Water districts fight over cost of Donner dam upgrades

By Jeff Delong, Reno Gazette-Journal

With vital water supplies for droughts seemingly secured through a legal victory, the Truckee Meadows primary water provider is trying to recover costs of dam improvements at Donner Lake.

The Truckee Meadows Water Authority wants $500,000 from the Truckee-Carson Irrigation District, half the cost of improvements to the Donner Lake dam ordered by the California Department of Dam Safety, Jeffrey Dunn, a lawyer representing the authority in a lengthy dispute over Donner's water rights, said.

"TCID stiffed us," Dunn said.

Read the whole story

El Dorado County resumes budget talks Monday

By Carlos Alcalá, Sacramento Bee

A day after El Dorado County's new budget went into effect July 1, it went $1.5 million out of whack.

Officials anticipated property tax revenue would tumble when they built the 2010-11 budget, but apparently they weren't pessimistic enough.

“We thought 4 percent was conservative,” said Laura Schwartz, a county analyst, referring to an anticipated 4 percent drop in revenue.

When late results from the assessor’s tax rolls came in July 2, however, revenue was down 6 percent, leaving the $1.5 million gap between revenue and expenditures.

The Board of Supervisors will look at that, and an expected $16 million deficit for 2011-12, when they meet Monday for budget discussions.

Read the whole story

Smoker leads to evacuation at 968 Park Hotel

By Kathryn Reed

Saturday afternoon’s rain showers contributed to 968 Park Hotel near Stateline being evacuated that night.

Hotel staff had put cushions and other pool items under a concrete stairwell when the rain started. The thinking was that most summer storms in Lake Tahoe blow through fast and that they would retrieve the items fairly quickly and put them back where they belong.



Remnants of the smoldering items at 968 Park Hotel on July 24. Photos/Kathryn Reed

But what happened is the flammable items were left there.

Being a non-smoking facility means guests of the 58-room South Lake Tahoe hotel have to go outside to light up. One of them either dropped a cigarette, ashes or match down the stairwell to cause the combustible materials to smolder, according to officials.

That distinct smell of something having been on fire and then doused with water lingered in the back parking lot where the cushions laid.

“It all adds up to something very unsuspicious,” said Sgt. Brian Williams of the South Lake Tahoe Police Department. “They had an excellent response to the emergency and the facility evacuated very well.”

The hotel sign out front said “full house.” Wayne and Joan Brown of Naples, Fla., were on the other side of the street with many of the other guests watching the four-engine response by the South Lake Tahoe Fire Department, along police and ambulance personnel.

Wayne Brown said smoke could be smelled on two of the three floors. Joan Brown had to change fast from her nightgown into

something more presentable for standing on a street.

No one appeared to be scared. This could have been because no flames were ever seen.

The manager on duty wanted nothing to do with the media.

The call came in at 9:04pm. People were let back in about 40 minutes later.

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder (Click on photos to enlarge.)

Teshara wants to bring sustainability to Tahoe region

By Kathryn Reed

ROUND HILL – Neat stacks of paper fill every inch of Steve Teshara's desk. They continue onto a side table. He goes to another room to get a piece of paper, this one with unemployment stats for the Lake Tahoe area and beyond.

"I think the community is at a real tipping point," Teshara said. He points to the loss of 10,000 full-time residents in the last decade, how tourism is changing, and the role gaming plays today and into the future.



Steve Teshara has been host of TV show aired on Douglas County public access since last fall. Photo/Kathryn Reed

In the 37 years he has lived at Lake Tahoe, Teshara has seen an abundance of change – and recently, not for the good. He wants to lend his expertise to turn things around.

Teshara opened Sustainable Community Advocates in April, the same month he stepped down as head of the North Lake Tahoe Resort Association. He had thought about opening a consulting practice in 2002 when he left the Gaming Alliance, but the NLTRA job opened up and he jumped at that.

"Sustainable Community Advocates was established to assist clients in the development and advocacy of strategies, initiatives, action plans, and projects designed to support and ensure the long-term viability of communities and regions. Sustainability promotes equity, strengthens the economy, protects the environment, and promotes healthy, safe communities," the website says.

Two key projects Teshara is working on are the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's Regional Plan update and the Prosperity Plan.

“I think sometimes people are more infatuated with the process than the end result,” Teshara said.

Part of the sustainability part of his job is integrating land use, housing and transportation issues.

He spends his times at meetings and sifting through all the written material his clients don’t have time for.

Through the Prosperity Plan the idea is to blend economic development with the environment. It’s also possible the three philanthropic foundations in the region – Parasol, Truckee Tahoe and El Dorado Community – will begin to work more collaboratively.

“I like to connect the dots with people that have not been connected before,” Teshara said.

Brief hailstorm dampens South Lake Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

A 10-minute hailstorm in South Lake Tahoe on Friday afternoon sent people scurrying indoors – at least those near the Y.

The National Weather Service in Reno said this was not unexpected, but seemed impressed to hear the size of the hail was more than a quarter-inch in diameter in some cases.



Hail on a hot tub cover near the Y in South Lake Tahoe on July 23. Photo/Kathryn Reed

It was all over, including some heavy rain, by 5:45pm.

A hazardous weather outlook and fire weather watch has been issued for the Lake Tahoe Basin and Reno-Carson areas.

Sunday is when the worst weather is forecast, though thunderstorms are possible Saturday, as well.

“We’re expecting significant thunderstorms Sunday,” Zach Tolby with the NWS said. They are expected to be dry, which makes the fire hazard severe.

Highs will continue to be above normal – meaning in the high 80s in the basin and triple digits in Reno.

Forest thinning project infuriates some Meyers

residents

By Kathryn Reed

Passion and frustration oozed from three Meyers residents while talking about the forest thinning project in their neighborhood.

Anger was another emotion.

It was all directed at the California Tahoe Conservancy – owners of the 209 acres that are being treated in phases over the course of several years. About 30 acres are being treated this summer.

Amber LaPointe, Dave Mason and Ralph Meyberg all live in the Apache area of Meyers. All pleaded for the board to visit the site, for prescriptions to be revisited and the harvesting of large trees to stop.

LaPointe read a letter that was later published on *Lake Tahoe News*.

She questions whether the Conservancy is making money off the project.

Deputy Director Ray Lacey said with it costing about $3,000 to thin one acre, making a profit isn't possible.

"We look at a forest from an ecological perspective, not timber," Lacey said.

El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago, who is also on the CTC board, has met with these individuals. The Conservancy has had neighborhood meetings and brought out Lake Valley fire officials to explain what is happening and why.

Santiago said it's important people have a clear understanding what the forest will look like when projects are done.

“It’s almost like it’s been clear cut,” Mason said.

To this Lacey says, “You have to cut a clear swath to get equipment in. Clear areas are part of a forest. They support different plants and wildlife.”

Executive Director Patrick Wright told the threesome the prescription for this area could be reviewed at the next meeting.

South Lake Tahoe won’t come clean on nepotism questions

By Kathryn Reed

Nepotism, according to the dictionary, is “patronage bestowed or favoritism shown on the basis of family relationship, as in business and politics.”

It’s alive and thriving among employees of South Lake Tahoe (full and part time), as well as extending to City Council members and city commissioners.

Since June 30, *Lake Tahoe News* has been emailing city officials in an attempt to have disclosure of all the relationships – spousal, in-laws, children – whatever the connection, be it blood or through marriage.

Even by invoking the Public Records Request Act more than

once, the city has not provided the information requested.

Initially, Human Resource Director Janet Emmett deferred the request to City Attorney Patrick Enright. After multiple emails and phone calls to Enright, a response came from him via City Manager Dave Jinkens.

The July 22 email from Jinkens says, “The city attorney provided me with information relating to your recent request for the names of persons employed by the city who are married.

“The request for information relating to marital status and blood relations is exempt from disclosure under Government Code section 6254(c), which excludes from disclosure ‘personnel, medical or similar files, the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.’ This includes information like Social Security numbers, home telephone numbers, home addresses, marital status, health issues etc. A 2007 California Supreme Court case in 2007, I am told, affirmed the exemption from disclosure of personnel information. Additionally, police officers have a special section [Penal Code section 832.8] which prohibits the disclosure of personal data, including marital status, family members, educational and employment history, home addresses and similar information.”

But the truth is, providing relationship status really has nothing to do with personnel records. The city’s refusal to disclose relationships based on this code is bogus.

Lake Tahoe News responded to Jinkens the same day by emailing, “Thank you for your email. However, not only did I ask for spouse and blood relations, but also relations through marriage like son-in-laws, as well as parent-child relationships. I would like that for seasonal, part-time workers, as well as full time. Those types of relations don’t seem to be precluded from public disclosure based on the information you sent me.

“In addition to that information, I respectfully ask for the email with the names of the people it was sent to, which is a public document, that was sent by Janet Emmett the day of my initial request [nearly three weeks ago?] to all of the employees affected by my inquiry. If you need a formal Public Records Request Act, I will do so. If this can suffice, thank you.

“At the same time, I am now asking for a list of all city employees and their job titles. I think this would be pretty easy to get to me by 5pm today. If not, then I’d like an explanation.”

To this Jinkens reply was, “I will ask the city attorney to reply. I have given you the best answer I have on the matter.”

Enright did not respond as of this posting. None of the council members weighed-in on the subject either and they were copied on the email.

Connecting the dots

The city’s website lists some of the employees, but not all. It doesn’t list most of the police and fire department employees, though police employees are on a separate website. The fire department doesn’t list its employees on its website. A list of part time and seasonal workers has not been secured.

On the city’s website it has the Palazzos. They met on the job. Ellen is the assistant city clerk; Gene is the director of Housing-Redevelopment.

Lori Marino is the grants administrator and her husband, Jim, is an assistant city engineer.

Maryanne Brand is an accounting manager. Her husband, Phil, is a housing rehabilitation specialist.

Debi Schild is a senior permit technician in the Building Department. Her husband, Walt, is employed by Public Works.

LTN learned Krista Eissinger, airport secretary, is the sister of police Officer Andy Eissinger.

Tony Silva, airport maintenance supervisor, is married to a police officer who has a different last name.

Nick and Heather Carlquist, not a common last name, are police officers. One is active, the other reserve. Their relationship is not known. Brad and Brian Williams are brothers who are police sergeants. There is a J. Broadfoot (dispatcher) and a T. Broadfoot (officer) listed on the SLTPD website.

Three of the council members are related to people affiliated with the city. Mayor Kathay Lovell is the mother of police Officer Ryan Wagoner.

Councilman Bill Crawford is married to planning Commissioner Jonnie Crawford.

Councilman Bruce Grego is married to planning Commissioner Geraldine Grego.

The Planning Commission hears an issue before it is referred to the City Council.

Three couples with city ties are engaged. One is Nancy Kerry, manager of Housing-Redevelopment, and airport Commissioner Howie Nave.

These are just the relationships *Lake Tahoe News* knows about. It’s been a common practice through the years for the Parks and Recreation Department to hire the children of employees.

Problems with nepotism

Most cities have detailed nepotism policies. Most don’t have anywhere near the number of familial ties South Lake Tahoe has — especially in a city with about 220 full-time employees.

The nepotism issue was brought up in the June El Dorado County

Grand Jury Report, saying their investigation could not track down a nepotism policy for the city.

No training has been provided by the Human Resources Department in how to deal with nepotism.

It’s common knowledge by workers that people who are related cannot supervise one another. This is standard in most workplaces.

But problems arise. For instance, Ellen Palazzo is a notary, but ethically she should not be notarizing a document her husband signed. It would not be illegal for her to do so. To keep it all clean, she has never notarized anything for him.

With two married couples having ties to the Finance Department, who is watching what’s spent by the departments their spouses work in?

Case law points to several incidents of third party discrimination. That would be when an employee working for one of the married or otherwise related individuals is not comfortable going to the spouse of their boss for fear of recrimination.

This creates a hostile, as well as dysfunctional work environment.

This story about Oakland’s hiring mess clearly illustrates what happens when nepotism, aka favoritism, runs rampant in a city.

Here is what a law website has to say about nepotism.

A fired spouse in another locale contended their constitutional right to marry was at stake and filed a lawsuit. Read this for more on the topic.

Here is another take on married couples in the workplace.

Issues with nepotism

How all relationships came about is not known. Did they get hired because they are a couple? Did they meet on the job? Was one hired and then got their relative on the inside track at the city?

The South Shore is small. There are a limited number of qualified people for certain positions. There are a limited number of potential significant others. But none of this means the city has to be in the business of hiring relatives.

Good hiring practices mean casting a wide net for potential hires, not asking the person in the neighboring cubicle if they know someone to hire. It means hiring based on performance, not just because someone is local or is related to someone.

The issue of nepotism goes beyond how city employees are affected.

With all the relations in South Lake Tahoe government, how is a member of the public to know when she files a complaint, that the person investigating it isn’t related to the person being accused?

Cities hide behind the shield of personnel records not being privy to public review. So how is the public to know hiring isn’t biased and that the relative is truly the best, most experienced candidate? That question then begs, why is a relative even being considered?

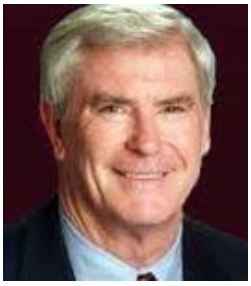
Without transparency in city government, the public – for who they work and who pays their salaries – is left in the dark.

Former Nev. Gov. Kenny Guinn dead at 73

By Steve Kanigher, Las Vegas Sun

Former Gov. Kenny Guinn, who served during Nevada's most explosive growth, leading with a pragmatic streak and fierce determination to do what was right rather than what more partisan elements in his party thought, has died.

Guinn guided Nevada from January 1999 through the end of his second term in 2006. He died this morning in Las Vegas after a fall from a roof after suffering a possible heart attack. He was 73.



Kenny Guinn

Clark County Coroner Michael Murphy said Guinn was pronounced dead at 11:07 a.m. at University Medical Center. He said an examination is expected to be completed by the end of the day Friday. An official cause of death is pending and a final determination might not be known for several weeks, he said.

Read the whole story

Lovell calling it quits at end of council term

By Kathryn Reed

So often politicians give the trite answer of “I want to spend more time with my family” when in fact something much less altruistic is the true reason. In the case of Kathay Lovell, the statement is fact.

Lovell has served on the South Lake Tahoe City Council for eight years, with three stints, including now, as mayor. She is not seeking re-election in November.



Kathay Lovell

Grandchildren are an overriding reason to call political life quits – at least for now. The boys are 11 and 14, the twins turn a year next month, and baby No. 5 arrives in January.

When this reporter congratulated her at the July 13 council meeting about her daughter-in-law’s pregnancy, Lovell was taken aback because she hadn’t even told all of her family. Plus, she had just finished her council member comments. On her list was to announce her decision to not run again. Instead, she stayed silent that day.

“I was trying to convince myself to run again. I said I would cutback and I would not be involved in so many things. But I said that every year. It just doesn’t happen that way,”

Lovell, 57, said.

Speculation has swirled around Lovell for some time that she would seek higher office. With state Sen. Dave Cox's recent death, talk became louder. But she said now is not the time to pursue higher office. However, she would not rule out running for some office in the future.

It's not just the twice a month council meetings that she goes to – and like all councilmembers – gets paid $450/month to attend. As a councilmember she is on the boards of the California Tahoe Conservancy, South Tahoe Area Transportation Authority, CalTahoe JPA, alternate for the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency board, and on the Finance Committee.

Outside of her elected duties, Lovell has been a member of the Secret Witness board for 12 years and is a member of Soroptimist International South Lake Tahoe.

Besides those commitments, so often she is the only councilmember at so many of the community events in town. She was the lone councilmember at the last Memorial Day, Veterans Day and Patriots Day ceremonies in the city.

This last year has been a trying one for the entire council. The grand jury report that came out in June says it all.

Even though Lovell says there is plenty more work that she would like to do for the city, her priorities have changed, with the focus on her growing family.

"I still want to be involved in some fashion with the community. That will never go away," she said. "But I've been doing this at warp speed and it has taken a toll."

Before she leaves, one of the projects she helped spearhead will break ground – Lakeview Commons. She is going to work on bringing in the El Dorado Community Foundation to provide money because there is a shortfall when it comes to building

the whole project that was once known as the 56-acre project.

Lovell isn’t taking the short-timer’s approach to governing.

“If we are fortunate enough to get the Tahoe Valley Community Plan done before December, that would be awesome,” she said. “I haven’t given up on getting a home for Tom and Cheryl (Millham for Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care). Maybe I can spend more time on that (being off the council).”

There are plenty of things she won’t miss about life as an elected official in a small town. However, it’s the little things she will miss most.

“I will miss getting things accomplished that people don’t even know we do. People will call with a concern or complaint and we just get it fixed,” Lovell said. “You don’t do it alone. You are the conduit. Staff does it. But (the public) calls us. I like to be that conduit and ask staff to be part of the solution.”

Making a difference in the community – that’s what Lovell will miss most when her term expires at the end of the year.

Counties find ways to promote tourism

By Susan Voyles, Reno Gazette-Journal

In Sonoma County, people are visiting local parks and riding bikes more than ever, adding to the attraction of local wineries to boost tourism, says County Supervisor Valerie Brown.

County parks are part of a stepped-up promotion to draw locals and people across California to visit the famous wine-producing region, she said.

Robert Reich, a former labor secretary who spoke to the National Association of County officials in Reno, would certainly say Brown, NACo president this year, is on the right track.

“There are two kinds of tourism,” Reich said today after his speech. “One is a major trip, a big-spending vacation where you take the whole family and splurge. That is not coming back for years.

“The other is long weekend getaways,” he said, of trips between 100 to 200 miles. “There are absolute signs that’s coming back.”

Read the whole story