LTUSD cuts 10 jobs for 2011-12; more possible

By Kathryn Reed

A counselor and two teachers at South Tahoe Middle School, two teachers at South Tahoe High School, two custodians, a teacher at the Independent Learning Academy, the human resources director, the English learner coordinator. Those are all the positions slashed Tuesday night from the Lake Tahoe Unified School District's payroll for 2011-12.

The cuts will save the district $840,000.

Lake Tahoe Unified, like all districts in California, is grappling with state take-aways that are making it difficult to continue providing the services parents, the community and educators want and expect.

The district's approach has been to keep as many programs and people as possible. Class-size reduction is a luxury in most districts. LTUSD has stuck with the program, believing children learn better when the student to teacher ratio is reduced.

If LTUSD were to completely eliminate class-size reduction, it would mean 18 teachers without jobs.

"Our mission is to keep as many people as possible," Jim Watson, HR director, told *Lake Tahoe News* after the Feb. 8 meeting. "Employment is not only good for the community, it's good for the kids because it returns programs (to the schools)

we believe make a difference.”

But on the chopping block that night was his job. He admits to having mixed emotions about retiring after spending 37 years in California’s education system.

As dreary as the news was, in many ways the emotional part is just beginning. Now it’s time for district officials to look at who has turned in their paperwork to retire, balance that information against the cuts the board made Tuesday and fill in names for the positions that were eliminated.

At the March 1 special board meeting the names of the people increasing South Lake Tahoe’s 17 percent unemployment rate are likely to be known. State law mandates certificated employees be notified by March 15 if they will be receiving a pink slip.

Between now and then the principals at the middle and high schools will be looking at master schedules to see what classes are cut along with the positions.

Before the board voted unanimously for the cuts, STMS counselor JoAnn Hernandez expressed what life for her and colleague Roy Benavidez is like.

She questioned how the school of 860 students would cope with one counselor. She wonders what happens to the 100 special education students. She spoke of the 150 students each trimester who receive extra counseling because they have received a D or an F.

Nevada resident Kathy Percival told the board the expense of paying for her son to attend South Tahoe High is worth it, but stressed the need to keep the focus on quality teachers and programs. She told the board shortening the school year should not be an option.

But it is.

However, because it is something that must be negotiated with

the unions, the board cannot automatically vote on it. The same goes for implementing furlough days. State law allows the district to go from 180 to 175 days.

LTUSD can save $100,000 for each day classes are not in session and teachers are not on campus.

Two things were stressed Tuesday night. One, is the 2012-13 cuts will be more painful if voters do not approve extending the taxes that will likely be on the June ballot. LTUSD faces another 10.5 positions being cut in a worst-case scenario.

The other fact that kept being reiterated is how districts cannot spend money however they want. Although the state in recent years has offered more flexibility with categorical funds, plenty of strings remain.

The district cannot take money from the voter approved Measure G or any of the matching state grant dollars to use them for items other than building facilities. Likewise, developers' fees have criteria for how they are spent. That is why the high school can get lights and a refurbished football field for next season – the district's share is from developers' fees.

CFO Deb Yates said in her 28 years in the profession she has never seen the financial picture so bleak.

"I've absolutely never seen anything close to the level of reductions we are looking at and that we've sustained," Yates said.

The problems for school districts stem from the state reducing what it pays per student as well other cutbacks. The state is giving LTUSD almost 20 percent less than what it is owed. This equates to $4.625 million for the 2011-12 school year, $4.2 million this school year, and nearly $4.5 million for 2009-10.

"Think what we could do with that kind of money," Yates said.

Lakeview Commons back on track for 2011 completion

By Kathryn Reed

B.J. Sullivan, president of Clark & Sullivan Builders, assured the South Lake Tahoe City Council his company would have Lakeview Commons done by October.

Last fall his firm successfully sued to have work on the multimillion dollar project at El Dorado Beach stopped, citing a flawed bid process.

Clark & Sullivan won again, so to speak, on Tuesday when the council unanimously decided to award the contract to the Sparks company. Their bid is $400,000 higher than Reeve-Knight's, the original contractor selected for the project, for a total of $4,897,837.



Lakeview Commons -- what it should look like in eight months.

However, the bid comes in below the $6 million allocated by California Tahoe Conservancy to pay for the upgrades to the

site, which include putting in a boathouse for non-motorized watercraft, restrooms, terraced landscaping, an invasive aquatic species decontamination station, improved walkways, and an improved picnic area all along the lakefront across from Campground by the Lake.

“I’m not sure if we rebid it, if we would get a lower bid,” city engineer Jim Marino told the council Feb. 8.

That was the council’s other option – to start all over. But that option was not discussed by the council.

Also part of Tuesday’s decision was signing off on the settlement agreement with Reeve-Knight, the firm that did the initial work on the project. They will be paid $142,500 for that work. This comes out of the CTC grant.

According to City Attorney Patrick Enright, the company wanted about $50,000 more than that.

Councilmember Angela Swanson asked if the public would have access to the area as work is completed. Sullivan said that has not been looked at, but will be considered as work begins in May.

Caltrans to host meeting about Hwy. 28 work in Tahoe Vista

On Feb. 9, Caltrans will have a drop-in style open house for residents of Tahoe Vista, local officials and other interested parties to discuss Highway 28 lane reconfiguration plans and receive comments. Caltrans staff will be on hand to answer

questions about the project.

The open house will be from 4-7pm at Kings Beach Elementary School, 8125 Steelhead St., Kings Beach.

Comment forms will be available at the open house. Comments may also be made online or sent to the Caltrans Project Manager, Mike Cook at 703 B St/, Marysville, CA 95901. All comments must be received by March 2.

Caltrans is proposing a striping reconfiguration to reduce the number of through lanes on Highway 28 for about one half mile between National Avenue and Beach Street in Tahoe Vista. This will maintain parking opportunities on the lake-side of the highway while still providing bike lanes. There would be safety benefits as well with a continuous median turning lane provided. The existing passing lane for westbound traffic, west of National Avenue, would still be in place.

Currently there are four lanes in Tahoe Vista from National Avenue to the Highway 267 intersection. The current construction plans do not change the number of lanes, but do convert the existing 8-foot wide paved shoulders into bike lanes. Because parking will be prohibited in the bike lanes, this will reduce parking opportunities for residents, businesses and visitors.

Caltrans will continue road work in May to improve stormwater drainage to help protect lake water quality, as well as increase traffic safety and access for bicycles.

Californians fear having to sell land if Conservation Act is axed

By Loretta Kalb, Sacramento Bee

In some ways, Gov. Jerry Brown's proposed elimination of California's Land Conservation Act is just one more symbol of the state's great budget disaster.

For many agricultural advocates, the consequences of abandoning a long-held strategy to preserve farmland and open space go well beyond the state's projected $25.4 billion deficit.

Supporters say eliminating the 46-year-old law – commonly known as the Williamson Act – will diminish an important source of environmental protection for 16.5 million acres and increase development pressure on farmers and ranchers.

The Williamson Act enables counties to contract with farmers, ranchers and other landowners, generally for 10-year terms, to keep the property taxes on their acreage lower. In exchange, the owners agree to keep the land out of development.

Historically, the state has provided funds to the counties to offset their property tax losses. If the program goes away, some landowners question their ability to continue operating their farms and ranches in the face of higher property taxes.

Read the whole story

Mount Tallac High coping with physical disrepair

By Kathryn Reed

Reusing portables isn't possible.

That's the message the state Department of Education has delivered to Lake Tahoe Unified School District officials. This is because the overcrowded relief grant money is designed to rid campuses of portables, not move them around to be used in a different manner.

South Tahoe High and South Tahoe Middle schools each received these types of grants, that with matching money from the voter approved Measure G bond brings new buildings to the schools. For STHS it's the completed Stadium View Building. Construction at STMS will begin this summer.



Neglected portable sitting in Mount Tallac's parking lot must be removed. Photos/Kathryn Reed

The news, that has yet to be widely disseminated among school

officials, will come as a blow to Mount Tallac High staff and students.

Just last Thursday the belief was the portable sitting in the parking lot of the continuation school still might become an extension of the school for outside agencies like Tahoe Youth & Family Services, probation and others to meet with students.

Susan Baker, who runs Mount Tallac, told *Lake Tahoe News* on Feb. 3, "It definitely feels like we're being neglected when we're told time and time again these things are going to be taken care of and they aren't. For me, we could do so much for kids if these things were in place."

"These things" being the dilapidated portable that has been sitting in the parking lot since August. She said Principal Ivone Larson, school facilities Director Steve Morales and Superintendent Jim Tarwater told her that portable would be converted into a usable facility.

Instead, it has sat all winter becoming a moldy, smelly mess. A leaky roof was repaired long after the problem was reported. Stepping in the dank building one does not want to linger.

It's possible even if the state didn't tell the district it can't keep these portables on campus (Tallac and STHS are considered one campus), the portable in the parking lot would no longer pass muster because of mold issues.

Morales said converting that particular portable into a usable facility was talked about, but was never guaranteed. "They weren't interested in hearing that it might not happen," Morales told *Lake Tahoe News* on Feb. 7.

He said the district is going to look into whether portables from other campuses that did not receive the overcrowding grant could be moved to Mount Tallac in the future, which could be as early as this summer. But it would still have to go through the permitting process.

What will happen to these portables remains an unknown. A couple have been given to Lake Valley Fire Department in exchange for defensible space work.

While STHS reaps the bulk of the benefits of the $65 million bond that with matches from state grants is closer to $100 million, Mount Tallac will not receive a dime. That’s how the bond measure was written.

Instead, teachers this year have listened to the ping of water dripping inside a classroom before the roof was finally repaired.



The boys' bathroom at Mount Tallac.

Students must use bathrooms that make some port-a-potties look more appealing.

Larson and Morales said they have not seen the bathrooms in question.

The irony is board meeting after board meeting the elected officials and administrators tout the importance of facilities, how creating a learning environment that is vibrant allows students to learn better.

“I think a lot of times there is a misnomer out there these kids don’t care about education as much a AP students,” Baker said.

She said all she wants is a clean, safe environment.

“Everything is triage and Band-Aids,” Baker said.

Harry Segal, a volunteer at Mount Tallac, questioned whether the neglect that is happening at Mount Tallac would be allowed to happen at the district office or the environmental school.

Reno tourism CEO quits abruptly

By Bill O’Driscoll, Reno Gazette-Journal

Ellen Oppenheim quit Monday after five years as CEO of the Reno Sparks Convention & Visitors Authority, saying she needs more time to care for her ill mother in Texas.

She leaves behind ongoing financial struggles at the tourism agency where in the past two years, the budget built on room tax revenues has been cut by 28 percent with 52 jobs slashed, and a shrunken international choral festival coming this spring could cost the agency nearly $400,000.

The choral festival issue, Oppenheim said Monday, “had nothing to do” with her decision to resign the post she accepted in 2006 at an annual salary of $225,000.

“I need to be available for my mother,” she said. “It’s important, my need to be able to get on a plane and tend to my mother’s needs.”

She said she will continue for the next six months in another capacity at the RSCVA because her contract, which was to be reviewed along with her job performance later this month by the agency’s board, requires six months’ notice of resignation.

Board chairman and Reno Councilman Dwight Dortch said the board will meet Thursday to discuss Oppenheim's transition and separation and appoint an interim CEO.

Last month, the 13-member board was informed that the American International Choral Festival had confirmed just 549 registrants out of an expected 3,000 from Europe, China and elsewhere for the May 4-8 event in Reno.

Read the whole story

Nevada contending with brain drain

By J. Patrick Coolican, Las Vegas Sun

Eric Glyman is exactly the type of young person Nevada needs to reinvent itself.

The 20-year-old graduate of Green Valley High School was a valedictorian, science olympiad and member of the speech and debate and track and field teams.

Now a junior at Harvard, he's majoring in Chinese and economics.

And he's probably not coming back. Opportunities are much better elsewhere.

Nevada, like many states and countries, has always suffered from a flight of human capital, or "brain drain," as it's often called. Many of our best and brightest take a pass on UNR and UNLV, and once they matriculate at elite universities elsewhere, they wind up in regions that are financial and

technological centers and offer more varied cultural and recreational lives.

This brain drain problem was mitigated during the boom, as tens of thousands of college-degreed Americans came to Nevada for opportunity. The valley was flush with architects, construction management experts, marketers, attorneys, accountants and other professionals. In fact, today there are roughly 191,000 working-age adults in the valley with bachelor's degrees who weren't born in Nevada, according to an analysis of census data by Alan Berube of the Brookings Institution.

Although we enjoyed a migration surge of the educated, we also had a massive influx of less educated service and construction workers, and we were left with a workforce that was less educated than most large urban areas – 21 percent of Clark County residents had bachelor's degrees as of 2009, compared with the national average of 27 percent, according to census data compiled by the Chronicle of Higher Education. By contrast, 28 percent of residents of Maricopa County, where Phoenix sits, have degrees; in Salt Lake County, it's 29 percent.

Read the whole story

CHP cracking down on cell phone users

California Highway Patrol officers will conduct a "zero tolerance" cell phone enforcement day, aimed at citing drivers who are distracted by their cell phones for 24 hours starting Feb. 8 at 6am.

The campaign is designed to deter people from using their cell phones if they don’t have a hands-free device or who are texting while driving.

Cell phones are one of the leading, identifiable, contributing factors in inattentive traffic collisions in California. According to the CHP’s Statewide Integrated Traffic Records System data, since the inception of the hands-free law, there have been 1,303 collisions throughout the state, where a contributing factor was inattention by the driver due to cell phone usage. Those same collisions resulted in 17 fatalities and more than 800 victims injured. The law, which went into effect July 1, 2008, prohibits the use of handheld cell phones by all motorists. In addition, it forbids anyone under the age of 18 from using any type of cell phone—handheld or hands free—while driving. Six months later, a ban on text messaging by drivers was put into effect.

Since the law’s inception in July 2008 through December 2010, CHP officers have issued 329,602 citations statewide to motorists who were in violation of the hands-free law and 5100 citations statewide for texting while driving, according to SWITRS.

Cell phone violations carry a minimum base fine of $20 for the first offense and $50 for the second. When court costs and other fees are added to the fines, the total cost of the violation exceeds $100 for the first offense.

Flood control issues divide

Reno City Council

By Susan Voyle, Reno Gazette-Journal

Fourteen years after the New Year's Day flood in 1997 roared into downtown Reno and left a shimmering lake at the Sparks industrial zone and the airport, Washoe County and Sparks have approved a new management authority to oversee the long-planned Truckee River flood control project.

The Reno City Council, however, remains split on creating a new government agency. If a vote were held today, it likely would be three for the project, two against and two undecided. A fourth vote is needed for passage.

While Sparks and Washoe approved it this week, the Reno council postponed its vote until Feb. 9 so Councilman Dan Gustin and Mayor Bob Cashell, who are undecided, have more time to study the 67-page agreement setting up the new authority.

Reno council members Jessica Sferrazza, Dave Aiazzi and Pierre Hascheff are in support, saying an agency focused only on the flood project will get it built.

Council members Sharon Zadra and Dwight Dortch opposed.

Zadra said she doesn't want to create a new government agency at a time when local governments should be consolidating operations. "It flies in the face of being more efficient," she said.

Dortch said he can't ever see the federal government putting $1 billion into the project as expected. And without those federal dollars, he said there's no sense in creating a new agency with the power to raise $520 million in fees from local property owners.

Reno forum: Tough choices, priorities need establishing

By Jason Hidalgo, Reno Gazette-Journal

Nevada needs to make tough choices and identify which priorities it can address now with its limited resources if it wants to emerge from the current downturn with a viable economy.

That was the consensus of a panel of business and community leaders that met Wednesday at the University of Nevada, Reno's Lawlor Events Center.

The panel, comprised team leaders for the Reno Gazette-Journal's Reno 2020 project, identified a set of action items within four key areas considered vital for economic development: education, green energy, fiscal policy and innovation.

It was the second portion of a two-part forum, which aimed to develop scenarios that will, over the next 10 years, set the region on a path to greater economic success.

The Reno 2020 project began in October in conjunction with UNR's Center for Regional Studies, which generated a scenario of what Reno would look like in 2020 if it remains on its current course.

A sense of urgency was palpable among the panelists Wednesday, and even some audience members during the economic forum's public comment portion.

Read the whole story