South Tahoe has sandbags ready in case of flooding

Snow levels are lower than originally forecast, with snow coming down all day Friday in the Lake Tahoe Basin. This means the threat of flooding has decreased.

Nonetheless, South Lake Tahoe crews are ready in case temps warm up and the moisture turns to rain as the system stays over the Sierra for the next few days.



People may be wishing they'd split this wood based on the forecast. Photo/Kathryn Reed

"City street crews are prepared for either scenario or a combination thereof," John Greenhut, South Tahoe Public Works director, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Sand and bags are available at the rear of Fire Station No. 3 off James Avenue and at Bijou Park off the Pavilion Loop Road at the back of the park.

Residents will need to fill the bags with their shovels.

Expect breaks in the weather Saturday and Monday, with an even

more substantial storm rolling in for Tuesday and Wednesday.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

LTUSD interim budget report better than anticipated

By Kathryn Reed

Deb Yates, chief financial officer with Lake Tahoe Unified School District, gave an update on the budget – and it wasn't as bleak as usual.

The local bottom line has improved since the budget was approved in June. There is an increase of $3.6 million – mostly from the federal Title 1 dollars, stimulus money, and the federal Jobs Bill Act. The latter ($700,000) could be used to stave off lay-offs in the spring.

With the state budget in disarray, it's unknown what the impact will be to local districts. Yates said she is hearing the state deficit is likely to be $30 billion by the time lawmakers begin working on the 2011-12 budget.

The state has been changing how it calculates average daily attendance dollars, cost of living adjustments, if Proposition 98 will be adhered to and other snatching of the purse strings that makes it difficult for K-12 and community colleges to make definitive plans.

The district has been operating with a $1 million deficit that has been filled with one-time money.

Without knowing what the state will do, the board is not going to spend the “extra” money. It may not be a “surplus” in a few months.

In other action Dec. 14:

• Wendy David will serve as president for another year. Sue Novasel is the clerk.

• Joy Curry, Jody Boles, Rick Angelocci and Ginger Nicolay-Davis were appointed to the Citizens’ Bond Oversight Committee, with Patrick Martin, Mike Berg and David Kelly re-appointed.

• The first reading to adopt the school calendars for 2011-12 and 2012-13 took place. The final vote is scheduled for Jan. 11. Like this school year, classes will begin before Labor Day. It was noted by the board that calendars are based on student needs.

Postal Service predicts busiest day of year to be Dec. 20

By Kathryn Reed

For many people this is the one time of year when there is something in the mail besides bills and unwanted solicitations.

It’s also the time of year when anyone and everyone associated with U.S. Postal Service barely has time to take a break.



Mail keeps coming even in the snow and with the house number covered. Photo/Kathryn Reed

“It’s a fun time of year – giving cards and presents,” Donna Bobeda, a carrier in South Lake Tahoe, told *Lake Tahoe News* as she delivered mail this week.

It’s taking her about an hour longer these days to do her route because of the extra volume of mail.

Even though the Postal Service is seeing a reduction in the amount of mail being sent because of email and other mailing options, people still like to communicate at the holidays the old-fashioned way – with a handwritten note.

South Lake Tahoe Postmaster Toni Passot said Dec. 13 was extremely busy at all the South Shore locations, but it’s Dec. 20 that is expected to be the busiest mailing day of the year. The USPS anticipates 801 million pieces of mail will be processed Monday.

Passot is not allowed to hire extra staff for the extra work, but just about everyone is getting more hours.

“We are bringing in all the troops,” Passot said for Dec. 20.

Bobeda has noticed larger packages being sent this year.

“I think more people are ordering online,” Bobeda said.

She and other carriers often finish their route, go back to the main office and there is another truckload of parcels to deliver. This means out they go – twice in a day this time of year.

But not everything in the mailbox is supposed to be delivered. Bobeda said every now and then a plate of cookies is in the box as a thank you for the work she has done. After all, even if the snowplow doesn’t come or school is canceled, the mail keeps being delivered.

During the holidays the Postal Service processes an average of 661 million pieces of mail. This compares to an average of 559 million pieces the rest of the year.

Between Thanksgiving and Christmas the USPS delivers about 15.8 billion cards, letters and packages. The agency has been doing this for 235 years.

For people hoping to have letters delivered by Christmas, it’s recommended to have them in the mail by Dec. 20.

TRPA to appeal shorezone decision

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board voted to appeal the Sept. 16 federal court decision nullifying the shorezone ordinance.

The bi-state regulatory agency has until Dec. 24 to file the appeal.

“We feel there is substantial case law that supports the analysis TRPA used to inform the shorezone amendments,” TRPA General Counsel Nicole Rinke said in a statement. “The amendments were the result of a 20-plus year stakeholder process and represent a reasonable approach to regulation of the shorezone.”

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

California economy improves except for hiring

By Dale Kasler, Sacramento Bee

Still not convinced the economy is improving? Talk to Elk Grove factory owner Michael Megna, who’s ramping up production to keep pace with higher sales.

Just don’t ask him for a job.

Business is better this year at Megna’s company, Backscratchers Salon Systems Inc., which makes nail-care and other beauty products. But Megna isn’t ready to rehire any of the workers he laid off during the recession.

“I’m just adding back hours right now,” Megna said. “I’m not planning on bringing back any people.”

And that, in a nutshell, is the state of California’s economy, three years after the recession began and 18 months after it officially ended.

The economy is advancing slowly. Business conditions are getting better. But some regions, including Sacramento, are

still shedding jobs.

California’s unemployment rate remains a recession-like 12.4 percent and has actually gotten worse since the recovery officially began in June 2009. Most experts say 2011 will be only marginally better than 2010.

But make no mistake: A recovery is under way, even if it doesn’t always feel that way.

Read the whole story

S. Tahoe City Council violates Brown Act at first meeting

By Kathryn Reed

On the first day on the job, Claire Fortier learned it takes more than desire to get what she wants as an elected official.

During council member comments Dec. 14, she proposed forming a citizens’ committee to look into what happened to the stalled Lakeview Commons project.

“I feel like we are not going to be transparent unless we look at what was done,” the South Lake Tahoe councilwoman told her peers. She wants to ensure awarding of future bids doesn’t wind up in court with the judge overturning the work of the city.



Work on Lakeview Commons was stopped by court order. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Before such a committee is formed, Mayor Hal Cole said he wants the matter to be discussed in closed session.

“I looked at the judge’s decision and didn’t see malfeasance,” Cole said. “Before there is a witch hunt or a group of citizens (is formed) I would like to see it in closed session.”

Councilman Tom Davis believes the report provided by City Attorney Patrick Enright before taking office was sufficient.

“I know what happened and I’m satisfied,” Davis said on his first day back on the council after a six-year hiatus.

The odd thing about this exchange is the council is not supposed to discuss items not on the agenda. A simple show of hands is how things get on a future agenda. This was a clear violation of the Brown Act – the California open meeting law.

If council members are going to discuss things, then the public has a right to comment. The public was not allowed to comment Dec. 14 on Lakeview Commons. A change in the agenda must be done 24 hours before the meeting.

Their exchange was deliberation – which is completely illegal.

At no time did Enright try to put a stop to the discussion. He would be the one to do so. He is also one of the city employees who the judge was highly critical of and might have much to lose if the matter were looked into by an independent party.

According to the First Amendment Coalition's website, "Either a citizen or the district attorney may sue to compel the local agency to comply with the Brown Act; obtain a ruling that a particular practice of the local agency violates the Brown Act; or obtain a ruling that the local agency is violating the free speech rights of one or more of its members in seeking to silence that member. Gov't Code section 54960(a)."

Fortier said she is willing to hear what is said Jan. 11 when Lakeview Commons is slated to be on the agenda in closed and open session before pressing harder on her request. Closed session will be at 8am, with regular session commencing at 9am – both at Lake Tahoe Airport.

At this meeting the council will likely vote on whether to start the bid process over or award it to Clark & Sullivan, the firm that prevailed in court.

Fortier's concern is with accountability.

No one in the city has publicly been reprimanded for what the judge ruled as a severe mishandling of the bid process on the $6 million project near El Dorado Beach.

Flooding possible in Tahoe,

valley areas with incoming storms

With a severe winter weather storm approaching the Sierra Nevada this weekend, Douglas County Sheriff Ron Pierini is advising residents of potential flood activity.

The National Weather Service reports that heavy precipitation is likely in the Central Sierra and Western Nevada. The storms are predicted to begin Friday and continue through the beginning of next week. With heavy precipitation expected from the storm, there is a potential for area flooding.

While the full impact of rainfall from this storm is uncertain, it is expected to be heavy in areas of elevation below 7.500 feet. With area snowpack starting at 5.000 feet, these rainstorms have the potential to cause the lower elevation snowpack to melt. With soils already heavily saturated due to above normal precipitation since October, the potential for flooding exists.

Persons with homes or structures in the Carson Valley located near rivers, streams, creeks, canals or other moving waterways should take steps to mitigate the chances of flooding. This includes cleaning tumbleweeds, branches, leaves and other debris from the waterways. Residents should stay aware of the latest weather forecasts from the National Weather Service throughout the weekend.

Current stage flow and river forecast information is available for many rivers and streams in Eastern California and Western Nevada online, then clicking on the area of interest.

Citizens are reminded that if immediate emergency services should be needed during this weather event, they should call 911. The non-emergency line is (775) 782.5126.

Nev. AG investigating state employees double-dipping

By Martha Bellisle, Reno Gazette-Journal

The Nevada Attorney General's office was asked to investigate whether some state workers were illegally paid as contractors while collecting their regular salaries after an audit revealed possible abuse by some employees.

One state worker was paid $250 per hour for work done while on sick leave; another collected contract money for work done during normal business hours; another left his $65-per-hour state job and now gets $350-per-hour as a contractor, a recent audit by the Legislative Counsel Bureau found. (Read full PDF document on top right of this page)

Assemblywoman Shiela Leslie, a Reno Democrat who chairs an audit subcommittee, said her panel voted this week to send the material to the attorney general's office to determine whether any criminal activities were involved.

Assemblywoman Debbie Smith, a Sparks Democrat who sponsored a bill during the 2009 legislative session to strengthen controls over the way the state uses contractors, said she knew there were problems, but not this bad.

Read the whole story

S. Lake alters nepotism policy; snowy paths OK this winter

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe is inching toward recognizing it needs to do something regarding nepotism. But the bigger policy issue regarding employees will not be brought to the council until February or March.

A revision to the basic nepotism policy was before the council Dec. 14. What was altered is the code of ethics that had been passed in 1992.

"The resolution prohibits City Council members from appointing any of their relatives to a City Commission or to the position of City Manager or City Attorney. The Resolution does not affect the employment, promotion, or retention of employees," Deputy City Attorney Nira Feeley wrote in her staff report.

The council approved the revision 4-0, with Bruce Grego being absent for the entire meeting except for joining via teleconference to vote on the mayor and mayor pro tem.

Grego weighed-in on the subject via a letter he wrote that City Clerk Suzie Alessi read into the record. In part it said, "We should select individuals to participate in our local government based upon merit. Depriving certain individuals from participating in local government based upon their 'relative' status is no different than depriving such individual from participating based upon their race, national origin, religion, sexual preference, sex, age and the other bases of discrimination that we all reject."

Grego's wife, Geri, is on the Planning Commission. The adoption of this rule will prohibit her from being on it.

Councilwoman Claire Fortier and Mayor Hal Cole stated how perceptions of a pipeline of power or influence need to be avoided even if relatives believe they can act independently of the other.

Councilman Tom Davis relayed how his son wants to be on the Airport Commission, but will be denied that opportunity. The elder Davis is OK with that to adhere to the policy and the ideals of promoting more transparency within city hall.

Councilwoman Angela Swanson pointed out how there are plenty of other ways for relatives to be active in the community and have leadership roles other than by being on a city commission.

The issue of nepotism was brought up in the 2010 El Dorado County Grand Jury Report. It's a topic the outgoing City Council and former city manager swept under the carpet.

Lake Tahoe News in July published an article about nepotism in the city. The effort to figure out who is related to whom has been difficult because the city will not turn that information over.

After *LTN* initially requested the information, Human Resources Director Janet Emmett sent an email to the related employees telling them about the request. That document is public information, but the city is not disclosing the full list of recipients.

When City Attorney Patrick Enright sent the email, he wrote, "Attached is a list of the bcc on the email that was provided to you. The ones redacted are mostly police officers who (sic) names were redacted under Penal Code section 832.8. There is one couple that has a 'confidential marriage,' which is specifically exempt as a Public Record."

So, it is still unknown how many full-time, part-time or seasonal/temporary employees are related to one another. Just being related does not present a conflict. Current policy prohibits someone from supervising a relative. However, relatives in the workplace can present conflicts for other employees. That is the part that has yet to be addressed by the city and it supposed to be next year.

Although the seven bargaining units in the city don't have to agree with what staff and eventually the council will vote on, they are being given the opportunity to review the policy before it becomes law. That is why it will be months before it sees the light of day.

"As to city employees, the city needs to meet and confer with the employee unions, which we are in the process of doing at this time. Staff is hopeful that in the next two months a comprehensive policy can be brought to the council," Enright told *Lake Tahoe News*.

In other action Dec. 14:

• The council adopted the ordinance to mandate businesses clear their sidewalks of snow, but the start date was altered to Sept. 1, 2011, so outreach can be done to educate people. As originally written, the enforcement was to begin Jan. 1. The city ordinance puts some teeth into what already is state law.

• A fee increase per the 2007 franchise agreement with South Tahoe Refuse was approved 3-1, with Tom Davis voting no. Because it is a contractual item it really didn't matter how the vote went. STR customers in the city limits will have rates go up 35 cents a month starting Jan. 1.

• Police Lt. Marty Hale was recognized for his years of service. He retires at the end of the month, though will continue on on a limited basis for the first six months of 2011. He was given a standing ovation.

• The three new councilmembers were sworn in, as were the city treasurer and city clerk.

Cole excited to be South Lake Tahoe's new mayor

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe has a new mayor of sorts – Hal Cole. He had the position during his first tenure on the council, so he knows what he is getting into. He was mayor in 1998, 2001 and 2006.

Claire Fortier, the top vote getter in the November election, was unanimously appointed by her colleagues to be mayor pro tem.



Hal Cole is ready to lead South Lake Tahoe into a new era. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Councilman Bruce Grego was on teleconference for only this

part of the meeting.

Fortier, Tom Davis and Angela Swanson were sworn in Nov. 14. Prior this happening, outgoing members Bill Crawford, Jerry Birdwell and Kathay Lovell each said a few words as they were about to resume their lives as non-elected persons. None of them chose to run for re-election.

Also sworn in on Tuesday were City Treasurer Dave Olivo and City Clerk Suzie Alessi.

The morning was filled with moments of levity – Crawford saying the reason he did not want a plaque is because he found his last one in the garage behind some canned goods.

The morning was filled with tears – Lovell tried to maintain her composure, but was overcome with emotion in her goodbyes. The packed room gave her a standing ovation.

The morning was filled with the continued acrimony between Crawford and Lovell – she not turning to shake his hand as he walked back to his seat after everyone else had.

The morning was filled with promises of things to change.

Cole, as mayor, expressed how this policy making body is a "we" and not an "I" – to which his colleagues later expressed their same desire to work as a team.

Cole acknowledged the hard financial times the state and country are in, and that South Lake Tahoe is right there with those bodies.

"We are at the point where we may have to look at how we deliver services," Cole said in reference to having balanced recent budgets with reserves. But he also pointed out how the town is resilient as is the staff. "We have a rare opportunity to reinvent our organization."

Part of the reinvention will be with establishing work

sessions outside the council meetings for one or two issues to be hashed out prior to a vote needing to be taken. All of these will be open to the public. The schedule is being worked out.

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