Missing Placerville woman found dead

Updated March 4 7:09pm.

El Dorado County sheriff's search and rescue volunteers located the body of the missing person approximately 250 yards north of her residence down a steep embankment.

Darlene Newman died from what appears to be hypothermia, according to authorities.

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El Dorado County Sheriff deputies are searching for a Placerville woman who went missing and is considered to be at risk due to health conditions.

Darlene Marie Newman was last seen March 2 at approximately 9pm at her Placerville residence on Fall Trail Lane. Newman's vehicle was located approximately 300 yards from her residence on the shoulder of the road and wedged against a rock.



Darlene Newman

It appears she was driving the vehicle down the driveway veered off the road and hit into the rock, according to law enforcement. At this time it is believed Newman walked away from the vehicle and is somewhere in the immediate area.

Sheriff deputies called in Hangtown Hank, a man-trailing

bloodhound, to search the area. In addition, search and rescue volunteers are assisting in the search.

Newman is described as a white female, 48, 5-feet-tall, 110 pounds, brown eyes and brown hair.

TRPA facing $1.3 mil. deficit; 8 people laid off, 12 reclassified

By Kathryn Reed

In an effort to close a $1.3 million deficit, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency on Friday laid out a reorganization plan that eliminates eight positions and reclassifies 12 others.

“Our position is exacerbated by what I call the perfect budget storm,” TRPA Executive Director Joanne Marchetta told *Lake Tahoe News*.

That storm includes mounting legal bills and cuts in revenue sources.



The bi-state regulatory agency estimates spending about $1 million in outside legal counsel in the next couple years, Marchetta said.

Personnel cuts account for about $721,000 of the anticipated shortfall for fiscal year 2011-12 that begins July 1. The remaining $600,000 will partly come from reducing the impact

on the current budget with those employees no longer on the payroll. As the agency works on the next budget, other spending cuts will be addressed.

TRPA's general fund is about $7.7 million. The bulk of revenue comes from the two states, with California paying two-thirds and Nevada one-third. However, Nevada has not allocated its full share. About 13 percent of the general fund revenue comes from fees.

With building stagnant in the Lake Tahoe Basin, that income is much less than previous years. A downturn in construction is reflected in not needing as many the planners.

The court's decision to invalidate the shorezone plan has rendered that segment of TRPA almost nonexistent.

Five of the positions being eliminated are effective March 4, with the three others being transitioned out. Gone are three planners, a quality monitoring coordinator, records technician, special projects director, shorezone coordinator and 1.5 positions from the Regional Plan update team.

TRPA is down to 68 employees – 22 less than were on board three years ago.

When it comes to the dozen positions being reclassified, some will be immediate and others will occur over time to ensure the organization functions properly and the needs of the public are adequately addressed.

"What we did was conceptually flattened the management structure and simplified it," Marchetta said. "I approach this from two points of view and not purely from a cost-cutting side of things. We made sure whatever changes we finally settled on were done with an eye on implementing our strategic plan and strengthening those pillars in the strategic plan."

Despite the news on March 4, TRPA has not put a freeze on

vacant positions. The open finance director and public information officer jobs will be filled.

“This was one of those very difficult situations where TRPA had to act and we had to make choices and all of the choice were hard choices,” Marchetta said. “We made them with the assurance we would be strengthening the organization for the long term so we could operate and meet our mission.”

California boosts traffic fines to help budget

By Jim Sanders, Sacramento Bee

Justin Jachens learned of California’s soaring traffic penalties when he got slapped for a red-light violation.

Ticketed drivers have been squeezed hard during the budget crisis, perhaps because few complain until they get fined — then it’s too late.

“We’re the ones taking the brunt for everything,” said Jachens, 21, a student at California State University, Sacramento. “It’s outrageous.”

Jachens was nabbed by a red-light camera for not making a complete stop at the intersection of Watt Avenue and Fair Oaks Boulevard. Three years ago, the offense would have cost Jachens $371.

Now it’s $470.

Read the whole story

South Tahoe couple jailed on child abuse charges

A South Lake Tahoe couple was arrested Wednesday on child abuse charges.

Demetrius and Leann Jones have been under investigation since the beginning of the year by South Lake Tahoe police officer after bringing their 3-month-old daughter to Barton Memorial Hospital alleging she became unresponsive at home. Because of the severity of her injuries, the baby was airlifted to Renown Medical Center in Reno. Officers said the Joneses told them there had been an accident at home.

Doctors became suspicious of the story because the injuries didn’t match the account of the accident, according to law enforcement. The infant had severe brain damage, bleeding in the brain, and retinal hemorrhages.

As a result, Child Protective Services removed the baby from the Joneses.

The Joneses were also charged with attempting to obtain a money under false pretenses after they solicited several churches in the area for money to help with transportation to visit the baby. The Joneses were not allowed to visit the baby, except for supervised visits, after she was removed from their custody.

Sensors in snow country help predict water levels

By Neetu Puranikmath, Daily Cal

UC Merced Professor Roger Bales realizes that California has a dire problem: a water problem.

According to Bales, California is currently in a drought. But with 70 to 90 percent of the state's water supply coming from snow in the state's mountains, Bales said scientists have traditionally been unable to accurately and precisely measure this potential water source – until now.

Bales has been collaborating with UC Berkeley professor in the Department of civil and environmental engineering Steven Glaser for the past several years on CITRIS MOTES – a joint UC Merced-UC Berkeley project that has developed a network of computers and radios that can measure the amount of water in snow atop the Sierra Nevada and other Californian mountain ranges.

"From a scientific perspective, our goal is to figure out what is going on in hydrology," said Branko Kerkez, a UC Berkeley civil engineering graduate student working with Glaser and Bales. "From an engineering perspective, it is to get as much data as possible."

Bales said the research team currently has several papers based on their findings in review by academic journals and are hoping their research will get published in the summer or fall.

Currently, the project has two wireless networks that were fully established last year: one in Shaver Lake – with around 300 sensors and measuring a square kilometer in area – and a second in Lake Tahoe with around 25 sensors.

Read the whole story

Incline woman admits stabbing husband to death

An Incline Village woman will be sentenced in May for the stabbing death of her husband in October 2009.

Mary Arlayne Baymiller, 73, pleaded guilty to voluntary manslaughter with the use of a deadly weapon in the killing of Charles Alan Baymiller, 73.

She faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in jail. Baymiller is out on bail.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Economic indicators show signs of recovery on South Shore

Although the December unemployment numbers for South Lake Tahoe are higher than the state and national averages at 17 percent, some people on the South Shore are making money.

Smith Travel Research says hotel occupancy was up 3 percent on the South Shore in December compared to 2009.

MontBleu casino in Stateline has seen a consistent 15 percent increase in year-over-year hotel occupancy and 50 percent increase in food and beverage, showroom and nightclub covers, according to officials.



More skiers have been coming to Lake Tahoe this year than last season.
Photo/LTN file

Lakeshore Lodge & Spa is doing well this winter, but is also getting calls for summer.

“We’re seeing solid indicators and positive momentum in the South Shore lodging community,” Jerry Bindel, general manager of Lakeland Village, said in a press release. “Not only is winter being reported above last year in many locations, there’s strong advance summer bookings. It’s a very encouraging sign that our tourism economy is rebounding.”

The boon in more heads in beds has South Lake Tahoe officials forecasting a 2.5 percent increase in transient occupancy tax for fiscal year 2011-12.

Sierra-at-Tahoe is up 14 percent in skier visits through February.

Vail Resorts, which owns Heavenly Mountain Resort and Northstar-at-Tahoe, will release stats March 10 for its second

fiscal quarter ending Jan. 31 which should give an indication how the Colorado-based company is doing in terms of skier visits and lodging.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Invasive species destroying tiny critters in Lake Tahoe

By Stephen Ward

INCLINE VILLAGE – Bugs. They are missing from Lake Tahoe.

While most people might think it's a good thing not to swim or kayak with these seemingly invisible critters, the fact is their disappearance is contributing to the changing ecosystem of this massive body of water.

Their demise is being blamed on invasive species.



Dozens of people learn about life below the surface of Lake Tahoe. Photos/Stephen

Ward

After watching videos showing various species of bugs inhabiting the bottom of Lake Tahoe, coupled with information detailing their assistance in keeping the lake clean, the audience sat in silence as the presenter showed a graph demonstrating how light transmittance and plant life are plummeting in unison.

This was the overarching tone Tuesday at the Tahoe Environmental Research Center, where Annie Caires gave an hourlong presentation about the impact on endemic species found in Lake Tahoe.

Caires is a researcher from UNR's Aquatic Ecosystems Analysis Laboratory and has studied benthic invertebrate since 2004. She has been studying Lake Tahoe since 2008 and believes the bugs, or the lack thereof, has a dramatic affect on the lake.

"When we look at Lake Tahoe, we don't think about what's in the depths of the lake," Caires said. "The point is these bugs perform important ecological processes."

The evidence Caires cited for a fleeting critter population was clear – 25,400 bugs were collected from 389 samples in a two-year study in 1963. When a similar experiment was conducted with 394 samples less than 50 years later, only 7,400 bugs were unearthed.

One species discussed was the blind amphipod, a white, many-legged creature found hundreds of feet below sea level on the sea floor. Caires noted the amphipod's reputation for being aggressive just before showing a video of them fighting viciously over territory.

When an audience member asked about the size of the amphipod, Caires scattered a jar of 3,500 grains of rice across a table to show the relative size of the bugs.



Rice represents the size of bugs in Lake Tahoe.

“Yeah, I know, I’m dedicated,” Caires added after the example.

But now, after being the most populous creature in the 1963 study, no trace of the amphipods remains today.

Caires said species such as the blind amphipod are gone because of invasive species and eutrophication, or the addition of natural and artificial substances through sewage and other substances.

Caires also said the decrease in water clarity has reduced the ability for plant beds to grow. She linked the introduction of mysid shrimp and other invasive species with the fisheries of the 1930s. The introduction of invasive species was meant to enhance the productivity of the fisheries. The mysid shrimp, that were not supposed to compete with the blind amphipods, ended up overpowering their frumpy counterparts.

Another invasive species attributed to harming the lake is crayfish; opportunistic feeders that hinder plant growth. They are another invasive species introduced to Tahoe 80 years ago when the fisheries started.

Caires added that preliminary research has suggested that the crayfish are eating the amphipods in the lake.

To Caires, the lack of bugs at the bottom of Lake Tahoe is not just the process of evolution.

“These things can be great indicators of lake health,” she said.

As for what can be done, Caires said public support for agencies such as the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and California Tahoe Conservancy is crucial to reverse eutrophication because both agencies are helping fight invasive species.

“We’re seeing huge declines in native species, but I think we can reverse the trends if we continue to focus on cleaning up,” Caires said.

The public support Caires described seemed to be gaining momentum shortly after the presentation. Steve Hale, a retired forest worker who worked in the South Lake Tahoe area for 20 years, called the information sobering.

“This is why it’s so important people come to lectures so they can learn from scientists,” Hale said. “To hear silence from the audience and see their reaction was remarkable.”

LTUSD slashes 7 positions from payroll

By Kathryn Reed

Seven positions were eliminated Tuesday night by Lake Tahoe Unified School District’s board of trustees.

Attrition and early retirements will account for most of the positions that won’t exist in the 2011-12 school year.

The surprise on March 1 was the elimination of the NRJOTC instructor. This had not been on the radar of the board during recent budget discussions, though there was an awareness the Navy would eventually cut its funding. With the Navy providing more than 50 percent of the salary, the district could not pick up the rest of the expense. The Navy nixed the program because it wants 10 percent of the student body to be in the program. South Tahoe High has eight students.

The other positions cut include:

• South Tahoe Middle School, 6th-grade teacher

• South Tahoe Middle School, teacher physical education

• STMS, counselor

• Independent Learning Academy, teacher

• Director of Human Resources/Staff Development

• Bilingual Coordinator

For this part of the meeting board members Mike Doyle and Judy Cefalu were absent. Doyle arrived late to the special meeting.

The three in attendance for the whole meeting – Wendy David, Sue Novasel and Larry Green – asked Superintendent Jim Tarwater to bring back a detailed version of what the reorganization of the district will look so they know who will be doing what job.

Questions were brought up about Sue O'Conner, who handles English learners, and what happens with her departure.

Human Resources Director Jim Watson said O'Connor will work a few hours to pay for her health benefits, so it's not like the position is being eliminated altogether.

“Sue is not going away. She will be able to help us out,” Watson told the board.

CFO Deb Yates said with fewer people it will mean reprioritizing what needs to be done.

“When you talk about reorganization, you look at the duties and pass them out to the administrative team because there is no one else to do it,” Superintendent Jim Tarwater said.

It’s expected the district’s attorney will be in town once a week to handle legal issues that had been handled in house before.

Lake Tahoe Unified needed to cut the positions based on declining enrollment and the threat from the state to keep taking away money. If the June ballot measure does not pass, the ledger will be an even darker shade of red.

In an effort to show its support for the measure, the board passed a resolution Tuesday night in support of continuing with the tax structure that is in place.

Lake Tahoe Unified is not alone in downsizing. Predictions are this will be a record year for teacher pink slips. About 30,000 teachers in California are expected to be notified by the March 15 deadline that their services are not needed for the next school year. This is an increase of nearly 10,000 from a year ago.

If the June ballot measure fails, it will be a $2 billion hit for public schools or $330 for each of the state’s 6 million students. What it will mean for LTUSD is more cuts to people, plus the likely elimination of programs such as class-size reduction, music and physical education starting in 2012-13.

South Lake Tahoe rolls out plan to eliminate deficit

By Kathryn Reed

To wipe-out an ongoing $3.4 million annual deficit, South Lake Tahoe staff members are proposing getting rid of positions, freezing wages, raising the hotel tax, and revamping employee pension and health care options.

Some of the proposals brought forth during the City Council's workshop Tuesday afternoon need to be vetted and approved by the bargaining units. But it was noted, if they don't agree to them, more layoffs are probably the only other solution.

The council on March 15 is slated to vote on the reorganization plan and five-year budget proposals presented to them March 1 by City Manager Tony O'Rourke and Finance Director Christine Vuletich.



South Lake Tahoe Finance Director Christine Vuletich on March 1 goes over the five-year budget plan. Photo/Kathryn

Reed

Eliminating positions, reclassifying jobs, early retirements and shifting things around would cut the annual deficit in half. That proposal was released last week.

Besides those proposals, the city is also looking at revamping what it contributes to employees' pensions and health care plans.

"In most organizations salaries and benefits are about 65 percent (of the general fund). In ours it is 78 percent," O'Rourke told *Lake Tahoe News*. "In the private sector it is closer to 45 percent."

In the current budget the city is paying $3.1 million to CalPERS, the Public Employee Retirement System, for the nearly 200 employees. Pension costs are projected to increase by 5 percent per year for the next five years.

That 5 percent equates to about $900,000 during the next five years. Today, 11 percent of the general fund goes to employee pensions.

Councilman Tom Davis asked about the city's unfunded liability. Vuletich said today it is about $26 million, whereas a few years ago it was at $42 million. The city is paying about $400,000 on that each year.

It wasn't until last year that any employee in the city contributed a dime to his or her own retirement. Police officers now pay 6 percent of the 9 percent employee contribution.

If employees start paying their share – or the full 9 percent, this would save the city about $800,000 a year.

Lake Tahoe News, before the presentation to the council, asked O'Rourke about the possibility of having a flat fee the city

would contribute instead of a percentage plan. Lake Tahoe Unified School District does this with its employees in regards to health care.

“There are some strong arguments to go to a defined contribution so you know each year your exposure,” O’Rourke said. “So then the risk is shifted to the employee.”

At this time, that is not being proposed.

When it comes to health care costs, the city doles out about $18,500 per employee and $14,900 per retiree – each year.

“On average, employees are contributing 4 percent, and retirees 12 percent, respectively, to the city’s annual health care cost,” the staff report says.

O’Rourke wants to revamp the system to “generate at least $550,000 annually in savings.”

After repeated questioning by Davis and Councilwoman Angela Swanson if the wage freeze is really that, Vuletich acknowledged the step increases built into the agreements with the bargaining units for employees who qualify would in fact get a raise. However, all cost of living increases are gone.

The pay freeze will save about $350,000 a year.

This year’s budget has $13.4 million allocated for salaries, which includes $1.4 million in retirement payouts.

The other way employees will be receiving more cash in their pocket is by eliminating furlough days. This equates to a 13.4 percent pay increase because workers have not legally had to be at work during that time. For those who were, it means actually getting paid for the work they are doing; for those who took the day off, it means being paid to work a full week.

Property tax is the city’s largest source of income at 23 percent of the general fund revenue. With revenues from the

Stateline or Project Area No. 1 taking a 15.7 percent hit, it means $1.2 million less for the city. This is because the county reassessed the values on the property in that area.

Projections are for property taxes to decline next year, with increases for the following four years – the most being a 1.6 percent uptick in fiscal year 2016. The county Assessor's Office is forecasting a 4 percent assessment decline for this fiscal year.

Hotel taxes are the second largest moneymaker for the city at 15 percent of general fund revenue. Today a rate of 10 percent is charged to people staying in most areas of town, while a 12 percent tax is added to a room in the redevelopment areas. Staff is proposing 12 percent throughout the city. This would have to go before voters, but is not likely to happen until 2014.

O'Rourke would like the $900,000 a year cash infusion from raising the TOT to be used on upgrading the roads.

Another way to bring in money is to ask the voters about creating a 5 percent amusement tax. This would be levied on recreation equipment rentals like bikes and skis, as well as ticket sales for the Tahoe Queen.

An agreement made by a prior council prohibits a tax on lift tickets at Heavenly Mountain Resort.

The forecast is a half million dollars a year could be generated from an amusement tax.

The other new source of revenue is via metered parking, especially near beaches. O'Rourke said most waterfront communities charge to park close to that body of water. The anticipation is this could bring in $450,000 a year.

The summary statement of the staff report says, "The strategy reflected in the Five Year Financial Plan allows the city to

ensure long-term financial success and sustainability, Moreover, the strategy will allow the city to continue to provide essential, outstanding cost-effective service and capital improvement to our residents and businesses.”