce Grego asked what happens if gas prices reach $5 a gallon.

Although this would substantially increase the fuel budget, Shaw said it would bring more passengers to BlueGo, which would create a positive cash flow.

To fill the remaining budget gap, Hasty said $100,000 in savings from the California Transit Insurance Pool is possible. He is also looking at reducing workers’ comp expenses.

However, Jason Van Havel, NDOT’s rep on the TTD board, said he is not convinced enough contingencies are in place to prohibit more cost-cutting measures in the future.

In other action:

• TTD is looking for a transit manager who would report directly to Hasty. Grego was adamant in not wanting the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's Human Resources Department to be part of the background checks, implying it did a poor job in hiring the former transit administrator.

• Ten bus shelters for BlueGo riders are expected to be erected this summer – five in California, five in Nevada.

• Martin Jimenez, BlueGo operations manager, said bus shelters are not cleared right after storms because his crews have to use personal vehicles to get to the stops to shovel out the areas that sometimes have been bermed by plow drivers. He added BlueGo has no snowblowers to do the work.

Coast Guard issues update on tsunami off California coast

Publisher's note: ***The following is from the U.S. Coast Guard on March 11 at 1:34pm.***

Northern California Coast Guard response crews are conducting the following actions in response to the West Coast tsunami and related impacts:

* Coast Guard Air Station Humboldt Bay's MH-65C helicopters are continuing to search for a person in the water near the Klamath River, reportedly swept out to sea while trying to photograph tsunami waves.

* Six vessels have sunk or are overturned in Santa Cruz Harbor. Coast Guard responder crews are at the harbor that was evacuated due to an oil sheen leaking from the vessels.

* Overflights today found 20-30 vessels damaged at Crescent City Harbor.

* Coast Guard is investigating activation of a 406mhz EPIRB in Crescent City. It was found in a sunken vessel with no one on board.

* Coast Guard Air Station Sacramento HC-130J Hercules aircraft stands by to assist in any long-range air missions.

* Sector San Francisco’s Captain of the Port is currently assessing port conditions and evaluating all vessel entries into port. Vessels are prohibited from transferring hazardous cargo at this time.

* Coast Guard resources are all accounted for in Northern California with no damage or injuries.

* The Coast Guard remains ready to respond to any reports of maritime emergency situations.

The Coast Guard is urging mariners and those planning to recreate on or near the water to take the following special precautions under hazardous conditions:

* People should stay away from beaches, jetties, and low lying rock areas.

* Check with the local harbormaster for marina evacuations and to make preparations for the possibility of a surge.

* Mooring lines for vessels should be doubled-up.

* People living or visiting tsunami warning areas should be prepared to evacuate.

Both parties eager to win Ensign's seat

By Erin Kelly, Gannett News Service

WASHINGTON— Sen. John Ensign's decision not to seek re-election surprised few in the nation's capital, where political leaders of both parties have been quietly planning for the possibility for months.

Both Republicans and Democrats believed that Ensign had been so badly weakened by scandal that he could not win a third term. Ensign apparently became convinced of that as well as he looked at the results of recent polls showing him vulnerable to a Republican primary challenge from Rep. Dean Heller, R-Carson City.

"I do not want to put my family, those that I care about, or this state through what would be a very ugly campaign," the Republican senator said Monday in Las Vegas.

Heller and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., issued solemn statements expressing sympathy for their departing colleague.

"This must have been a very difficult decision for John to make," said Heller, who is widely viewed as the leading GOP contender for Ensign's seat despite the fact that he has not yet announced he will run. "He and his family have been through a lot."

Similarly, Reid said, "These have been difficult times for John and his family."

"I wish him the best as he serves out the rest of his term," Reid said.

While Reid and Heller carefully refrained from making any

political comments, their respective political parties clearly have already begun the scramble for Ensign’s seat.

Read the whole story

North coast of Calif. riding out threat of tsunami

By Bill Lindelof and Tony Bizjak, Sacramento Bee

Some minor effects from a possible tsunami have been reported along the California coast this morning, although thousands were evacuated from a handful of coastal counties as a precaution.

Ocean swells have begun to rise quickly in the last hour in some coastal areas, with Crescent City a hot spot, officials with the West Coast and Alaska Tsunami Warning Center report at 8:30 a.m.

Crescent City harbor is seeing a three-foot sea level rise in the last hour, according to Cindi Preller, tsunami program manager at the center in Alaska.

“Our modeling still says it can go up to seven feet,” Preller said.

That may not cause major problems, she said. “We have seen tsunamis there that do stay in the harbor.”

Monterey and Arena Cove areas have seen a 2.5-foot sea level rise in the last hour, she said. But Preller said San Francisco “shouldn’t see a whole lot of action.”

Brad Alexander of the state Emergency Management Agency operations center said the California coast will experience rising water over a several-hour period this morning, but no huge waves.

Read the whole story

8.9 quake rocks Japan; West Coast braces for tsunami

Publisher's note: ***Here is a link to when NOAA forecasts a potential tsunami could hit West Coast cities. Here is an emergency preparedness guide for the South Shore that has relevance to other areas.***

By Barbara Demick, David Pierson and Kenji Hall, Los Angeles Times

The worst earthquake in generations struck off the northeast coast of Japan on Friday, setting off a devastating tsunami that swallowed swaths of coastal territory and fanned out across the Pacific Ocean, threatening everything in its path.

The 8.9-magnitude earthquake — the world's fifth-largest since 1900 and the biggest in Japan in 140 years — struck at 2:46 p.m. local time, shaking buildings violently in Tokyo for several minutes and sending millions fleeing for higher ground.

At least 60 people are believed dead, though that number is expected to rise dramatically as officials begin assessing the extent of the damage. Japanese media is reporting scores of people missing, likely buried under rubble or swept away by

waves as high as 33 feet.

Nearby islands are bracing for the tsunami and warnings have been issued for 53 countries including ones as far as Colombia and Peru.

At least 80 fires have been reported across the country and large areas are without electricity.

Read the whole story

Echo Summit closure could impact S. Shore ski resorts

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe officials were in Sacramento on Wednesday discussing Caltrans' plan to close Highway 50 over Echo Summit next month and what it will mean to the local economy.

With the contract already awarded to C.C. Myers contractors out of Rancho Cordova, the city and tourism entities have no control over whether the road will be closed Easter weekend. Work could begin as early as April 15. The start date is up to Mother Nature – as in if there is snow on the ground and when the skies look to be clear for a two-week stretch.

The contractor has until Memorial Day weekend, per the contract, to close the road for two weeks.



Caltrans crews restripe Highway 50 in South Tahoe on March 10 -- one activity that doesn't impede traffic too much. Photo/Kathryn Reed

A major issue is how the road closure will impact Heavenly Mountain Resort and Sierra-at-Tahoe, and all the businesses their customers frequent on the South Shore. As of now Heavenly plans to close April 24 – Easter Sunday. Sierra has not set a closing date.

Caltrans needs to shutdown the main gateway to the South Shore from the Bay Area and Sacramento for two solid weeks to replace the deteriorating rock wall. Then for another six to eight weeks there will be delays on Highway 50 Monday-Thursday until the work is completed.

Tom Davis, the City Council's rep on the South Lake Tahoe Lodging Association board, on Thursday updated his colleagues and the full room at Inn by the Lake about the plan.

He said on March 9 he met with state Sen. Ted Gaines, Caltrans, Sierra General Manager John Rice, Andrew Strain of Heavenly, B Gorman with Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce, and the contractor.

“Once the road closes, Sierra is done,” Davis said.

However, the resort isn’t exactly saying that. A number of their patrons come from outside the basin and would be able to access the resort even if the summit were closed.

Historically, Sierra has closed the second or third week of April. With Easter being late this year and the abundance of snow, spokesman Steve Hemphill said the resort would like to stay open until April 24.

“We are keeping our options open and hoping for the best,” Hemphill told *Lake Tahoe News* in regards to the Echo Summit closure.

Jerry Bindel, a lodging board member, at the meeting said, “It may not be terrible if snow occurs in mid-April.”

His concern as well as others in the lodging industry is people have booked rooms over Easter with the intent to ski. Hoteliers are concerned skiers will head to the North Shore instead of taking the back roads to the South Shore.

Bindel is less concerned about how the road closure could impact the Tour of California cycling event that starts in Stateline on May 15; speculating people coming for that won’t mind the additional time it takes to be routed to the South Shore because it’s a one-time special event.

Vail Resorts’ second quarter earnings rise 34%

By Wall Street Journal

Vail Resorts Inc.’s fiscal second-quarter earnings rose 34 percent as more skiers visited its slopes and ancillary sales jumped.

The results beat Wall Street’s expectations.

Ski resorts have seen their results improve since the economic downturn, when spending on travel and leisure plummeted. Visitors numbers began climbing in 2009 and picked up in 2010. Brief unfavorable weather in Colorado and the Northeast during the key Christmas-to-New Year’s week last year did little to damp Vail Resorts’ visitor numbers.



Skiers on March 9 fill Heavenly's California base lodge parking lot. Photo/Kathryn Reed

“We continue to be encouraged by the strong rebound in guest spending, with all major ancillary areas outpacing the growth in both lift ticket revenue and visitation,” Chief Executive Robert Katz said.

Vail, the only publicly traded ski resort, owns a handful of ski areas in Colorado and California. In October, the company acquired the Northstar at Tahoe Resort.

Read the whole story

Nevada casino win drops in January

Statewide, the casino industry started the year off with a slight decline, though the Stateline numbers were worse.

On the South Shore revenue was down 7.85 percent in January compared to 2010.



Stateline casinos do worse than state average. Photo/Kathryn Reed

However, throughout Nevada the numbers dropped less than 1 percent year over year. Casinos collected $877.4 million from gamblers two months ago.

There were bright spots up and down the state, with casinos in Carson City and Carson Valley posting a 10.57 percent increases. The Boulder Strip and North Las Vegas in Southern Nevada had double-digit increases of 13.2 percent and 10.9 percent, respectively.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report