Chipmunk’s disappearance signals changing Sierra

By Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee

With button-brown eyes, striped cheeks and a bushy orange-black tail, the Inyo chipmunk has darted among the gnarled pines of the Sierra Nevada for centuries.

But it has apparently vanished.

“We have not been able to find it anywhere,” said James Patton, a retired UC Berkeley professor of zoology who has scoured parts of the high Sierra over the past two years in search of the elusive species.

No one knows why – or when – the species vanished. There is talk about air pollution and competition from other chipmunk species. But most of the speculation centers on climate change, which has brought warming temperatures, earlier snowmelt and changing forest conditions to the region over the past century.

Read the whole story

Woman accused of trying to run over police sergeant

By Kathryn Reed

A 60-year-old South Lake Tahoe woman who lives in her van had the windows shot out with bean bags by police after she nearly

ran over a sergeant, led officers on a chase and held them at bay for 30 minutes.

South Lake Tahoe police officers responded to a call of gunshots being fired on Oct. 15 at 7:10pm near Regan Beach. They found Jill Shelly in a full size 1988 Ford E350. She was reportedly confrontational and wanted to talk to a supervisor.

Sgt. Shannon Laney said when he arrived on the scene Shelly tried to run him over. As she spun the vehicle toward Laney, Officer Travis Cabral broke the driver side window. He's off work for a few weeks after needing stitches in his hand from cutting it on the glass.

Shelly sped off, leading officers on a two-mile chase. In front of Rojo's Bar and Grill at Los Angeles and Harrison avenues, Laney said the suspect swerved toward customers standing out front.

The chase ended in front of the police department on Johnson Boulevard.

"After a 30-minute standoff, Shelly finally complied with officers only after the officers shot out all of the windows in her van with bean bags and threatened to send the police K-9 in after her," Laney said in a statement.

Earlier this fall officers had a run-in with Shelly near the El Dorado County library when there was a report of shots fired. Nothing tied her to the shots fired that day.

On Friday, Shelly was arrested on charges of attempted homicide, felony evading an officer and resisting an officer. No firearms were found in the van she lives out of.

"I've never seen two big pursuits like that in one day, let along one month," Laney said of this and the chase that ended with three arrests in Kings Beach earlier Friday. He said it was lucky no one was seriously injured considering the speeds

of the first chase and the number of officers involved between the two events.

Anyone who knows Shelly or witnessed the altercation is asked to contact Detective Jeff Roberson at (530) 542.6100.

Bill alters age requirement for California kindergartners

By Tracy Correa, McClatchy Newspapers

Monica Hoenig could have enrolled her 4-year-old son Ryan in kindergarten this year, but she was concerned that his lack of maturity would cause him to lag academically – not only now, but in years to come.

So she signed him up for a pilot transitional kindergarten program at Washington School, a charter school in Kingsburg, Calif.

The transitional program gives Ryan an extra year to learn some of what's taught in kindergarten. But Ryan also can learn at a slower pace – and with far less pressure to master skills such as writing.

The new program in Kingsburg, one of a growing number of transitional kindergarten classes statewide, would be mandated under proposed legislation that would hike the age of kindergartners and give younger children the chance to be better prepared when they enroll.

Parents and some education activists have tried for years to raise California's age requirement for kindergarten, but past bills failed to win legislative support.

Read the whole story

Caltrans changes date of Echo Summit work for bike event

By Kathryn Reed

With South Lake Tahoe being the host city for Amgen's 2011 Tour of California cycling event, Caltrans is scrambling to change its time line for construction on Echo Summit.

Tom Brannon with the transportation agency said if the weather and TRPA cooperate, the plan is to start work on the retaining wall April 20. Normally, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency does not allow grading in the Lake Tahoe Basin to begin until May 1.



Caltrans will replace the Echo Summit wall in spring 2011. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The race starts May 15 near the state line, with cyclists

doing 1½ laps around the lake to end at Northstar. The second stage will leave from Squaw Valley.

However, tour officials are expected to bring in necessary infrastructure for the event starting May 9. Teams should arrive May 12. A gala event is planned for May 13.

Caltrans still intends to have Highway 50 over Echo Summit closed for two weeks. Then it will be reduced to one lane controlled traffic until the 32-inch wall is in place. This wall replaces the deteriorating wall that was erected in the 1930s.

The job will be advertised starting Oct. 18, with the bid scheduled to be awarded in mid-December. Built into the documents are bonuses for coming in ahead of schedule.

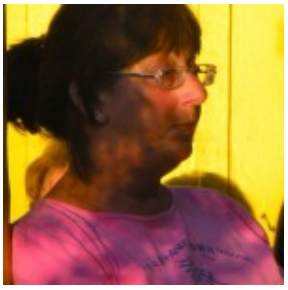
While Echo Summit is off-limits, the routes being touted for people coming from the Bay Area are taking Highway 16 to 49 to 88 to 89 to 50. From Sacramento, the route is Highway 50 to Missouri Flat Road, highways 49-88-89-50. Taking Highway 580 to Highway 4 through Jackson to Highway 88 is another choice. Interstate 80 is another option, then dropping down either the East or West shores.

Kindertown owner wins small financial relief from state

By Kathryn Reed

Maria Barrows-Crist was back in court Oct. 15. This time the owner of Kindertown day care was trying to recoup attorney fees.

Although the judge said no to that request, the state will be reimbursing her $3,600 for the cost of purchasing transcripts.



Maria Barrows-Crist

The state Department of Social Services had spent nearly a year trying to shut down the South Lake Tahoe facility. El Dorado County Superior Court Judge Steve Bailey in August ruled in favor of Barrows-Crist.

The other financial burden Barrows-Crist has been contending with is California not having a state budget until earlier this month. She is owed about $150,000, which she expects to get in the next few weeks.

In the mean time, she said she is scraping by with the help of friends and understanding creditors.

Residents help douse fire in Washoe Meadow State Park

By Kathryn Reed

What was supposed to be a casual afternoon walk through Washoe Meadow State Park turned into a firefighting scene for two South Shore residents.

Michael Lipkin saw smoke Friday afternoon and went to investigate with his walking companion Lynne Paulson. What they discovered was dry grass on fire in what Paulson said was in about an 8 x 8 foot square area.



Michael Lipkin monitors a wildfire in Washoe Meadow State Park on Oct. 15. Photos/Lynne Paulson

“It reminds me of a situation like Seneca Pond,” Paulson said in reference to how the 2007 Angora Fire started small before erupting into a devastating inferno.



A Forest Service firefighter puts out the fire.

Lipkin started to put out the fire, while Paulson ran up the hill about a quarter mile to houses on Normuk Street near the south end of the park to call 911. Before firefighters arrived some of the neighborhood kids helped with dousing the flames.

Lake Valley, CalFire and U.S. Forest Service officials arrived, with the Forest Service being the lead agency. No one was available Friday night to give details on how the fire may have started.

No one was around when Paulson and Lipkin arrived at the scene.

Repeat offender leads cops on chase around Tahoe

Updated: Oct. 16, 2010, 8:17pm.

By Kathryn Reed

It wasn't the typical leisurely drive around Lake Tahoe Friday afternoon. Instead, Mario Amial, 21, of South Lake Tahoe had a bevy of law enforcement following his white Chevy Suburban.

The high-speed chase started at 1:32pm in South Lake Tahoe near the Springwood area and ended in Kings Beach with Amial's arrest by California Highway Patrol officers about 45 minutes later.



Mario
Amial

South Lake Tahoe police Lt. Marty Hale said Amial was wanted on two felony warrants.

Amial had been arrested in South Lake Tahoe in August 2009 with two others on charges of assault with a deadly weapon, vandalism and participating in a criminal street gang.

When he was 19 he was arrested on trespassing charges when he was found in his 16-year-old girlfriend’s bed in Carson Valley.

CHP put down spike strips that flattened one tire, but Amial kept driving on the rim. The second spike strip flattened all the tires.

The passengers arrested were Joshua Hawthorn, 27, and Kelsey Sierakowski, 19, both of South Lake Tahoe. South Tahoe police Sgt. Shannon Laney said officers have been familiar with Hawthorn since 2006 and Kelsey back to 2004.

The suspects reportedly threw methamphetamine out the car window. The three were booked into Placer County jail.

CHP on Friday night would not give further details of the incident.

Snow, rain forecast for Tahoe this weekend

A storm is headed for Lake Tahoe that could add another layer of snow to the higher elevations.

The system is expected to move through Central California and into the Southern Sierra Sunday night and Monday.

Similar to the storm that blew through earlier this month, snow levels will remain above 8,000 to 8,500 feet. There is a good possibility that Sierra passes above 8,500 feet will receive snowfall that could cause travel difficulties Sunday night and Monday, according to the National Weather Service. Passes of concern include the Mount Rose Highway, Ebbetts Pass, Monitor Pass, Sonora Pass and Tioga Pass.

Motorists should keep in mind that higher Sierra passes will be susceptible to chain controls and in some cases closure Sunday night and Monday and alternate routes should be anticipated.

Abundant moisture with the system will set the stage for a soaking rain event for portions of Eastern California and Western Nevada, especially south of Interstate 80, officials said. Localized areas could see ponding of water and small hail that could cause minor travel difficulties.

– Compiled by Kathryn Reed

Forms reveal campaign contributions, expenditures

At different times candidates for political office must report the amount of money they have collected and spent assuming it totals at least $1,000.



The complete forms can be found below by clicking on the candidate's last name. The campaign forms are for South Lake Tahoe City Council and El Dorado County sheriff. Douglas County officials have not yet provided the commission candidate forms.

For California candidates, the next date to report campaign contributions and/or expenses is Oct. 21.

Joy Curry

John D'Agostini

Tom Davis

Clair Fortier

Elizabeth Hallen

Steve Kubby

Angela Swanson

Craig Therkildsen

– Compiled by Kathryn Reed

SLT council candidates ask each other questions

By Kathryn Reed

Losing a bit of the rhetoric and staid questions posed to the South Lake Tahoe City Council candidates this election season, at Thursday's forum they were allowed to ask an opponent a question.

Doug Cichowicz asked Steve Kubby what he thinks the percentage of the people using marijuana collectives is abusing the system.



SLT council candidates address an audience Oct. 14 of more than four dozen. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Kubby didn't answer the question forthright, but instead said he doesn't want Proposition 215, which he helped write, be abused or be a shield for criminals.

Kubby also said in reference to young people coming and going from the establishments, “I also like to say one reason everyone looks healthy is because it’s working.”

Alice Jones asked Tom Davis why in fiscal years 2003-04 and 2004-05 the city didn’t spend money on roads, yet the Public Works Department’s payroll was fully funded without cutbacks.

Davis said he couldn’t recall decisions from six years ago when he was on the council, but added snow removal is part of the roads and that was funded.

Adrian Gooch asked Davis how many hours a council member needs to spend doing the job.

He said between 30 and 50 hours a week.

Claire Fortier asked Liz Hallen how she expects to bring a younger element to town.

Hallen said it’s already happening. She spoke of small businesses like her Hot Gossip Coffee and others providing what locals need and want; and that she would be the voice for the young, small business person.

Kubby asked Jones what she thought of Davis’ answer to her question.

Jones said she doesn’t personally fault Davis for the roads, but pointed to the need to have someone like herself who is a certified public accountant to be on the council to better understand budgets and the city’s 79 separate funds.

Joy Curry asked Jones how she expects to put in the necessary time for the council when she is a mother with a full time job outside the home.

Jones said she has plans in place to make it work, including speaking to her employer, but said getting elected needs to happen before she reorganizes her life.

Angela Swanson wanted to know from Hallen how people could trust her to enforce the rules of the city when her campaign signs are placed illegally.

Hallen said she has not placed signs illegally and that it could be others who support her, including her husband, who may have gotten overzealous.

Davis asked Kubby if he supports Proposition 19, the Nov. 2 initiative to legalize marijuana in California, and how it will affect dispensaries in South Lake Tahoe.

Kubby supports the proposition, saying language in it protects the collectives and that the new law should not affect them.

Hallen asked Davis if the rule preventing the city from assessing Heavenly Mountain Resort a surcharge on gondola ticket sales could be reversed and how to prevent something like that from happening in the future.

Davis said he advocated for a $1 surcharge for the gondola for the city, but his colleagues on the council nixed that idea.

More than 50 people turned out for the Oct. 14 forum.

In 18 days voters will go to the polls to pick three candidates for the council. None of the incumbents is running. Nine of the 10 candidates spent about two hours at Inn by the Lake answering questions. Géorg May did not attend.

The four prepared questions the candidates were sent ahead of time were geared toward the interests of the sponsors – South Tahoe Association of Realtors and South Lake Tahoe Lodging Association. *Lake Tahoe News* was the other sponsor.

Question: The subject of vacation rentals within the city of South Lake Tahoe has been a prominent topic for the City Council in the past few years. What is your perception of the issues surrounding vacation rentals and what are your thoughts on them?

Hallen: Favors moratorium on number of vacation rentals. Wants to track them, enforce rules and recover taxes owed.

Davis: Believes in free enterprise, having started Tahoe Keys Vacation Rentals years ago. Thinks everyone should follow the rules, including those renting off the Internet.

Swanson: Need to have vacation rentals and hotels. Noise and garbage are issues. Sees an issue with people not using rental agencies as difficult to collect taxes from.

Curry: Sees rentals as valuable part of transient occupancy tax equation. Wants to control noise and trash.

Kubby: Doesn't favor moratorium. Would like to see less government. Believes rules on the books are sufficient.

Fortier: In a perfect world, she would like all housing to be residents and all lodging for tourists. She questions if TOT is being collected, citing three homes in her neighborhood that are not paying. Wants bear boxes mandatory on vacation rentals. Wants to look into these rentals being part of the Tourism Improvement District.

Gooch: This was the most difficult question for her – to balance the $1.2 million in TOT vacation rentals bring in annually v. losing the sense of community in a neighborhood. She would consider a moratorium.

Jones: She points to working for the Tahoe Keys Property Owners Association, knowing occupancy is down for rentals. She said the way to increase property values is to increase occupancy, but to increase occupancy visitors need to have a good experience in South Lake Tahoe. Riding on pothole filled streets and contending with other aging infrastructure is not a good experience. She said the city has never reached out to the TKPOA to help with TOT enforcement. She thinks the city needs to work more collaboratively with partner agencies – like getting South Tahoe Refuse to be able to collect trash on

Sundays when all the visitors from the rentals are leaving town and their trash behind.

Cichowicz: Trash is his biggest concern. Also sees need to have STR open seven days.

Question: There has been recent discussion of using city of South Lake Tahoe tourist accommodation unit (TAU) allocations for use outside of the city limits. What are your thoughts on city limit TAUs being sold outside of the city limits?

Kubby: He calls TAUs fraud and a fictitious metric. He wants the city to override the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

Fortier: Agrees TAUs are fraudulent. Wants city to pay attention as TRPA goes forward with Regional Plan and make sure TAU discussion benefits the city.

Gooch: While employed by the city she compiled the report the city uses for TAU policy. She called it a "somewhat stupid" issue. She wants to be able to trade TAUs for commercial floor area. Does not support banning TAUs from going outside the city.

Jones: Believes she needs more education on TAUs, but is concerned with the idea of the city selling an asset because of "potential pitfall of favoritism".

Cichowicz: Needs more info about TAUs, and until then would hold off on selling them.

Curry: Wants TRPA to redefine TAU from it being a bedroom to it being a unit. If they are sold outside the city, she wants something tangible in return like work force housing or roads.

Swanson: Believes current definition of TAU is "arcane and insane". Wants to be able to trade TAUs for CFA. Wants to look at big picture before selling TAUs to know where the city is headed.

Davis: Would like TAUs for CFA so the latter could be used as incentives to get businesses to make improvements like what happened at the old Crescent V Center.

Hallen: Not well versed in TAUs. Would support selling them if it financially benefits the city.

Question: The city of South Lake Tahoe is past years has supported the tourism community through funding of marketing and special events. How would you envision the city supporting tourism, marketing and special events in the future?

Gooch: Supports city's decision years ago to stop writing blank check to tourism related entities in order to balance its own books. Believes city should support tourism when it can afford to do so and for things that are explained in detail.

Jones: Believes if city focuses on core services – transportation, roads, lighting – this will provide climate where tourists will want to come back instead of how it is now.

Cichowicz: Wants an event in town every weekend. Would support them financially if possible.

Hallen: Wants to be four-season town and lose the shoulder seasons; be more family friendly so the bowling alley isn't the only place she recommends people go.

Davis: Wants city to provide in-kind support through things like police services. Would support special events if financially possible. Wants to make sure town is clean and bike paths are repaired.

Swanson: Pointed to history and the distrust it fostered with TOT collection-allocation. Wants city to be viable partner. She was "embarrassed" the city was not part of the inaugural Sample the Sierra in August.

Curry: Wants an amusement fee on the Tahoe Queen and would-be convention center of a dollar or two paid by the tourists that could be used to supplement the Lake Tahoe Visitor Authority's $4 million budget.

Kubby: Agrees with Davis that bringing more ski events to Heavenly is a good idea. Wants events at Heavenly Village, but points to the vacancies there and parking garage that is expensive and loses money each year. Believes a good job is being done to get people to town, but wants to work on the experience they have once here.

Fortier: Also pointed to the past with council raising TOT but then taking it away from marketing. Wants to be partner in tourism, most likely with in-kind help. Wants infrastructure improvements to bring South Tahoe into world-class destination status.

Question: Citizens are concerned about enforcement and sense of standards for cleanliness and common sense trash containment around town. What do you propose as solutions to rid our city of blight – both commercial and residential?

Swanson: Need to work on large trash bins at businesses being out front. Wants to work on culture at city because she is running into residents who are afraid to talk to staff about making improvements to their home or business.

Davis: Wants STR to maintain dumpsters. Also would like youth to paint them at businesses like what has been on utility owned structures.

Hallen: She wants property owners to have reasonable lease agreements to small businesses and survive, which in turn will help bring the 17 percent unemployment rate down.

Cichowicz: Does not favor more regulations, but would rather see better communication with absentee homeowners to ensure their property is taken care of.

Jones: Believes the city needs to lead by example by taking care of its property and then individuals and businesses will follow suit. Pointed out it’s hard to want to improve a parking lot leading to dilapidated city infrastructure. Wants to work on franchise agreement with South Tahoe Refuse. Wants recycling bins everywhere.

Gooch: Pointed to grant city recently receive to obtain 15 dumpsters. Hesitant to support mandatory commercial trash service.

Fortier: Would like grant through STR to buy bear boxes for vacation rentals that those owners would pay back through time via their bills. Agrees with Jones that Sunday trash pick up for vacation rentals is logical. Suggests twice a year city has day to clean up trash that community could participate in like Coastal Cleanup Day.

Kubby: Wants world-class services so this isn’t an issue.

Curry: Wants vacation rentals and new construction to have bear boxes. Believes redevelopment and Tahoe Valley Community Plan will take care of blight.

The election is Nov. 2. Mail ballots have already arrived for those voters.