Storm downs trees, power lines; shelter open in S. Tahoe

Updated 6:45pm: In anticipation of the low temperatures this evening and people still without power, South Lake Tahoe officials in conjunction with the American Red Cross has opened a warming shelter at the South Lake Tahoe Recreation Center located at 1180 Rufus Allen Blvd.

Power is still off in the Al Tahoe neighborhood of South Lake Tahoe, with the power company not saying when lights will be on. Sierra Pacific Power said they are still looking for the cause as of 6:06pm. Between 2,500-3,000 customers on the South Shore are still without power. Traffic lights are flashing red and some are completely out in that area. Power is back on in Meyers and on the North Shore. Left turn lanes are the big issue on Highway 50 tonight through South Tahoe because they are not plowed and it's causing a back up in travel lanes. Spooner Summit is slow going, but navigable.

By Kathryn Reed

Chain saws were buzzing in the predawn hours of this normally quiet South Shore neighborhood. A tree had gone through a house.

The wet, heavy snow that fell overnight is wreaking havoc with power lines and tree branches throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin.

South Lake Tahoe firefighters ran more than 20 calls between 2-8am. Battalion Chief Ray Zachau said four trees went through houses in that time. A secondary power line was across five driveways on South Shore Drive.



Keith Cooney looks at the tree leaning on and in his South Lake Tahoe home. Photo/Kathryn Reed

“Then the primary came down right after that. It’s a mess with power lines,” Zachau said. “The wet snow is breaking trees.”

Keith Cooney, who lives in the Tahoe Island area of South Lake Tahoe, was abruptly awoken at 3:45am by a loud crash that shook the entire house.

“I knew what it was when it happened,” Cooney said looking at the tree branch coming through the ceiling of his garage.

The entire Jeffery pine in his back yard is uprooted and leaning against the house, taking out part of the chimney, creating a 9-foot gash in the kitchen ceiling and holes in the garage.

Firefighters cleared his driveway of the debris in the dark of the early morning so he could get his vehicle out.

Cooney and his black Lab were not hurt in the ordeal – just shaken up a bit. Cooney is a survivor – his house burned in the 2007 Angora Fire, he was laid off from his job and is still out of work, and his family barely survived Hurricane Katrina.

“I’m just very grateful to have a guardian angel,” Cooney said of surviving the latest trauma without a scratch.

He had planned to go to his friend’s restaurant in Meyers, but the power is out.

Sierra Pacific Power crews came up Tuesday night to start working on getting power back on. Three lines remained out at the Meyers substation, affecting close to 10,000 customers. The company does not have an estimate when the power will be back on.

Power started going out at 11pm Dec. 28 in the Stateline and Ski Run areas. That was back online quickly.

On the North Shore, initially three lines were down between Kings Beach and Tahoe City. Half of the 3,300 customers had power back by 8am, with the rest expected later this morning.

There is no estimated time when the power for the 1,500 customers in the dark on the West Shore south of Tahoe City will have lights again.

The roads are a mess. Zachau said a five-car crash on Lake Tahoe Boulevard at Park Avenue this morning sent one person the hospital.

“The roads are in horrible shape. They are really slippery,” Zachau said.

The Nevada Highway Patrol cleared a two-vehicle accident at the Bourne Curve on the South Shore this morning that resulted in minor injuries. A non-injury accident was being worked on the Mount Rose Highway as well.

“Slow down and don’t go out if you don’t have to,” is the recommendation of Trooper Chuck Allen.

The ride into Carson City from South Tahoe was a bit treacherous this morning.

“A few people couldn’t get out of connecting streets and are stuck in snow banks,” commuter Sue Wood said. “It’s pretty bad. It is the blowing wind that makes it bad.”

About a foot of snow on the South Shore at lake level fell overnight, with 2 feet being reported on Tahoe Mountain with no plows in sight at 9:30am.

The National Weather Service in Reno has reports of 2 to 3 feet in the higher elevations.

Most of the day will be sunny, but snow showers are expected to return this afternoon.

“The air is dropping down from Alaska so that will keep the high temperature for Thursday and Friday below freezing, probably in the 20s for a high,” meteorologist Brian Brong with the Weather Service said.

Overnight lows may be below zero. Brong doesn’t anticipate any records to break, but it may come close the record of 5 below for South Lake Tahoe.

For the entire Lake Tahoe Basin, Brong said the snowpack is 220 percent of normal for this time of year.

The next chance of significant snow for Lake Tahoe may come New Year’s Day.

All El Dorado County offices South Lake Tahoe opened late – 10 today. For additional information, call the snow closure hotline at (530) 573.3050.

The Tahoe Queen and M.S. Dixie II cruises are canceled today. Zephyr Cove snowmobiling is sold out.

South Lake Tahoe Parks and Recreation Department suggests people think about using the pool and gym as things to do once the shoveling is done.

The ice rink is closed because it doesn’t have power. In the Al Tahoe area of South Tahoe the senior center is also without power, flashlights were used at the main post office to sort mail, and visiting hours at the jail were canceled because it is being run on by generators.

Weather hampers efforts to locate missing snowboarder

Rescue crews are still searching for snowboarder Shanwte Marie Willis, 25, of Tahoma. She was last seen on the backside of Alpine Meadows Ski Resort on Dec. 28 at 1:30pm.

Her boyfriend reported her missing at 4pm.

Placer County sheriff’s Capt. Jeffrey Ausnow said Wednesday at 8am search and rescue efforts are under way, including snowmobiles and 11 Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue Skiers. The weather is not cooperating with blizzard conditions and high avalanche danger.

Willis was last seen wearing a pink helmet, tan and camo jacket, and grey snowboard pants.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Lake Tahoe water transit plan inching toward reality

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – A shred of optimism still exists that water transit will be operational on the North Shore in summer 2011. The reality is it is probably not going to be fully functional, if at all, until 2012.

The Tahoe Transportation District board this month agreed to have Executive Director Carl Hasty find a person to spearhead the project. This person would be tasked with obtaining agreements with pier owners, finding a boat and developing a plan.

TTD has no money for the project for the coming season, but the North Lake Tahoe Resort Association has said it can probably come up with $10,000 to help the cause. The NTLRA board still needs to vote on allocating the dollars.

The idea is to have water transit for locals and tourists at locations in Placer County – the North Shore – as a pilot program. The plan is to start small and grow – both in number of boats used and stops.

In this month's staff report it says, "Several key questions remain unanswered at this time and they are the support of the Federal Transit Administration to use capital grant funds for boat acquisition, the identification of matching funds should FTA support exit, and the identification of start-up funds to get operations under way."

Mechele Duhamel, who ran a waterborne transit operation briefly in 2010, spoke at the meeting this month in favor of going forward with the concept.

“There is tons of funding out there. There are waterborne associations. They’ve all done this before,” Duhamel said. “A nonprofit in our eyes is a perfect way to solicit more money.”

Bill Bohn, who operates Bohn Consulting Design & Engineering in Incline Village, submitted a three-page letter to the board outlying how to go forward with water transit. He is advocating his firm be the one to create a feasibility study.

In part he wrote, “ … none of the studies have comprehensively addressed the entire Waterborne Transit system from initial design, systems integration, funding and ongoing operational requirements. Before this board votes to approve the LSC study as presented it needs to consider the entire waterborne system from design, funding, construction and implementation to on-going operations.”

Cal Neva to resume operations in February

By Dale Kasler, Sacramento Bee

The slots will start ringing again soon at Frank Sinatra’s old gambling joint at Lake Tahoe.



The owners of the Cal Neva Resort, the fabled hotel that straddles the state line on Tahoe’s north shore, said this week that they expect to reopen the property’s casino in February.

Cal Neva’s casino was shuttered in March, a year after the

property was taken over in a foreclosure by investment firm Canyon Capital Realty Advisors.

Read the whole story

Residents homeless because of fire on Upper Kingsbury Grade

By Kathryn Reed

A nasty snowstorm with blowing wind hampered firefighters' efforts to bring a structure fire under control late Tuesday afternoon.

Flames could be seen along much of Tramway Drive in Stateline after the 4:30pm blaze was reported. Although the structure is not a total loss, all four units are uninhabitable, according to officials.

Mark Novak, fire marshal with Tahoe-Douglas Fire Protection District, said people living in the units are spending the night with friends or family in the area. He said some of the units were occupied, while others are vacation rentals.

"All efforts are being hampered by weather up there," Novak told *Lake Tahoe News*. He said it's been snowing hard and blowing quite a bit since the fire started.

The cause of the fire is under investigation. No injuries were reported.

"We're going to keep a fire watch overnight and complete the fire investigation in the morning when the light is better and the weather is better," Novak said.

Assisting Tahoe-Douglas on Dec. 28 were fire crews from South Lake Tahoe, North Lake Tahoe and East Fork. Those who weren't on the fire were contending with multiple accidents on Kingsbury Grade.

The worst of the collisions involved two vehicles that temporarily closed the highway, sent one person to Barton Memorial Hospital and left three others with minor injuries that did not require hospitalization.

Mild temblors shake Truckee area

Residents in the Truckee area were shaking a bit Tuesday night.

A 1.6 magnitude earthquake struck at 6:01pm two miles west-southwest of Truckee. This was preceded by a stronger temblor of 3.6 at 5:53pm.

One person in Oakland reported feeling the first quake, though most of the more than 100 responses on the U.S. Geological Survey site were from people in the area, including Reno and Incline Village.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Moody’s predicts slight improvement for gaming industry in 2011

By Steve Green, Las Vegas Sun

Analysts at Moody’s Investors Service are a bit more optimistic about the U.S. gaming industry, issuing a report Wednesday projecting gaming revenue will grow 1-2 percent and casino operator profits will increase 2-4 percent in 2011.

This is an upward revision from Moody’s previous estimate for 2011 gaming revenue to come in flat – between a decline of 1 percent and increase of 1 percent. The previous estimate for industry operating profits was that they would decline by as much as 2 percent or grow by as much as 2 percent.

Sustained increases in gaming revenue would signal a turnaround for the industry, which endured declines in 2008, 2009 and most of 2010.

Moody’s made headlines in June by upgrading its gaming industry outlook to stable from negative, signaling the casino industry decline may have bottomed out.

Moody’s on Wednesday updated the outlook, maintaining the stable outlook but saying “our outlook has a positive bias.”

Read the whole story

Sheriff’s deputies ready for Stateline New Year’s revelers

The Douglas County Sheriff’s Office is readying itself for the upcoming New Year’s Eve celebration at Lake Tahoe. Each year upward of 60,000 celebrants ring in the New Year in the casino core area of Stateline.

Due to the ordinarily high volume of celebrants within the Stateline casino core area during the event, Highway 50 may be closed to vehicle traffic in the evening if necessary for the safety of the celebrants. If that should occur, vehicle traffic will be diverted around the Stateline casino core area using upper and lower Lake Parkway Drive.

Drivers anticipating traveling through the Stateline casino core area on New Year’s Eve should allow themselves an additional 15 minutes of travel time. Drivers transiting the area in wintertime should always anticipate poor road conditions caused by winter weather. They should have snow tires mounted on their vehicle or carry tire chains/cables with them.

Officers of the Douglas County Sheriff’s Office will be present in the Stateline casino-core area throughout the evening, supplemented by officers and representatives of numerous other law enforcement agencies, including Nevada Highway Patrol, Carson City Sheriff’s Office, South Lake Tahoe Police Department, El Dorado County Sheriff’s Office, California Highway Patrol, Nevada Department of Prisons, Placer County Sheriff’s Office and the FBI. Supporting agencies include the Douglas County Communications Center, Tahoe-Douglas Fire Department, Douglas County Road Department, Caltrans and Nevada Department of Transportation.

Glass or metal containers, regardless of contents, are

prohibited in the casino core area on New Year's Eve. Any such containers, including their contents, will be confiscated for destruction by law enforcement. Alcohol or other liquids shall be in a plastic cup, paper cup or other similar vessel.

Parents must be mindful of their children's whereabouts and activities, especially during the New Year's Eve celebration. The crowd that gathers in the casino core for the event is not conducive or intended for participation by juveniles. Each year during the event, a large percentage of contacts and arrests are made of persons under the age of 21.

Snowpack water content near Tahoe 158% of normal

By Kathryn Reed

PHILLIPS STATION – With snow coming down in a flurry, the water content was likely changing Tuesday during the first snow survey of the year near Echo Summit.

What a difference a year makes. In 2009 the water content was 9 inches at Phillips Station, whereas this December it came in at 19 inches. Water content, not snow depth, is what matters.



Frank Gehrke and Maureen

Stapleton measure the water content Dec. 28 near Sierra. Photos/Kathryn Reed

For this location at the base of Sierra-at-Tahoe off Highway 50 the water content is 158 percent of normal. Statewide, the mountain water content is 198 percent of normal.

“What is kind of surprising is having this much snow on the ground given the fact it’s a La Nina year,” said Frank Gehrke, chief of the California Cooperative Snow Survey Program. La Nina years tend to be drier, which Gehrke said could be the case in January and February.

But it’s also true Lake Tahoe sits on the cusp of these weather phenomena, so no matter how much people forecast El Nino and La Nina years, Tahoe may do its own thing.

The abundance of moisture this fall and early winter has reservoirs downstream filling up – with some already releasing water to make room for more wet stuff. That is not the case with Lake Oroville, which is the main body of water for the State Water Project. It was last full at 3.5 million acre-feet in summer 2003.

Location	Elevation	Snow Depth	Water Content	% of Long Term Average
Alpha	7,600 feet	62.4 inches	18.4 inches	140
Phillips Station	6,800 feet	55.9 inches	19 inches	158
Lyons Creek	6,700 feet	61.2 inches	22.3 inches	189

Source: Department of Water Resources

Before Tuesday's readings the state Department of Water Resources estimated it would deliver 50 percent of requested State Water Project water in 2011. Officials expect that percentage to rise. The last 100 percent allocation year was 1996 for 25 million residents and nearly 1 million acres of farmland that depend on the canals to bring them water.

Agencies and farmers dependent on the SWP received 40 percent of allocations in 2009, 35 percent in 2008, and 60 percent in 2007.

Gehrke said it's like reading tea leaves to figure out what the season will end like. Last year it started off relatively dry and finished wet.

He said the rain earlier this month did not affect the water content, it just compacted the snow. So instead of the 55.9 inches at the site on Dec. 28, there may have been 70 inches had it not rained.

The snow content surveys are taken once a month for five months starting in December.

Usually Gehrke and whoever is helping him take seven readings in the snowfield near Sierra. With the creek about 50 feet into the meadow, only six could be taken on Tuesday.

Maureen Stapleton, general manager of the San Diego County Water Authority, was helping Gehrke on Tuesday. This was her first survey.

"I'm here to see the snow survey because of the runoff. Forecasts are so important to everyone in California," Stapleton said.

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California drivers face slew of new laws Jan. 1

Jan. 1 not only ushers in a new year but also a handful of laws for California motorists.

These new traffic laws were passed by the Legislature and signed by the governor earlier this year.

Below are synopses of a few of the significant changes for the upcoming year:

Instruction Permit: Motorcycle (AB 1952, Niello)

This bill added Section 12509.5 to the Vehicle Code, which lays out the age-specific requirements drivers must fulfill to obtain a motorcycle instruction permit. Among those requirements for drivers younger than 21 years of age is the successful completion of the motorcycle safety course administered by the CHP.

Motorcycle Theft: (AB 1848, Garrick)

This bill adds Section 466.65 to the Penal Code and makes it a misdemeanor to possess, give, or lend the following:

· Any device designed to bypass the factory-installed ignition of a motorcycle in order to start the engine without the manufacturer’s key.

· Any motorcycle ignition or part of motorcycle ignition, with the intent to unlawfully take or drive, or to facilitate the unlawful taking or driving of a motorcycle, without the consent of the owner.

· Items of hardware, including bolt cutters, electrical tape, wire cutters, wire strippers, or allen wrenches, with the intent to aid in the unlawful taking or driving of a motorcycle without the consent of the owner.

High-Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) Lanes (AB 1500, Lieu & SB 535, Yee)

These bills extended the life of the yellow and white clean air stickers for low emission vehicles. Vehicles bearing these valid stickers can continue to access HOV lanes regardless of vehicle occupancy. Hybrids with Yellow Clean Air Access stickers set to expire the beginning of January 2011 will be given a six-month extension until July 1. White Clean Air Access stickers will be valid until Jan. 1, 2015. Additionally, SB 535 provides that starting in 2012, 40,000 HOV access stickers can be issued to early purchasers of Enhanced Advanced Technology Partial Zero Emission Vehicles.

Windshield Video Event Recorder (AB 1942, Fletcher)

This bill amended Section 26708 of the Vehicle Code to allow a video event recorder to be mounted in a 7-inch square in the lower corner of a vehicle windshield on the passenger side, or a 5-inch square in the lower corner of the vehicle windshield on the driver's side, outside of an airbag deployment zone. It also makes it legal to mount the video event recorder in a 5-inch square in the center uppermost portion of the interior of the windshield. The law also defines a video event recorder and requires a vehicle equipped with one to have a notice posted in a visible location which states that a passenger's conversation may be recorded. In addition, this law lays out rules for recording events, notes who the rightful owner of the footage is, and who is entitled to a copy of the recording.

Emergency Alert System: Law Enforcement Officers (Blue Alert) (SB 839, Runner)

Much like an AMBER Alert, this bill added Section 8594.5 to the Government Code. Activation of the Emergency Alert System for a Blue Alert would occur if all of the following conditions are met:

· A law enforcement officer has been killed, suffers serious bodily injury, or is assaulted with a deadly weapon, and the suspect has fled the scene of the offense.

· The investigating agency has determined that the suspect poses an imminent threat to the public or other law enforcement personnel.

· A detailed description of the suspect's vehicle or license plate is available for broadcast.

· Public dissemination of available information may help avert further harm or accelerate apprehension of the suspect.

Neighborhood Electric Vehicle (NEV) (AB 584, Huber & AB 1781, Villines)

Specific to Amador County, the cities of Jackson, Sutter Creek, Amador and the city of Fresno, these two bills allow for development of an NEV transportation plan within those communities until Jan. 1, 2016. They also specifically require NEV operators to possess a California driver license and comply with established financial liability requirements.

Mobile Billboard Advertising Displays (AB 2756, Blumenfield)

This bill created Section 395.5 of the Vehicle Code, which defines "mobile billboard advertising display" as an advertising display that is attached to a wheeled, mobile, non-motorized vehicle that carries, pulls or transports a sign or billboard and is for the primary purpose of advertising. This bill also amended Section 21100 of the Vehicle Code to give local authorities the ability to adopt rules/regulations by ordinance/resolution to regulate mobile billboard

advertising; this includes establishing penalties that could authorize removal of the mobile billboard advertising display. In addition, VC Section 22651 was amended to say that the mobile billboard advertising display may be towed when left parked or standing in violation of a local ordinance. Warning citations advising of the consequences, including towing of the mobile billboard display, are sufficient enough warning to the public.

Miscellaneous Transportation (SB 1318, Senate Transportation & Housing Committee)

This bill was responsible for the following new law, as well as the amendment of others:

· Section 667 of the Vehicle Code was added to define a "utility trailer" as a trailer or semitrailer used solely for the transportation of the user's personal property which cannot be used in commerce, cannot exceed gross weight of 10,000 pounds, but can be used for transportation of livestock.

· This bill also amended Section 5201 of the Vehicle Code to require license plates to be mounted parallel to the ground so the characters are upright and display from left to right.

· Section 21755 of the Vehicle Code which allows drivers of vehicles to pass on the right under specified conditions was amended to clarify that it does not prohibit a bicyclist from passing on the right in either a bicycle lane or on a shoulder.

· Section 22511.55 of the Vehicle Code has been amended to allow a disabled person or disabled veteran to display their distinguishing placard on a clip installed by the vehicle's manufacturer on the driver's side front windshield.

There are a couple bills that were passed by the Legislature and signed by the governor this year that don't go into effect

in the coming year, but are worth highlighting:

Driving Under the Influence (DUI) Repeat Offenders (AB 1601, Hill) Section 23579 was added to the Vehicle Code which authorizes the court to order a 10-year revocation of a driver's license if a person has been convicted of three or more DUIs. However, under this new law, a motorist will be allowed to apply for reinstatement of his or her driver's license with the Department of Motor

Vehicles (DMV) after five years if the person installs an Ignition Interlock Device (IID) in their vehicle. It also allows the DMV to terminate the restricted license if the IID requirements are not met. This law goes into effect Jan. 1, 2012.

Motorcycle Exhaust Systems (SB 435, Pavley)

It will be illegal to park, use or operate a motorcycle registered in California, which does not bear the required applicable federal Environmental Protection Agency exhaust system label consistent with federal regulations. This law only applies to motorcycles manufactured on or after Jan. 1, 2013, or a motorcycle with after market exhaust system equipment that is manufactured on or after Jan. 1, 2013.

These points are only a synopsis of the new laws listed here and only a partial list of new laws adopted for 2011. For complete information on chaptered bills enacted in 2010, refer to the Legislative Counsel website.