Legislative analyst's proposed cuts if June ballot fails

By Kevin Yamamura, Sacramento Bee

The Legislative Analyst's Office provides a sobering take on how to solve the state's $26.6 billion deficit without new tax dollars in a memo released Monday.

School districts would shorten the school year by a few more days, districts would increase K-3 class sizes and college tuition would soar. The state would soften its "three strikes" sentencing policy. And state workers would pay more in health care costs and face another round of two furloughs a month.

The 11-page letter comes in response to a request by Sen. Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, who asked the analyst's office to suggest how the Legislature might solve the deficit without $13.5 billion in additional taxes.

"The LAO report is important information for people to consider, and the Legislature to consider, about what our choices are over the next (few) weeks," Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg said. "And then, ultimately, what the people's choices will be come June."

Few legislators in either party could stomach such deep cuts; Democrats are having a hard enough time accepting the sweeping social service and health reductions that Gov. Jerry Brown proposed in his January budget. They already plan to reject some of Brown's ideas, such as cutting off aid for children in the state's welfare-to-work program after 48 months, and replace the proposals with alternative savings.

Steinberg said he doesn't think the analyst's cuts will reach

the floor for a vote.

Read the whole story

Heavenly Village entities look at new era of cooperation

By Kathryn Reed

Movement is afoot to alter language in the multi-year agreement regulating who pays what and does what at Heavenly Village. South Lake Tahoe officials brought the idea to the board Tuesday with the hopes of possibly being able to offer in-kind services, help with special events and restructuring parking fees as incentives to pay less each month.

“I think everyone at this table wants it to be successful. We’ll put together a group to talk about parking and the existing agreement,” PADMA board Chairman Greg Campbell told City Manager Tony O’Rourke at the Feb. 15 meeting. He said the board would have something to bring to the table at or before the April meeting.

Park Avenue Development Maintenance Association is the organization formulated in 2002 to maintain the Heavenly Village. The two Marriott properties pay 55 percent collectively, Heavenly Mountain Resort 20 percent, South Lake Tahoe 20 percent, Trans Sierra Investments 2.5 percent, and Cecil’s 2.5 percent for the upkeep.



The fee structure at Heavenly Village garage is likely to be altered. Photo/LTN file

Attorney Lew Feldman, who represents PADMA, pointed out there is a separate parking agreement between the city and PADMA that calls for the board to be consulted regarding parking fee changes at the village garage even though it is owned by the city. That hasn't been happening.

"The parking structure should be an enhancement for the village and it's not," O'Rourke told fellow PADMA board members.

He broached the idea of instituting the "Free after 3" program like Vail has, but added, "To do so we need to off-set the costs."

If the Free after 3 idea were implemented, the city would take an additional $100,000 a year loss on the parking garage that already loses $100,000 and has a debt of $7.2 million that is gradually being paid off. That is why the city, as O'Rourke told the board, "wants relief with our agreement."

Officials from Vail will be in Tahoe in the next couple weeks to offer advice about what the city can do with its financially failing concrete structure.

The idea is to get more locals to use the garage and therefore

frequent the businesses in the village.

But Feldman also pointed out the trend is more people are staying in vacation rentals, so a reasonable parking rate – or free at times – would be incentive for those tourists to venture to the Stateline area village.

He also noted with the garage being the most underutilized during the midweek that in the past the idea of having a parking pass for Heavenly season passholders was brought up but went nowhere.

Pete Sonntag, general manager of the ski resort, is a PADMA board member. He didn't comment on Feldman's midweek parking incentive idea.

To offer different types of parking options for people, O'Rourke told the PADMA board it's possible about 30 spaces could be created at the transit center, with the first two or three hours free.

When it came time to discuss how much retailers pay the city per validation coupon, Feldman said the idea for the movie theater to pay so little compared to others was to get locals to the village.

O'Rourke contends with the length of time movies are in the theater – months not weeks – that would point toward the theater having an eye toward tourists, not locals and therefore wants the board's help with making the validations equitable. The city manager also asked for assistance with getting all retailers to offer validation that will provide consistency for retailers.

Gary Casteel from Trans Sierra Investments, the group that owns the bulk of the retail buildings, said it's easier for someone selling high-end art to offer validation than someone selling an ice cream cone.

In the era of trying to all play nicer together, Feldman pointed out there was resistance from officials with the city who are no longer on the payroll for things like banners and other visual displays to spruce up the area.

“Let’s look at this relationship from a different perspective and bury the adversarial tones,” O’Rourke said.

O’Rourke told the PADMA board how the current council wants to build partnerships – which includes with the folks at Heavenly Village. It’s part of the council’s economic development plan.

The more Heavenly Village is successful, the more sales and hotel taxes the city collects – not to mention parking fees.

Feldman said most of the businesses are seeing double-digit gains over the prior year. Campbell noted the Marriott properties are doing well this season, too.

“Luxury items are off a little bit like the rest of the country,” Casteel said.

Kerry David with David & Johnson certified public accountants went over the November and December financials. The numbers prove early snow isn’t always a good thing.

Snowmelt was budgeted to cost $1,746 in November, when in fact the bill came to $16,975. For December, the deficit was $4,584. The good news is a dry January made up $19,000 in savings with no snow on the ground to melt.

El Dorado County father

arrested in child support case

By Niesha Lofing, Sacramento Bee

A dad who allegedly owes more than $190,000 in back child support payments to his El Dorado County ex-wife was arrested last week in Los Angeles after flying in from the Philippines.

El Dorado County officials on Wednesday were notified that Gerald Boldt, who owed child support payments to the mother of his now-emancipated child, was getting ready to leave the Philippines.

Boldt was attempting to apply for additional passport pages at the embassy in Manila when a routine check revealed he was on a passport denial list for having failed to pay child support payments, Laura Roth, director of child support services for El Dorado County, stated in a news release.

Read the whole story

Financial concerns stall walkway by convention center

By Kathryn Reed

Money was the overriding concern of South Lake Tahoe City Council members as they went back and forth with what to do about the unsafe walkway in front of the rebar and concrete known as the convention center.

What staff brought them last week were two ideas – one a covered walkway, one an uncovered – for the stretch of asphalt from Stateline Avenue to McP's Pub. Uncovered would cost about $200,000, while a cover would be almost an additional $100,000.



What any walkway will mean to cyclists remains to be seen. Photo/Kathryn Reed

After much deliberation, the council unanimously agreed it wants staff to bring back more alternatives – ideally less costly ones. They also want to know what Caltrans has to say about the ideas because the right-of-way belongs to the state agency. They even said Caltrans should be dealing with this.

"This should have been done at the beginning with the building permit," City Manager Tony O'Rourke told the council Feb. 8. "This should be the developer's cost."

But prior councils apparently didn't think so, that's why this council is left with the decision about how to make the strip of asphalt less of a liability to the city if someone were to be seriously injured or killed there.

The signs saying "don't walk" are not effective. The cement barriers abutting the fence allow enough space for people to

easily walk along the highway.

Councilwoman Claire Fortier repeatedly asked about placing concrete barriers in a manner so pedestrians had no room to walk. But her idea did not resonate with staff.

No matter what walkway is built, the mural along the fence is still going to be erected. However, it was noted, depending on what walkway might go up, the mural could be obscured.

South Tahoe on path to change how it does business

By Kathryn Reed

A blueprint for how South Lake Tahoe will conduct business is taking shape, with adoption of the formal strategic plan expected at the March 1 council meeting.

The City Council spent about 90 minutes last week creating substance for the five priorities the group agreed to at the prior meeting.

Besides what the council envisions for the area, City Manager Tony O'Rourke is doing is own assessments that are designed to complement the policy the City Council is formulating.

Also at the March 1 meeting will be O'Rourke's reorganization plan for the city.

"We need to right size the government to match resources,"

O’Rourke said.

What positions will be eliminated and the cost savings are not being made public. Part of the secrecy is the need to discuss matters with unions. *Lake Tahoe News* has been told the cuts will be at various levels, not just rank and file employees.

O’Rourke told the council during the workshop portion of the Feb. 8 meeting under the Fiscal Sustainability section that change is coming. The plan calls for looking at “shifting city’s employee compensation system from a longevity-based step plan to a pay-for-performance system that rewards results.”

He said, “We are just paying people to show up and I don’t think that’s our goal. We have good employees. We need to recognize them.”

Nancy Kerry, who works in the Housing and Redevelopment Department, has been assisting O’Rourke with the intricacies of the strategic plan.

Another thing O’Rourke is looking at is how the city delivers services. He is considering privatizing some of the city’s resources such as the ice arena.

“We don’t have to be the direct provider of services,” O’Rourke told the council.

The council agreed the goal should be for the Parks and Recreation Department to cover 75 percent of it costs instead of the current 50 percent. Stan Sherer, who has been at the helm of the department for six weeks, is assessing how best and who best to operate entities under his authority.

“We need to be more entrepreneurial in how we invest in Bijou (Golf Course). Maybe we need more special events,” Councilwoman Angela Swanson said.

At the start of the meeting the council agreed to the city’s

mission statement being, “We are dedicated to providing essential, outstanding and cost-effective services that enhance the vitality and quality of life our residents, businesses and guests.”

Within the five categories of the plan are strategies to achieve the goal and performance measures.

Under Economic Development, the goal is to adopt the Tahoe Valley Community Plan by the end of the year, increase hotel tax collections by two percentage points next fiscal year, increase business licenses from 3,000 to 3,150, and increase hotel occupancy rate from 23 percent to 32 percent.

O’Rourke said he had been meeting with stakeholders “to discuss what is the community brand.”

He added, “There are not enough events celebrating the natural environment.”

Councilwoman Claire Fortier said it’s important for the city to support events even if they are not city-initiated events.

Under fiscal matters, Councilman Bruce Grego believes the city needs look at going back to voters to increase the business license fee even though it failed at the ballot in November.

Councilman Tom Davis strongly disagreed. He said there is no appetite for such a fee no matter how much the public is educated. He said his Tahoe Keys vacation rental business would have gone from paying $3,800 a year to $10,000 had the measure passed.

“If we are going to go to the public, it should be for more than $150,000,” O’Rourke said. That’s all the fee change would have generated.

When it came to the Built Environment, O’Rourke praised Mayor Hal Cole’s sign near the airport welcoming people, saying more things like that are needed in town.

The idea it to improve things like landscaping, plant flowers, and make Linear Park near Tahoe Meadows be visually appealing.

One of the strategies is to create a rating system in conjunction with the lodging and visitors bureaus for hotel properties that would encourage owners to enhance their establishments so they are at the top of the list.

A performance measure for this category is to add two business improvement districts in 2011-12 to what Ski Run Boulevard has established.

Providing a 24-hour online and voicemail service was proposed as a way to better get input from the pubic, with the idea people will get a response within 24 hours.

Playing nicer with everyone keeps being reiterated. The idea of the council having annual meetings with various boards was broached. Ironically, Douglas County Commissioner Lee Bonner spoke at the start of the regular council meeting saying his board wants to set up a meeting soon with the council to discuss matters of importance regarding the South Shore that cross the state line.

Next up is for the council is to adopt the plan. Then staff will start implementing it. The council will be provided quarterly reports, with an annual progress report created for the public, although the quarterly documents would be public documents.

Although the strategic plan is a bit of a living document, it is designed to be a vision for the next four years.

From the strategic plan, the business plan will be developed. That should be before the council in April. That in turn will drive what the budget looks like. For the first time in at least a decade, if ever, the city plans to create a five-year budget.

Environmentalists sue USFS to not log Angora burn area

Reno Gazette Journal

Environmentalists are suing the U.S. Forest Service to try to block logging at Lake Tahoe that the agency says is needed to help guard against another wildfire like the one that destroyed 254 homes three years ago.

In addition to removing downed logs that hamper firefighting efforts, the Forest Service says the Angora project will help speed regeneration of the forest and restore wildlife habitat across about half of the 3,000 acres that burned on the southwest edge of South Lake Tahoe in June 2007.

But the Earth Island Institute and Center for Biological Diversity say the logging would do more harm than good.

They say the project would do little to reduce fire threats but would disrupt the natural regeneration of the forest and eliminate about 70 percent of the last suitable habitat for the rare black-backed woodpecker across the entire 230 square miles of the national forest surrounding Lake Tahoe.



The burn area from Angora

Ridge on Feb.
13.
Photo/Kathryn
Reed

The Forest Service's own research shows the woodpecker is highly dependent on burned forest where beetles and other insects are plentiful, especially where the fire burned intensely, as was the case across about a third of the Angora site, the lawsuit said.

The agency designated the bird the "management indicator species" for post-fire habitat throughout the Sierra Nevada in 2007. Last September, the Center for Biological Diversity and the institute's John Muir Project petitioned the California Fish and Game Commission to declare it threatened or endangered under the state's Endangered Species Act.

"If the black-backed woodpecker is going to survive here in California, we can't keep logging its habitat. And this is exactly the kind of habitat it needs," said Justin Augustine, a staff attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity who helped prepare the lawsuit filed on Friday in U.S. District Court in Sacramento.

Read the whole story

Meeting set to explain Lake Christopher thinning project

To combat potential public outcry when the 50-acre Lake Christopher fuels reduction project starts this summer, officials have scheduled an outreach meeting for Feb. 16 at

6pm at Lake Tahoe Airport in council chambers.

South Lake Tahoe firefighters plans to use hand crews and low-impact equipment, including a helicopter, around the Trout and Cold creek meadows. The project is slated for the first three weeks of June from 7am-6pm.

One foot path between Martin Avenue and Golden Bear Trail may be temporarily closed.

The goal of the Lake Christopher project is to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire by thinning overcrowded forest stands within South Lake Tahoe.

The helicopter will be used to assist in transporting cut material from the treatment area to the processing area. Small trees and slash will be chipped and transported to the landing for removal for use in biomass energy generation facilities, while sawlogs will be removed and delivered to log processing facilities.

The project is a collaborative partnership between South Lake Tahoe, Lake Tahoe Community College, California Tahoe Conservancy and the South Tahoe Public Utility District.

The cost of the project is approximately $174,000 and is being paid for by a grant from the U.S. Forest Service.

For more information, contact Ray Zachau at (530) 542.6166.

Storing customer ZIP codes

violates California law

By Denny Walsh and Rick Daysog, Sacramento Bee

Consumer advocates were celebrating, and retailers were shocked Thursday, when the California Supreme Court declared that state law bars a merchant from asking for a customer's ZIP code and recording it as part of a credit card purchase.

As part of an address, a ZIP code qualifies as personal identification information, so when a merchant asks a customer for it and records it as part of a transaction, that violates California's Credit Card Act, the high court ruled.

The unanimous 17-page opinion outlaws the widespread practice and strikes down an appellate court's 2009 decision.

The defendant, high-end household goods giant Williams-Sonoma Stores Inc., offers no reason that would justify departing from the "statute's plain language, protective purpose and legislative history," the court concluded.

Through both its attorney and its marketing vice president, San Francisco-based Williams-Sonoma declined to comment.

Read the whole story

Up tick in sales of high-priced houses

By Robert Lewis, Sacramento Bee

In what might be a sign that the recession ended for the rich

faster than the rest of us, new real estate figures show mansion sales increased in 2010 across California even as total home sales fell.

Last year, 22,529 California homes sold for $1 million or more – a 21 percent increase from 2009, according to figures released Friday by DataQuick Information Systems, a La-Jolla based research company.

That contrasts with a 9 percent year-over-year drop in total home sales statewide from 2009 to 2010.

Some notable increases in the four-county Sacramento region: In Tahoe City, $1 million-plus sales increased more than 133 percent from the prior year, to 28. Truckee had 42, a 10.5 percent increase. Granite Bay had a modest 7.4 percent increase, with 29 such sales in 2010.

Many of the buyers are tracking unique homes that were once worth $2 million now on sale for, say, $1.2 million and have decided it's a good time to hunt for a bargain, said Kris Vogt, president of Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage's Sacramento-Tahoe region.

Read the whole story

South Tahoe council revises rules for itself

By Kathryn Reed

Stationary for council members, how to get an item on the agenda and receiving text messages during meetings. Those were some of the heady issues the South Lake City Council spent a

chunk of time on this week.



It was all part of the council going over its protocols Feb. 8.

Apparently not realizing it doesn't take a degree in graphic arts to create letterhead or even knowing the city has stationary, the electeds spent a good amount of time debating how it should look. All their names? A disclaimer at the bottom saying it was just from one member?

Finally, they agreed to spend taxpayer dollars to create note cards, which all but Mayor Hal Cole seemed to think they needed to send thank yous and what not.

Councilman Bruce Grego got his way after a lengthy discourse to change the requirement so only two councilmembers need to think an idea is worthy of being placed on a future agenda.

The reasoning behind this is so more ideas are vetted in public and don't get discarded by a fractionalized council, as has been the case in the recent past.

Staff will bring back to the council a potential policy regarding social media, which will include how the Brown Act controls text messages with the public during meetings, and the constraints on the five when it comes to making comments online about stories.

Councilwoman Claire Fortier wants cell phones off during meetings. Her colleagues didn't like that idea.

Councilwoman Angela Swanson's desire to have only electronic agendas fell flat.

Grego wants to punish any council member who gives closed

session information to the media, and presumably to the public in any manner. He thinks a $500 fine and removing their picture from what’s called city hall would be appropriate.

He didn’t get far with those ideas.

City Attorney Patrick Enright said the council’s every other year ethics training is coming up and maybe that would stave off any desire by the current council to leak information.

Swanson was successful in getting the council to reverse its policy about broadcasting public comments. They will be televised and heard via the web for the next six months on a trial basis.