Lack of stimulus money compounds state budget woes

By Kevin Yamamura, Sacramento Bee

Facing a dismal budget crisis last year, California relied on a federal lifeline of stimulus dollars. The cash infusion staved off the bleakest of cuts to Medi-Cal patients, welfare recipients and students.

But that money is beginning to run dry, leaving California grappling with whether to replace it by raising taxes or institute the severe cuts the state avoided last year.

The state already has exhausted some pots of stimulus money, such as one for higher education. Others will expire in the next year.

Read the whole story

Plan circulating among convention center creditors

By Kathryn Reed

A plan for the long stalled convention center in South Lake Tahoe could be unveiled in August.

Owens Financial, the largest creditor involved in the bankruptcy, has taken the lead role in trying to come up with a resolution that everyone can live with. Several meetings have been conducted involving the various parties.



No work has occurred on the would-be convention center in years. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Lake Tahoe Development Company out of Zephyr Cove filed for bankruptcy last fall after it had put in the foundation and some rebar on the 11-plus acre site near Stateline.

Randy Lane, principal of LTDC, earlier this year thought he had lined up someone up to take over what was supposed to be a $410 million convention center-two hotel-retail complex.

“The last deal the company said they would offer X and they offered Y. They thought they could do whatever they wanted because no one else was out there,” Lane told *Lake Tahoe News*. “Maybe no one is out there who will step up to build today or tomorrow, but the dynamics have not changed and the location has not changed.”

Lane said Owens Financial has a plan that is being discussed among the creditors, but consensus is still needed. He expects a decision could come in a few weeks.

He doesn’t expect to go back to court until someone has a plan to present to the judge.

“I’m very grateful creditors say they are not going to take pennies on the dollar. They see value in this project,” Lane

said.

Lahontan schedules TMDL public hearing

The California Regional Water Quality Control Board, Lahontan Region has scheduled a public hearing as part of the process for considering amendments to incorporate the Lake Tahoe TMDL into the Water Quality Control Plan for the Lahontan Region.

This action is being proposed to meet the requirements of federal Clean Water Act section 303(d). The Basin Plan amendment process is authorized under California Water Code section 13240. The Basin Plan amendment is a project subject to the California Environmental Quality Act and the Water Board is the lead agency. The Water Board wishes to obtain public input on the proposed Basin Plan amendment.

The Water Board has prepared draft Basin Plan amendments, a draft Lake Tahoe TMDL Technical Report, and a draft Lake Tahoe TMDL Report which includes an environmental checklist. The draft substitute environmental documents were prepared pursuant to Public Resources Code section 21080.5. These documents are accessible at the Water Board office in South Lake Tahoe or on the web page at http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/lahontan/water_issues/programs/tmdl/lake_tahoe/index.shtml.

There will be a public hear Sept. 7-8 at Lake Tahoe Community College in the board room at the South Lake Tahoe campus at One College Drive. The time has not been set.

The Water Board will not take action on the proposal until its

regular meeting on Nov. 9-10.

Oral statements will be heard in September, but for accuracy and to the extent possible, testimony should be presented in writing. Submittal of written comments is encouraged. Written comments are requested no later than 5pm Sept. 10 to Douglas F. Smith at DFSmith@waterboards.ca.gov. For more information on this project, Smith at (530) 542.5453.

Building fees cut emissions on Fallen Leaf via electric boats

By Kathryn Reed

A distinct hum is usually associated with motor boating. Not anymore. Two boats cruising Fallen Leaf Lake are electric, creating a new boating experience for the user and others on or near the water.

Self-described marina boy Joe Zanetell turns on the engine. Nothing seems to happen. No sound emerges from the engine. That’s one of the benefits of electric boats – no noise. But it also means the lake and air are not being polluted with fuel emissions.



Joe Zanetell fires up the electric boat at Fallen Leaf Lake. Photos/Kathryn Reed

This is the first season the South Shore lake has had electric boats. Rob and Sandy Wirth, who run the concessionaire, bought the boats for $35,000. After all, his background is in the electrical business.

The pontoon boat holds nine people, while the V-hull can take seven. Both go about 6mph and have a charge lasting about four hours.

Most people cruise out a ways and then drift, according to Zanetell.

On today's agenda, the Fallen Leaf Lake Community Services District board will consider becoming owners of one of the boats by using mitigation funds passed to it from El Dorado County via the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

The board will discuss and possibly vote on accepting $20,000 from TRPA. (Funds must be given to a public entity, thus the reason the CSD is involved and the money is not going directly to the Wirths.) The district and Wirths would then likely enter a six-year lease agreement.

The agenda says the district has received confirmation from its insurance carrier that liability will be covered under the concessionaire's policy.

"People are really digging them," interim CSD General Manager Tom Barnes said of the boats. "They are very stable. It's a good way to poke around the lake."



Fallen Leaf Lake has two electric boats for rent.

Last spring talks about electric boats began between Barnes and TRPA officials. Then Steve Kooyman, a civil engineer with the county's transportation department, got involved, along with Supervisor Norma Santiago.

"Given that the electric boats have no emissions as well as address other thresholds such as noise, this is a very logical project to support with these funds," Santiago said. She is also on the TRPA Governing Board. That agency will vote this month or in August to allocate the mitigation funds.

What are mitigation funds?

All new construction projects in the Lake Tahoe Basin pay air and water quality mitigation fees to TRPA. That check must be written before the final permits are signed by the bi-state regulatory agency.

Whichever jurisdiction the construction is occurring in has the funds deposited in a pot for that city or county. The government agency then can request money from the TRPA board for projects that have to do with air and water quality improvements.

"This is a restricted fund by law. The money is invested back into the community," explained Julie Regan, TRPA legislative affairs analyst. "It can't go to operations, the building or salaries."

With so many state and federal grants requiring matching funds, the mitigation account is a source for local governments to point to as money in hand.

Air quality mitigation fees for single-family residences are based on the projected number of trips that will be made. On average, the fee is $3,300. (Remodels don't pay this fee.)

For water quality mitigation fees, it's $1.86 per square foot of land coverage. So, 3,000 square feet of coverage will cost the builder $5,580 in fees.

"The fees are tiered on actual impacts," Regan said. "It's really designed to off-set the impacts on the ground."

Commercial construction also pays mitigation fees, as well as other fees, which are calculated on a different scale.

For the five counties and one city in the basin (and only basin projects can use the money), there is $7 million in the account. From 2007 to the end of June 2010, $4.19 million in mitigation funds have been spent.

Spending the money



Mitigation funds helped pay for the Sawmill bike trail in El Dorado County.

Local jurisdictions make requests to TRPA for the money. It's

up to the Governing Board to say yea or nay. The project must have some benefit to improving air or water quality to qualify.

About $200,000 in mitigation funds was used to help build the bike path in front of Lake Tahoe Golf Course in Meyers.

Several entities, including South Lake Tahoe, tapped the mitigation pot to purchase dustless street sweepers.

Placer County used these dollars to build bus shelters.

Regan said her agency is looking at whether mitigation funds could be used for a water taxi.

The electric boats are just one example of what mitigation fees can go toward. The idea is to see how well they work and what the public thinks of them so maybe they would be a staple at Lake Tahoe marinas.

“So much extensive research has been done to make sure these boats were eco-friendly, including the batteries that the boats use,” Santiago said. “This is a definite win-win for the community as it continues with its commitment to protecting Fallen Leaf Lake, while providing an eco-friendly boating experience to lake visitors.”

Protesters lobby for smoke-free casinos

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – A group of non-smoking gamblers plans to spend two more days protesting in front of the Stateline casinos in an

attempt to bring awareness that people would like go inside if it weren't so smoky.

"Eighty percent of the people don't smoke and they are shutting those people out," Janet Kahler of Phoenix said.



Stephanie Steinberg, left, and Janet Kahler protest outside Harrah's on July 16.

She and Stephanie Steinberg, chairwoman of Smoke Free Gaming, were in front of Harrah's Lake Tahoe early Friday night.

About a dozen people from the Denver-based organization started protesting Thursday and will continue through Sunday – trying to get national recognition while the American Century Celebrity Golf Tournament is in town. Protesters are from Nevada, Colorado and Arizona, with some local advocates.

Steinberg said casino security was out to speak with the pickets.

"We tell them we support Harrah's," Steinberg said. Gaming isn't the issue; it's the smoke-filled environment this group has an issue with.

She said the group also advocates for casino employees who are

breathing secondhand smoke.

A few people were honking as they saw the signs reading, “Smoke free casinos” and “What happens in a casino stays in your lungs.”

Then there was the passenger who offered the women a cigarette. Later a guy appearing to be in his 20s walked by and said, “That would be nice,” after reading the signs.

Forest Service has plans for Angora Fire restoration

Terri Marceron, superintendent of the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, has signed off on the Angora Fire Restoration Project.

The project area encompasses the boundary of the 3,100-acrea burn area.

Copies of the decision and maps of the project area are available at the Forest Service office at 35 College Drive, South Lake Tahoe.

“This project represents our final stage of planning for restoration activities on National Forest System lands within the Angora Fire area. Project activities include management of fire, fuels, vegetation, and forest health, wildlife habitat, aquatic habitat and hydrologic function restoration, roads and trails, and invasive weeds,” Forest Service officials said.

Appeals to the decision may be made until Aug. 23 to Randy Moore, regional forester, 1323 Club Drive, Vallejo, CA 94592.

– Compiled by Kathryn Reed

Arizona fugitive arrested in South Lake Tahoe

An Arizona man wanted on 12 counts of fraud and forgery was arrested in South Lake Tahoe on July 14.

El Dorado County sheriff's detectives tracked down John William Rodriguez at a house on Eloise Avenue. He was booked at the South Lake Tahoe jail for a local misdemeanor warrant as well as a no bail felony fugitive warrant from Arizona.



John William Rodriguez

Rodriguez had been fraudulently representing himself as a U.S. Marine, an Iraq war veteran, an FBI agent and a detective with the Department of Veteran's Affairs, among other things, according to sheriff's Lt. Les Lovell. Rodriguez often wore the uniform of a U.S. Marine, gained access to military installations and attended functions such as the Marine Corps Ball.

The El Dorado County Sheriff's Office is asking anyone familiar with Rodriguez to contact Detective Matt Harwood at

(530) 573.3015.

Flash flood warning issued for Tahoe-Reno area

The National Weather Service in Reno has issued a flash flood watch for the greater Lake Tahoe area from 1pm today through the evening.

The warning includes portions of East Central California and Western Nevada, including Reno, Carson City and the Minden areas, and Mineral and southern Lyon counties.

Abundant moisture and strong instability over the area will allow showers and thunderstorms to produce heavy rain today, weather officials said. The stronger storms may produce rainfall rates of at least 1 inch per hour and bring the potential for flash flooding.

The greatest risk for flash flooding are locations near small creeks and streams, canyons, steep terrain and urban areas. Heavy rain may quickly flood dry creeks, wash out roads and create rock slides.

Bill secures South Tahoe,

Truckee’s snow removal funds



By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe, Truckee and Mammoth no longer have to worry about coming up with additional money to pay for snow removal.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger on Thursday signed AB2704 – a bill introduced by Assemblyman Ted Gaines, R-Roseville, to protect snow removal funding for these jurisdictions.

Millions of dollars in the gas tax had been threatened to be taken from these mountain towns by the Legislature and governor.

South Lake Tahoe receives approximately $1.2 million annually from the gas tax. Of this amount, approximately $700,000 a year is for snow removal.

As recently as July 7, Mayor Kathay Lovell sent a letter to Schwarzenegger pleading the city’s case for the Highway User Tax Account to not be raided. This money is for local street and road maintenance for all California cities, plus snow removal for mountain areas.

During last year’s budget negotiations these dollars were threatened. Gaines introduced the legislation to remove the threat from future budget cycles – like the one the state is currently mired in.

Upper Truckee Marsh to be off-limits to dogs in 2011

By Kathryn Reed

Unleashed dogs in the Upper Truckee Marsh are wreaking so much havoc on wildlife habitat that the California Tahoe Conservancy has decided that beginning in 2011 dogs will be banned from this swath of public land in South Lake Tahoe.

“The purpose is to preserve habitat value,” Ray Lacey, CTC deputy director, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Canines will not be permitted in the area starting in May during the breeding season. The cut-off date has not been determined, but it could extend into the fall to encompass the migratory season for birds.



Beginning in 2011 dogs will be banned in the summer from the Upper Truckee Marsh. Photo/Kathryn Reed

This is expected to be an annual closure.

The 300-plus acres were acquired for the purpose of preserving

habitat, not for recreation. For about a decade the Conservancy has been trying to educate dog owners about what happens when their animals walk in sensitive marsh areas. It impacts the terrain as well as scares off wildlife.

“They are traipsing in the meadow. There is a lack of complete understanding by people who want to get to this isolated beach,” CTC board member Kathay Lovell said at Thursday’s meeting.

El Dorado County Animal Control and the South Lake Tahoe Police Department will help regulate the closure. People violating the law will be cited and fined.

The goal this year is to educate the public about why the closure will be implemented.

Tina Carlsen, who has a doctorate in ecology and is an environmental program manager with the CTC, was tasked with analyzing the impact dogs have on wildlife and habitat in the marsh that is on the east side of the Truckee River adjacent to the Al Tahoe neighborhood and leads to Lake Tahoe.

She said birds are leaving the area because of dogs. Dogs are also affecting feeding and nesting areas of several species of birds.

Sean Butler, urban land management supervisor, said he won’t be surprised if people are angry about the closure, but said this has been a long time in coming because people continually disregard the current rules.

He said he expects the closure to be easier to enforce because it is not subject to confusion – like can a dog be off-leash to swim in the lake.

The CTC pointed out that no changes are planned for Cove East, on the other side of the Truckee River. Al Tahoe residents have the option of the dog park at Regan Beach for lake access

for dogs.