Chief: Wine Country fire could happen in Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

The 2007 Angora Fire was devastating. Compared to the Wine Country fires, though, it was nothing.

For starters, there was no loss of life in the Tahoe blaze. The toll today stands at 43 for this October's blazes, but that number could increase.



Jeff Meston

Angora was out in a matter of days. Wine Country is still burning.

And while 254 houses were destroyed, no commercial structures were lost. In the Wine Country, more than 5,700 structures have been reduced to ash.

"The real question is could it happen here in South Lake Tahoe. Yes," South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Jeff Meston said.

He spoke briefly at the Oct. 17 City Council meeting.

With winds reaching 70 mph that first night, there was only so much firefighters could do. Meston called this an "unprecedented" time, noting how firefighters from Australia were flown in to help.

Meston's duties aren't just relegated to the basin. He is the president-elect of the California Fire Chief's Association. He is a board member on statewide mutual aide.

If a statewide commission is formed to study this fire, Meston would be on it.

On Tuesday he stressed that the best thing local residents can do is to make sure they have their defensible space.

Styrofoam ban possible in South Lake Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe is contemplating regulating the type of to-go containers restaurants use, whether retail outlets can sell Styrofoam and plastic utensils, the packaging of meat in grocery stores, and what egg cartons are made of.

The elected officials on Tuesday gave staff direction to come back with verbiage for a ban on polystyrene. Having the Sustainability Commission do the research was suggested as a way to free up staff time.

The idea to essentially rid the city of Styrofoam was brought to the council by members of the public. The electeds on Oct. 17 supported investigating the idea further, but no formal vote was taken.

"I'm not opposed to a ban on take-out because there are a lot of alternatives for them to use," Councilman Tom Davis said.

What he is worried about is if something like Cup-of-Noodles

would be banned. He sits on the board of Christmas Cheer and that food item is a staple for those clients.



Many restaurants in South Lake Tahoe already use environmentally friendly to-go containers. Photo/LTN

Putting in this type of ban was broached when the city was talking about the plastic bag ban in 2013. It never gained traction.

It was pointed out this week that the material is not biodegradable and has no value when it comes to recycling and weighs so little.

The council was curious to know what impact the product has on South Tahoe Refuse.

Jeff Tillman, president of South Tahoe Refuse, would not talk to *Lake Tahoe News* about the issue.

Councilwoman Wendy David, who sits on the Waste Management Authority JPA, said she would like that board to discuss polystyrene so perhaps El Dorado and Douglas counties might be part of the ban.

There are many restaurants in the area that already use a

disposable product for leftovers.

Marilee Movius with the League to Save Lake Tahoe spoke in favor of a ban, citing statistics about how bad the product is for the environment and animals.

About 100 cities in California have some sort of ban on the product.

Wildfires stressed Wine Country's healthcare system

By Soumya Karlamangla, Los Angeles Times

Dr. Scott Witt kept close behind the ambulance carrying the newborns. On his motorcycle, he drove over and ducked under downed power lines. He swerved around embers blowing onto the highway.

Sutter Santa Rosa Regional Hospital, where Witt oversees the neonatal intensive care unit, was being evacuated Oct. 9 because of wildfires that would become the deadliest in California history.

But Witt couldn't call the doctors who would be caring for the babies because there was no power. The physicians at the other hospital also had no way of accessing Witt's medical records online to know what treatment was needed.

The Northern California wildfires created what some described as an unprecedented healthcare crisis that has served as a wake-up call in the region. Not only were two major hospitals evacuated hours into the disaster, but the chaos continued for

days after.

Read the whole story

Nev. utility regulators investigating ballot measure

By Sean Whaley, Las Vegas Review-Journal

CARSON CITY – State utility regulators are investigating "issues of public importance" regarding the pending Energy Choice Initiative that will be on the November 2018 ballot.

If approved by voters, Nevada's energy industry will be restructured to allow consumers to pick their electricity supplier.

The investigation by the Public Utilities Commission was initiated following a request by the Governor's Committee on Energy Choice, which is also reviewing the potential effects of Question 3, should it win approval. The amendment to the state constitution passed in 2016 with strong support.

Read the whole story

Barton's management team

grows



Preston Becker

Barton Health has added a chief operating officer to its management team, a first for the South Lake Tahoe-based health care organization.

“We have added the position of COO to our executive team in order to ensure that the operations across all the clinical departments are consistent. As Barton continues to expand access to additional services and our operations become more complex, our new COO will enable us to ensure consistently exceptional care to our patients,” CEO Clint Purvance told *Lake Tahoe News.*

Preston Becker, who most recently was CEO of Carson Valley Medical Center in Gardnerville, has been hired as the COO.

While Barton would not release what Becker’s salary is, it is assuredly well into the six figures. IRS documents for Barton from 2015, the most recent available, show the CEO making $672,044 a year and the CFO salary being $340,070. Their benefits packages are each worth in excess of $30,000.

Asked who was essentially doing the job before Becker came on board, Elizabeth Stork, director of Human Resources, said, “This is a new position that aligns patient care, services, and office operations. Some duties and responsibilities now within the COO position were previously shared between the executive team and managers.”

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Leads sought in EDC logger's 2015 disappearance

By Cathy Locke, Sacramento Bee

Charles Thompson, a long-time El Dorado County resident and logger, left his family home with an unidentified woman on Oct. 2, 2015, and his family has not heard from him since.

The El Dorado County District Attorney's Office this week issued a news release and video seeking the public's help in developing new leads in the cold case.

Thompson lived more than 40 years in the Fair Play area, where his family owned a large ranch. He attended local schools and worked for many years as a logger, according to the news release.

Read the whole story

Residents unload VHR frustrations on EDC supes

By Susan Wood

It was like a back-to-the-future flashback on vacation home rentals at Lake Tahoe. Only this time, it was El Dorado County

fielding the brunt of fiery opinions – not the city.

On the same day South Lake Tahoe officials hashed out rules on vacation home rentals within their boundaries, El Dorado County supervisors met Tuesday on city turf to open the door to dialogue on the nagging issue. The topic brought out about 30 people for the supervisors' annual gathering at the lake.

Speaker after speaker on Oct. 17 lined up to express their opinions. Most were disgruntled residents. Others were property managers defending the practice that has turned into an economic gain for homeowners and the jurisdiction.



El Dorado County Board of Supervisors on Oct. 17 get an earful about vacation rentals. Photo/Susan Wood

Suggestions differed. But many agreed the process needs expanded law enforcement and to be taken out of the county tax collector's office. Department head C.L. Raffety gave an informational presentation at the urging of Tahoe Supervisor Sue Novasel.

When all was said and done, the county committee of Novasel and Supervisor Michael Ranalli that was formed Sept. 12 agreed to host community meetings in the next few weeks. Novasel wants to bring stakeholders together in the same room in order to revisit the existing ordinance.

"We need better enforcement," said Novasel.

Within the county jurisdiction of the Lake Tahoe Basin, the tax collector's office reported 575 vacation home rentals in 2015. It has grown to 876 in a few years. Those are just the ones the county knows about. It monitors 15 VHR websites to check for homes listed without a permit. The process takes precious man hours – more than what Raffety's staff can handle.

"We are moving into a shared community. It's an ongoing problem everywhere," Novasel said.

With the growth of the shared-home industry comes investigations of wrongdoing spun out of complaints that involve an overburdened county sheriff's department. The county has opened 128 investigations this year. Violations numbered 129 in 2015 and 59 a year ago as the permitting process was being addressed.

"It's been incredibly difficult to watch the (city's) process knowing the tsunami is coming our way," Novasel said, adding "an overhaul" of the county's rules is necessary.

El Dorado County's current ordinance mandates two people per bedroom plus four additional visitors per residence; prohibits spa use between 10pm and 8am; dictates when trash can be taken to the curb; regulates the posting of the permit; demands a local contact person within a one-hour's drive from the rental; restricts parking to only the driveway; and requires noise kept to a level not deemed "excessive."

Violators may get a warning on a first offense, but will be fined $250 on the second. The third complaint may lead to a $1,000 fine and finally a fourth could result in the permit being revoked.

A citizen's group called the Peaceful Tahoe Coalition formed because neighbors of the vacation home rentals got fed up by outrageous behavior by some visitors.

Among the demands, John Adamski outlined a few suggestions including a cap on the number of units, tighter restrictions and more “teeth” in enforcing the law.

Adamski shared a concern observing the city still doesn’t have a final ordinance.

“I don’t want to see that happen with the county,” he said.

Time is of the essence for some residents.



County residents tell elected officials what they think of VHRs. Photo/Susan Wood

“We’re being terrorized in our neighborhoods,” Carrie Williams told the board. She described a disruptive street in which she lives where one neighbor’s dog was killed “on leash” by a vehicle racing down the road.

In another instance, gun shots were fired into the night.

And yet another, 30 visitors showed up to rent a two-bedroom

home.

“This has gotten out of control,” Williams said.

Ed Miller of the Meeks Bay Fire Protection District said he wants more order.

“It’s a quality of life issue,” he said.

Miller shared a story of disrespect when renters on his street blocked plows, prompting the driver to return to no avail because vehicles were still blocking the road.

“The entire neighborhood didn’t get plowed,” he said.

Miller would like to see the “Good Neighbor” brochure the county uses to say more than South Lake Tahoe. The county seems to have ignored its reach goes to the West Shore.

A 55-year resident on the South Shore, Janet McDougall told the board it should take the ordinance out of the tax collector’s office because it’s a zoning issue.

“This is a serious problem,” the former South Lake Tahoe legal analyst said. “This is completely inappropriate from a land-use perspective.”

She also lamented over the practice pitting residents against visitors.

Leona Allen added to the list of unlawful observations. These incidents range from strewn trash to strippers showing up to perform lewd acts to urinating in public to cigarettes tossed off decks. Extinguishing the latter is critical to Allen considering her involvement with the Lake Valley Fire Protection District.

“Vacation home rentals aren’t going anywhere. I get that. But neither are we,” she said.

Allen insisted the county set up a community service division

within the sheriff’s department to enforce the new rules.

“Something’s gotta change,” Rick Mapes said with a sigh.

Mapes runs a snow removal company and must get up at 4am to conduct his business – a difficult task when neighbors are partying and creating a ruckus into the night.

His wife, Jamie Mapes, attended several community meetings over a decade ago when the city was undergoing the formation of its ordinance.

Still, property managers got up to voice their support of the industry, careful not to condone the types of behavior mentioned. Those who spoke appeared to genuinely care about being a part of the solution.

Kathy Jo Liebhardt not only runs Tahoe Destinations, she owns a vacation home and is “saddened to hear” the stories.

She cautioned the county on placing a limit on the number of them.

“Capping is not going to do anything,” she said.

In the meantime, her rules are strict and non-negotiable.

“I have no problem fining and evicting,” Liebhardt said, adding she is “not going to put up with that crap.”

Another property manager, Josh Priou admitted to feeling sheepish about even stepping up to the podium.

“I feel like crap after hearing everybody’s horror stories,” he said.

Nonetheless, he reminded the crowd renting homes is still considered residential use, not commercial.

The tourism industry drives Lake Tahoe.

“Lake Tahoe is a huge vacation rental destination,” he said.

Priou has been involved in the tourism industry for 24 years – half of that time renting homes in the marketplace. He likes “to provide an experience to the visitor.”

Shaken by the homeowners’ stories of unruly vacation home renters, Ranalli turned to county Counsel Michael Ciccozzi asking if the board may place a moratorium on permitting new rentals until the county figures out its changes to the ordinance.

“I’m bothered,” Ranalli said.

Ultimately, the board shied away from the suggestion but agreed to move on the matter sooner rather than later.

With that, Raffety will host a public meeting Nov. 1 at 2pm in the South Lake Tahoe Library at 1000 Rufus Allen Blvd. to review the vacation home rental policy.

In other action, the Board of Supervisors:

· Heard an economic report on the impact of e-commerce on brick and mortar retail space and how it relates to land-use planning. Chief Administrative Officer Don Ashton requested two outside economic advisors provide the study that highlighted the need for the county to accommodate such a shift.

· Watched a presentation from a land-use planning team providing a glimpse into the county’s Economic Development plan with a new website campaign coined “Elevate to El Dorado, a great place to live, work and play.” The $14,000 campaign is intended to coincide with the county’s strategic plan.

· Observed a silent protest from the El Dorado County Public Employees union as almost a dozen members sitting a short time in the audience came with signs reading “Fair Contract Now” and “Negotiate.”

SLT about to set moratorium on VHRs

By Kathryn Reed

Data. It's the four-letter word that could make the difference in the world of vacation home rentals in South Lake Tahoe.

Instead of making arbitrary rules based on emotion, at least three City Council members want facts to guide their decision-making.

Mayor Austin Sass with his pouting, fidgeting and lack of professionalism toward his colleagues on Tuesday showed why the gavel needs to change hands in December.

Sass has been lobbying for substantive change to the rules governing short-term rentals since he was elected three years ago. He was hoping in his one-year stint as mayor to have that change in place. He's not going to get what he wanted.

While he kept asking if the first reading of the new ordinance would take place Nov. 17, he was repeatedly told by the city attorney the substance of the changes would require a first reading to be down the road. That meant that no matter the outcome this week, there wasn't time for Sass to get in place everything he wanted while having the title of mayor.

He was beside himself that his peers were changing their minds and others never agreed with him.



City Councilman Austin Sass at the Oct. 17 meeting did not get his way about vacation rentals. Photo/Kathryn Reed

While two weeks ago it appeared there were three votes to implement a density rule where VHRs could not be closer than 150 feet to each other, Sass was the lone backer of that idea this week.

It's hard to know if what's on the books today works because data has been elusive. The council has had a habit of making changes to the ordinance based on the loud chorus of those who don't like VHRs. The problem is the city didn't have facts to corroborate those stories; or evidence to show they had even tried to address the complaints filed.

Nor were those tasked with enforcing the rules seeming to do their job because the same rental houses keep being the subject of public outcry.

Councilman Jason Collin has been harping on the need for data-driven decision making. Councilwoman Brooke Laine is echoing that sentiment. Her main soapbox has been all about enforcement and wanting to prove it is or isn't effective.

Collin repeatedly said it's time to "hit the pause button"

with VHRs in order to figure out what is working.

That could come next Tuesday at a special council meeting. The four will meet at 5pm Oct. 24 to vote on an urgency ordinance. (Councilman Tom Davis recuses himself from VHR discussions because of his interest in Tahoe Keys Resort.) It’s expected that the number of VHRs on the books as of that night will be the limit for a 45-day period. For the emergency law to take effect, all four must vote for it.

City Attorney Nira Doherty said she will come back with evidence as to why the urgency ordinance is lawful. It’s possible the bear box mandate could be wrapped into that ordinance because health and safety issues could be cited.

The council could vote to extend that moratorium for a year or enact something else at the 45-day mark.

At the Nov. 7 regular meeting other aspects of the VHR ordinance will be discussed. This includes the three strikes and the permit is revoked rule, higher fines, increased fees for more enforcement, rules regulating owners using their dwelling and more.

Occupancy was a sticking point. This gets back to Collin wanting data to show the type of residences and the number of people in a unit causing X infraction. He broached the idea of square-footage possibly being a better gauge for the number of people allowed than bedroom counts. That issue will warrant further discussion next month.

Eliminated from the ordinance on Tuesday were all regulations pertaining to those who rent a room while staying on the premise. Those shared rentals will be the subject of a future ordinance unto themselves.

Women: ‘Pervasive’ harassment in Calif. Capitol

By Melanie Mason, Los Angeles Times

A state legislator who was groped by a male lobbyist weeks after she was sworn into office. A legislative staffer-turned-lobbyist who for years would only wear pantsuits in order to project a “business-only” air. A government affairs director who faced inappropriate advances from an associate in full view of male colleagues who seemed oblivious as it happened.

As Hollywood takes a hard look at itself in the wake of the spiraling Harvey Weinstein sexual misconduct scandal, the women of California politics are publicly declaring: Us too.

More than 140 women — including legislators, Capitol staff, political consultants and lobbyists — are signing a letter calling out the “pervasive” culture of sexual harassment and mistreatment that plagues their industry.

Read the whole story

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1 in 30 wells in the West failed in recent years

By Emily Benson, High Country News

When their taps began spitting out air instead of water a few

years ago, one family in Paso Robles was forced to snake a hose from a neighbor’s property into their home for drinking water. They ate from paper plates instead of dishes, could no longer wash their laundry at home and watched their vegetable garden dry up. For households that rely on well water – a common situation across the rural West – the impacts can be severe when a well runs dry.

Stories like that one streamed out of California during the drought that officially ended earlier this year, but the extent of the problem – exactly how many wells were affected – was unclear. Now, new research suggests that one in 30 groundwater wells in the West, wells that supply farms in addition to homes, went dry between 2013 and 2015.

To arrive at that number, California-based researchers Debra Perrone and Scott Jasechko compiled location and depth records for wells constructed between 1950 and 2015 across Western states.

Read the whole story