Ax falls in S. Tahoe; positions gone, retirements imminent

By Kathryn Reed

“Thank you for your email. Eugene Palazzo is no longer employeed (sic) with the City of South Lake Tahoe. Please contact Tracy Franklin at 530-542-6093 or tfranklin@cityofslt.us. Have a great day. Gene”

That is the auto-reply Gene Palazzo left on his email Feb. 23, the day he found out he no longer had a job with South Lake Tahoe. He had been the director of Redevelopment and Housing.

His is one 11 positions being eliminated. Another 10 employees are taking early retirements.

Some departments are being re-organized, while some people are taking on new responsibilities in positions that are being created.

“This will allow us to streamline operations,” City Manager Tony O’Rourke told *Lake Tahoe News* late Wednesday. “The reorganization is more of a rebalancing. It allows us to introduce new concepts to the city.”

The anticipated re-org is expected to save the city $10.2 million across five years.

The city has been in the red millions of dollars a year for the past few years, with the anticipation of much the same in the future because of declining revenues from hotel, sales and

property taxes.

Spending is the main area the city can control. That is what the reorg is all about. Past practices have been to take from reserves to cover the deficit. O'Rourke and the current council want the city to live within its means.

"We have to control our own destiny," O'Rourke said. Seventy-eight percent of the General Fund goes toward employee salaries and benefits.

The City Council will discuss the reorganization and five-year budget during the work session March 1 after the regular council meeting.

Positions eliminated on Wednesday also include assistant city manager (Rick Angelocci) and assistant Parks and Recreation Director (Chris Hawken).

The employees represented by unions – those who are not at-will employees – have been told what is in store. However, it is the council that must vote on those jobs. That will happen March 15. The workers have 30 days after that to vacate their jobs.

With bumping rights in the city, the exact people leaving all positions is not known. It's the positions the city desires to eliminate that are outlined here.

O'Rourke said he wants to work with the unions to abolish the bumping rule because it can mean a person who is less qualified or not a good employee keeps his job based on seniority and nothing else – and bumps a newer hire into the unemployment lines when that person in fact is the one who management would have preferred stayed on the payroll.

Severance packages are still being worked out for everyone.

The positions likely to be eliminated are:

• Accounting technician – (was filled by a temporary employee)

• Assistant engineer – (position was vacant)

Funding will dictate if another engineering position is cut in October.

• Associate planner

• Fire division chief (was vacant)

This leaves one division chief per shift. Fire Chief Lorenzo Gigliotti is keeping his job for now, but will have to step it up a notch, which includes taking a shift in the firehouse and filling in when a division chief is out.

• Housing rehabilitation specialist

• Senior accounting technician

• Senior airport assistant

• Administrative assistant in public works – (was temporary worker).

Those being offered early retirement will leave at different times. They include:

• Fire captain

• Fire engineer

• Human resource analyst

• Information technology manager

• Public Works director (John Greenhut will leave in May.)

• Police captain (Martin Hewlett will leave next February.)

• Police sergeant

• Police officer

• Recreation supervisor (John Collins is leaving; Rob Swain is moving from the ice rink to the senior center.)

One other position is likely to be gone with early retirement; that was expected to be finalized Thursday.

In O'Rourke's staff report, he says, "The vacant positions resulting from these early retirements will be filled, with the exception of the Public Works Director, Human Resource Analyst and Recreation Supervisor. The Police Captain position will be reclassified to a Community Service Officer and the Police Sergeant reclassified to a Community Service Officer."

O'Rourke met with everyone Feb. 23 who would no longer be receiving a paycheck from the city, except for Hawken, who no one could locate.

South Tahoe downsized in 2009 in what was called a cost containment plan. On April 21, 2009, the council approved six early retirements in various departments, seven people lost their jobs, and a few positions were left vacant.

Seven months later, on Nov. 17, the council laid off one person, approved nine early retirements and froze more positions.

This is also when furlough days started.

Consolidation, which means departments are being reclassified, is also part of the plan that will be before the council in March.

Hilary Hodges, the current planning manager, will head the Development Service Department at least for the interim. This department will include redevelopment, housing, economic development, sustainability, planning, building and the engineering section of public works.

Stan Sherer, who took over the Parks and Recreation Department last month, will run the Community Services Department. The new department will also include streets, fleet management and facilities maintenance – everything that was in public works except for engineering.

The airport and parking will come under finance; still led by Christine Vuletich.

“Those are enterprise operations that should break even at best or make money. We really need a financial focus on those operations,” O’Rourke said.

Four other positions are being reclassified, with current staff filling the jobs.

The city’s special events coordinator will be Lauren Thomaselli. She has been running Explore Tahoe. Someone within the city will fill her shoes at the visitor center.

“The city is going to be much more engaged in producing new events and assisting other people’s events. This is tied to economic development,” O’Rourke said.

Engineer Jim Marino will be the capital improvement coordinator.

Tracy Franklin, who worked in Redevelopment and Housing, will be the volunteer coordinator. One of the things in the citizens’ survey that was recently released was the desire by locals to volunteer more. The city could reap millions of dollars worth of free service from residents.

Nancy Kerry, manager of Redevelopment and Housing, is moving into the role of communications/public affairs manager. She will work directly for O’Rourke. The job will also include marketing of city services, like Parks and Recreation.

“This is a major step forward, but not the only or final step,” O’Rourke said of all the changes. “We will have to

monitor and modify as we go forward.”

S. Tahoe grad near epicenter of New Zealand temblor

Updated Feb. 25, 2011, 11:30am.

Publisher’s note: ***Hillary Santana, the 2008 salutatorian at South Tahoe High School who works for the Lake Tahoe Basin Forest Service office in the summer, is an exchange student in New Zealand from her university in Pennsylvania. The following is from her dad. Hillary is the daughter of David and Bernadette Santana, who work at STHS.***

By David Santana

When South Tahoe High School graduate Hillary Santana elected to pursue her Environmental Studies concentration abroad, she had no idea how immediate and impactful her education would soon be. The Swarthmore College junior arrived in Christchurch, New Zealand, to attend classes at the University of Canterbury just more than a week ago.

Before then, her only brush with adversity had been a half-day’s wait on a delayed arrival of luggage from the North Island’s Auckland airport. After spending a week acclimating to her new environs and enrolling in classes, Hillary witnessed what could only be described as a life-changing experience as she sat in a lecture hall on the Canterbury campus.



Hillary
Santana

Shortly before 1pm on Feb. 22, as the class listened to a speaker, the building began to shudder and roll, and students and staff scrambled for the shelter of desks and doorways as a reported 6.3 magnitude earthquake struck just more than 2 miles below the New Zealand city.

In an emergency phone conversation with home shortly afterward on a dedicated line, Hillary described the experience: “Dad, it was crazy – I’ve never been so scared in my life. As soon as the shaking stopped, we got the heck outta there, and out onto the lawn!”

The University of Canterbury campus, located only 3 miles from the quake’s epicenter, was quickly evacuated as many of the older buildings had to be secured and inspected. No major damage was immediately found there, but downtown Christchurch, only 3 miles away, was not so fortunate.

To date, there have been 65 confirmed deaths, and hundreds of people missing as rescue crews scour several devastated buildings for survivors. Water and power have been shut down in much of the area, as damage to drinking water, sewage, and gas and electric systems have been reported. The night following the disaster has been a long and wet one for many of the evacuees, as rain began falling on hundreds of individuals preferring to spend the night outdoors as aftershocks riddled the area

“They finally let us back into our dorms this evening, but my

flat’s on the fourth floor, and I’m not too sleepy, if you know what I mean.”

Describing her flatmates as “pretty freaked out”, Hillary has been trying to keep updated on the chaos downtown.

“It’s not good, Dad. Several of us are looking to volunteer at the shelters they’re setting up outside of the areas of devastation for the evacuees,” she said. Classes at Canterbury have been canceled for the week, pending any further developments.

“It looks like we’ll have lots of time on our hands to help out,” she said.

Although Internet and phone service have been limited in the hours following the earthquake, people wishing to help out and stay informed may contact the New Zealand Red Cross.

Here is an update, day two:

“Dad, there’s no water, and we’re still feeling aftershocks every half hour or so. I still can’t believe how bad things are in downtown. It’s only a 15-minute bus ride away.”

Hillary has been able to communicate with family by phone, but Internet service is still down at her location near the University of Canterbury campus. As to the moment the quake struck, she states: “I had been packing my things to leave class, and the room started shaking violently. It felt pretty unreal, and I literally asked myself if it was really an earthquake. It felt as if the building was no longer attached to the ground. Most of us ducked under desks, and covered our heads. When it stopped, we were told to move outside and away from any buildings – no problem there! A large aftershock occurred soon after, and it was very strange to see concrete shake.”

Back at her apartment dorms an hour later, emergency personnel

were still limiting access until inspections were completed.

“The building next to mine suffered a crack, so the people living there had to stay in another flat. At that point, we still had no power or water, and phone service was still spotty. I was still nervous and confused, but I really had no idea then how bad things were a couple of miles away.

“Little information has been passed along yet as to how locals can volunteer, and emergency efforts have restricted travel. I will continue to keep everyone updated as best I can, and I hope everyone out there is thinking hopeful thoughts for the city and its people, as I am. I’m fortunate to be in a relatively safe place, and this city has been very welcoming to me since I arrived here only 10 days ago. I hope things will turn up, and that people who are still missing will be found and returned to their loved ones.”

Day 3

“So, the aftershocks are becoming almost commonplace by now … it’s not easy to sleep, but you just kinda look around and ride them out.

“Water at the apartments is still out, and we’re being asked not to flush toilets, as the sewage system is badly damaged down the line – not too pleasant ….” Hillary is entering Day 3 after the devastating Christchurch quake, and reality is settling in as clean-up and rescue efforts go into overdrive downtown, a few miles away. The official death count has risen to 75, and numbers are expected to rise sharply as downtown buildings are excavated, and hundreds are still trapped. The Christchurch Airport has re-opened for domestic flights, and is limited international flights for transport and rescue craft. Some airlines are offering reduced fares for tourists and international students who wish to leave the area.

“Some of my international classmates have left for Auckland (North Island) or Australia, but once we got our power back, I

saw some of the video from downtown … I mean, the devastation is only a few miles away from the campus, and it's awful … I decided I couldn't go."

Hillary will be joining approximately 300 other University of Canterbury students who call themselves the Student Volunteer Army. They will be busing into adjoining neighborhoods to help with clean-up efforts. "Downtown's pretty much cordoned off and limited to army, rescue and police personnel, but surrounding neighborhoods are in need of help," she said. "We'll be leaving in a little bit, so I've gotta go – I'll let you know where we are when we get there – I love you."

New Zealand Prime Minister John Key has declared Christchurch a national disaster, the country's deadliest in more than 80 years. Besides the destruction of several downtown high-rises, water and sewage systems have been badly damaged by the liquefaction of the ground beneath the city in several places, and hundreds, possibly thousands, have been displaced. International rescue teams continue to arrive in Christchurch, and President Obama has pledged American support for the beleagured city.

"I was taking pictures of the Christchurch Cathedral just last Friday, and cruising the downtown square with my classmates – the news clips are just surreal, Dad." Hillary will be staying on in Christchurch to help with cleanup efforts, and urges her classmates and South Lake Tahoe residents to do the same.

Although Internet and phone service has been limited in the hours following the earthquake, people wishing to help out and stay informed can contact the New Zealand Red Cross.

Day 4

"Up early today to join with other University of Canterbury students (Student Volunteer Army) in clean-up efforts.

"Downtown is heavily cordoned off as search and rescue in the

demolished buildings continues. Death toll has risen to 113, and still hundreds unaccounted for. We headed to the coastal communities out by New Brighton Beach in buses. The earth movement has shifted the substrata, pushing up lots and lots of sand and muck into neighborhoods, and clogging drainages. We were assigned to a residence of elderly folks in their 70s and 80s, where we spent the day digging and wheel-barrowing their yards, garages, and nearby gutters. Their neighbors' house had a large crack running down the center of their floor. We grabbed our shovels and dug in. It was hard work, but the people were exceedingly grateful and fed us what lunch they were able to put together. Being down by the coast, all I could think of was tsunami activity, as the aftershocks have only now begun to subside. I thought about my sister, Victoria, who was in the Navy aboard the USS Duluth during tsunami relief efforts after the disasters in Thailand and Sri Lanka in 2004. It was their job to provide fresh water for the locals, as their ship had water desalination systems on board. Back at the dorm, we've still had to boil our water before using it to drink and cook, but in many areas here people are still getting their water from tanker trucks. When we got back to our apartments, we were tired and sore, but happy to find out that we were finally allowed to take short showers. After today's work, we would've been pretty nasty without them. What's more, we were allowed to flush the toilets – Happy Day!

"Later in the evening, our internet service came on, and as I contacted my folks and friends back home, I realized just how much we take for granted not only basic services like water, sewage and power, but the niceties of the tech age. Just a week ago, I remember complaining to my dad that we had to pay additionally for Internet access at the dorms, while back at Swarthmore we enjoyed campuswide Wi-Fi for free. What a reality check …

"Classes are still suspended at University of Canterbury, and it appears they will be for another week, at least, while

things are put back in order, and buildings checked. I was counting on the three-week break between terms to do some traveling around New Zealand and possibly Australia, but adjustments to the schedule might impact that. For now, we're all following the progress downtown, limiting our water use, and helping when we can.

"I strongly urge people to help, if they can, as the situation only a few miles away has become truly heartbreaking.www.redcross.org.nz/donations."

Weather Service warns people to stay off Sierra passes

The winter storm warning for the Lake Tahoe Basin begins at 4pm Thursday and is scheduled to end at 4am Saturday.

The National Weather Service is calling for 12 to 24 inches at lake level, with 2 to 4 feet above 7,000 feet.

The agency warns, "Anyone planning travel over the major passes should consider completing their trip over the Sierra by midday Thursday or postponing travel until Saturday."



The Carson Spur west of Kirkwood on

Feb. 19. Photo
by Casey via
Facebook post
by Seth Frank

The super cold storm is expected to bring powdery snow, significant blowing and drifting snow, and whiteout conditions.

The high for South Lake Tahoe on Thursday is set for 20 degrees, and 18 on Friday and Saturday. It will warm up to 32 degrees on Sunday.

In the Reno, Carson City and Minden areas the storm warning is in effect from 10pm Thursday to 10pm Friday. Three to 8 inches are expected below 5,000 feet.

With forecasters calling for snow on the streets of San Francisco, that's a definite signal this is a cold, snowy storm on its way to the Sierra.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Mixed reaction to Reid's speech to Legislature

By Guy Clifton, Reno Gazette-Journal

None of Washoe County's legislative delegation considered U.S. Sen. Harry Reid's call to end legalized prostitution in Nevada much of a priority, in a session where the budget shortfall dominates all other topics.

But they did find other parts of Reid's address to a joint

session of the Legislature on Tuesday more agreeable.



Harry Reid

“Maybe someone who was listening will introduce a bill (to outlaw legalized prostitution). I don’t know,” said Sen. Greg Brower, R-Reno. “But we have so many challenges that we’re working on every day in an effort to get this state back on track economically through job creation and education reform and getting the budget balanced. Those are really the priorities of this session.”

What most Washoe County legislators did like was Reid’s call to reform education, properly fund it and to focus on making the state the renewable energy capital of the nation.

“He makes the point that it’s hard to diversify the economy and attract new businesses to the state when you are in a cutting mode with education,” said Assemblywoman Debbie Smith, D-Sparks.

Reid, the U.S. Senate Majority Leader and a former state assemblyman, said the state cannot keep asking for cuts in education.

Read the whole story

Reno-Tahoe airport to spend $5 mil. on baggage claim upgrades

By Bill O'Driscoll, Reno Gazette-Journal

As Reno-Tahoe International Airport officials see it, those departing the airport have been accommodated with the latest upgrades.

Now, it's the arriving passengers' turn.

The airport is preparing plans for a $5 million face-lift of the baggage claim area which, officials said, will mean improvements designed to continue the rock-woodsy-outdoors themes that adorn the renovated ticket counter area.



Improvements coming to Reno-Tahoe airport's baggage claim. Photo/LTN file

"We want to move that look, that Tahoe feel, down to baggage claim," said Marily Mora, executive vice president/chief operating officer at the Reno-Tahoe Airport Authority. "When people leave Reno, they get to see it. So now, when they come in, we'll try to showcase what the community's about."

That means upgrades that will include rock and wood facing on columns and beams, an all-tile floor, improved signage and, with a nod to locals, the elimination of the chrome in the ceilings.

Read the whole story

Is labor strife in Wisconsin just the beginning?

By Peter Finocchiaro, Salon

Wisconsin has captivated onlookers as it evolves into what some are calling ground zero for a nationwide standoff over organized labor in the public sector. Major budgetary battles loom large on the horizon, and Wisconsin's Scott Walker is just one of several governors who are considering big cuts to union benefits for state employees. Rumors are already swirling about similar legislative battles in states like Ohio, Tennessee and Indiana, and action against organized labor there could instigate further protests. In short: The scene in Wisconsin could be prelude to a national event.

Given that the two major media stories of the moment have inundated the American public with images of protests, both at home and in the Middle East, it's unsurprising that people are beginning to draw comparisons. That being the case, the big question of the moment becomes this: Will the labor fight cascade out from Madison across the U.S.? Or, as the *New York Times* succinctly put it: "Is Wisconsin the Tunisia of collective bargaining rights?"

Read the whole story

Upgrades to Nevada Beach make it ADA compliant

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Making Nevada Beach accessible to people with disabilities and improving water quality are the goals of the $1.2 million project under way at the popular beach-day use-campground just east of the Stateline casinos.

With work having begun last summer, crews expect to wrap things up before Fourth of July. This holiday is the time when the beach reaches maximum capacity because the views of the fireworks shot off over the lake are some of the best.



Restrooms at Nevada Beach are being built to ADA specs. Photos/Kathryn Reed

This winter workers are finishing the two restrooms, with landscaping work to begin once the snow melts and the grading season opens.

The two old restrooms date to the 1940s or ’50s, according to U.S. Forest Service officials. They will be demolished. One of the facilities that was built in the 1970s will remain in use, however it is not compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act.

The Forest Service, which has owned the land since 1942, is using money from its general budget as well as funds from the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act for the upgrades.

Besides replacing the structures that have outlived their usefulness, water and electrical lines are being replaced to meet health and safety codes.

“The other thing related to accessibility is an accessible path around the entire parking lot,” USFS spokeswoman Cheva Heck said. “As we get money, we go to our facilities and address accessibility because we want and need to bring them up to that level.”

She said it’s all part of the Forest Service’s goal “to serve all of the public.”

A boardwalk leading to the lake has been laid. This allows people in wheelchairs to use picnic areas close to the shore.

Part of the water quality portion of the project involved moving one campsite to ground that is not sensitive. Burke Creek runs through Rabe Meadow, which leads to Lake Tahoe, so lots of marshy areas exist much of the year in the area. None of the improvements are designed affect the creek.

In the day use area, catch basins are being installed to trap water to have it filtered before it reaches Lake Tahoe.

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Body of missing snowboarder found at Mt. Shasta ski area

By Redding Record Searchlight

Searchers Sunday morning found the body of a 23-year-old Mount Shasta man who went missing Thursday while snowboarding at Mt. Shasta Ski Park.

Alexander Gautreaux was found about 9am near the southeast side of Coyote Butte, about 100 feet from park boundaries, said Siskiyou County sheriff's Capt. Jim Betts.

"Our thoughts and prayers are with the Gautreaux family in this tragic time. We remained hopeful throughout the search mission that we would be able to return Alexander to his wife and family," said Siskiyou County Sheriff Jon Lopey in a news release.

Those who knew Gautreaux say he was a genuinely kind person who loved to be active.

Read the whole story

Pension cuts being discussed in Sacramento

By Kevin Yamamura, Sacramento Bee

Former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger hailed pension cuts last year as a major reform after Democrats and state worker unions agreed to concessions that ended a record-long budget stalemate.

But Republican lawmakers are clamoring for more.

Voter backlash has grown, fueled by ongoing budget deficits, significant pension liabilities and a gap between public- and private-sector benefits. It’s become a national discussion, most evident in the explosive debate over a Wisconsin measure requiring public workers to contribute more to their pension costs and restricting their collective bargaining rights.

GOP leaders have yet to offer a formal counterproposal to Gov. Jerry Brown’s budget to close a $26.6 billion deficit. In recent weeks, however, some Republicans have suggested they might be willing to consider a five-year tax hike extension on the June ballot if pension changes are part of negotiations.

In California, 70 percent of likely voters told the Public Policy Institute of California last January they would favor shifting new public employees from defined pension benefits to 401(k)-style plans.

“The recession has been a big wake-up call for people about public pensions,” said PPIC President Mark Baldassare. “It’s something that flew under the radar for many years, without consideration of what impact it has on budgets. But now people are realizing it does have consequences for what states and localities will be able to provide.”

Read the whole story

Injury accident snarls traffic on Hwy. 50 in S. Tahoe

Traffic was slow on Highway 50 at Al Tahoe Boulevard late Monday afternoon as emergency crews worked to clear an injury accident.

At least one person was being transported to Barton Memorial Hospital via ambulance about 4:40pm.

South Lake Tahoe police officers were not providing details Feb. 21 about the accident.



Emergency crews work an accident Feb. 21 in South Lake Tahoe. Photo/LTN

Although snow had not fallen all day Monday, road surfaces are slick with slush in some locations and pockets of ice elsewhere. All wet spots are likely to continue to freeze and thaw as overnight temperatures are in the single digits in the Lake Tahoe Basin and highs are in the 20s this week.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report