Nevada counties looking to stop state's money grab

By Susan Voyles, Reno Gazette-Journal

An advisory question on whether the Nevada Legislature should obtain the consent of local governments before taking away revenues or imposing new functions will be on the Washoe County ballot Nov. 2.

With the county commission's unanimous approval today, Washoe became the second county in Nevada to approve the ballot question. The Nevada Association of Counties is asking all 17 counties to approve the ballot question, said Jeff Fontaine, NACO executive director.

If approved by voters, "this would really serve as a message to the Legislature that the voters want their local tax revenues to pay for local services," Fontaine said.

Read the whole story

Judge allows Stateline CalPERS defendant access to cash

By Dale Kasler, Sacramento Bee

RENO – Former CalPERS board member Alfred Villalobos, facing accusations that he bribed pension fund officials, broke his silence Wednesday, persuading a bankruptcy judge to unfreeze

some of his assets so he could reopen his business.

The Stateline, Nev., resident, who earned more than $50 million helping Wall Street clients win business from CalPERS, testified that he's been squeezed financially since a California judge froze his assets in May. By placing his real estate and other assets under control of a receiver, the judge forced the shutdown of his Arvco Financial Ventures investment banking firm and left him unable to pay basic living expenses, Villalobos said.

"The receiver called and canceled my credit cards," he said.

Judge John Peterson ordered the receiver, David Pasternak, to turn over the assets of Arvco, including about $250,000 in cash, to Villalobos. The Arvco firm isn't a defendant in the California case.

Read the whole story

Nevada's top court denies appeal of Incline wife killer

By Martha Bellisle, Reno Gazette-Journal

Peter Bergna, a former Incline Village art appraiser convicted of staging a 1998 crash on Slide Mountain that killed his wife, failed to prove a long list of claims against his lawyers, the Nevada Supreme Court said in denying his appeal.

A Washoe District Court jury found Bergna guilty in 2002 of orchestrating the murder of his wife, Rinette Riella-Bergna, by sending his Ford truck plunging 700 feet down the mountain with her trapped inside. He has insisted on his innocence,

saying the brakes failed.

Bergna was sentenced to life in prison with parole possible after 20 years. He lost his first appeal to the high court in 2004 and filed a motion in Washoe District Court claiming his lawyers did not defend him adequately.

Read the whole story

Confusing bid documents delay Lakeview Commons project

By Kathryn Reed

Convoluted bid documents sent out by South Lake Tahoe officials are delaying construction of Lakeview Commons by more than a month. The soonest work at El Dorado Beach could begin is Aug. 16.

Lakeview Commons is the name of what had been called the 56-acre project. The plan is to revitalize the entire area on both sides of Highway 50, with work on the lake side the priority and the only portion that money has been secured for.



The retaining wall above El Dorad Beach is

collapsing.
Photo/Kathryn
Reed

“I looked at the bid documents and there is serious ambiguity,” City Attorney Patrick Enright told the City Council on Tuesday. “We will try to go with a cleaner bid so we know what is in each line item.”

The city thought it had a contractor lined up, but when it came time to draw up a contract confusion arose as to what exactly was expected.

The council voted 4-0, with Councilman Hal Cole absent, to reject the four bids that were received and to start all over.

BJ Sullivan, president of Clark & Sullivan, said it wasn’t fair to his company to start from scratch.

“If I wasn’t the low bidder, I’d think it was a good idea to rebid the job also,” Sullivan said. “It’s a relatively simple job. I feel it’s unfair you rebid the job because they will know our numbers.”

The company’s attorney, Pat Markham, also addressed the council. His contention is the letter of intent from the city for his client to be the contractor on the multi-million project should be binding. To this, Enright said, only action from the council is binding.

Enright’s concern with going forward with the current bid documents is the wording is apt to leave the city and any contractor disputing for years the intent of the language used. The inability to draw up a workable contract is what led him to this conclusion.

Jim Marino, assistant engineer for the city, said the plan for the next set of bid documents to be more clear on what is expected to be built, with other parts of the project listed

as add-ons. The two primary concerns are fixing the hazardous retaining wall and building the boathouse.

The dilapidated wall is what pushed the project to the forefront when it came time for the California Tahoe Conservancy to secure state bond dollars for the project.

Although that money is still on its way to the South Shore from Sacramento, everyone associated with the $6 million believes it will arrive within 10 days.

Peter Eichar, who has been spearheading the project for the CTC, told *Lake Tahoe News* all the paperwork has been sent to Sacramento.

“This project really has some great potential. Maybe this is the start of something big. We are due for something around here,” Eichar said.

It’s possible the boathouse could be erected to meet the Oct. 15 grading deadline and then have the interior worked on over the winter. The boathouse will be used for non-motorized watercraft storage.

The project was always expected to take two building seasons. The delay means less gets accomplished this summer and more will be done in 2011.

Add-ons to the project that could get done next year include the cantilever walkway at the east end of the project.

When the project does go back out to bid the city’s Public Works Department would like to incorporate the city’s ordinance giving preference to local contractors.

The council on June 22 delayed first reading of the ordinance until the July 13 meeting to incorporate additional language into the document. It’s likely everything will be in place so Lakeview Commons would be the first project to use the local contractor preference mandate.

Summer arrives in Tahoe because the calendar says so

By Kathryn Reed

Summer is here. Sometimes in Tahoe it takes looking at the calendar and not just outside to know this fact.

Mother Nature has been struggling to warm up this part of Sierra. Just last week the overnight lows were consistently in the 30s. The National Weather Service in Reno said some 30s are still possible in the coming nights, but expect 40s as well.

The highs are going to be in the upper 60s to low 70s into the weekend.



Trout Creek is running fast, wide and is close to the top of the bank. Photo/Kathryn Reed

“We are trying to get there,” Rudy Cruz, Weather Service

specialist, said of normal temperatures.

Systems in Oregon and Washington are pushing down on Eastern California and Western Nevada to create the afternoon cloudiness.

With unusual systems off the Northern California coast, it means more wind in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

Thunderstorms are in the forecast for the afternoons this week, too.

The Upper Truckee River in Meyers is running about 200 to 250 cubic feet per second.

“Most of the melting occurred a few weeks ago,” Cruz said of the snow melt.

Trout Creek behind Lake Tahoe Community College looks like it could overflow its banks.

The American River along Highway 50 is rushing, producing rapids rarely seen.

South Lake Tahoe Public Works Director John Greenhut said no flooding has occurred to date in the city with the high rivers.

Lake Tahoe is still above its natural rim of 6,223 feet. On June 22 it was at 6,224.52 feet. But the toll of three consecutive drought years is adding up. In late June 2008 the lake level was at 6,225.26 feet.

Once the snow in the higher elevations is done filling the tributaries of Lake Tahoe and the weather warms to cause greater evaporation, it’s possible the lake will go below its natural rim. That means no water on the other side of the dam in Tahoe City, which in turn spells trouble for users downstream in Reno.

Incline’s runaway truck ramp accident not the first

Publisher’s note: ***Click here to read about the driver of the truck.***

By Jeff Delong, Reno Gazette-Journal

At least three other trucks launched off the end of an Incline Village runaway truck ramp before the one that crashed into a home Friday and killed a truck driver trapped in his burning rig, fire officials said Monday.

Nevada Highway Patrol investigators combed the charred wreckage of the truck, removed Friday night. The driver’s identity was withheld while the Washoe County medical examiner’s office awaits X-rays to provide positive identification.



The Incline Village house the big-rig careened into is a total loss. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The driver died Friday morning after his flatbed truck, hauling lumber, apparently lost its brakes while traveling west on the Mount Rose Highway. He steered into an uphill-slanted gravel runaway ramp near Nevada 28 but the ramp failed to stop the speeding vehicle.

The truck vaulted off the end of the ramp, slammed into a nearby residence and exploded. The occupant of the home escaped but rescuers were unable to reach the truck driver, who died in the flames.

Read the whole story

Furlough day for LTUSD, 13% spike in health insurance costs

By Kathryn Reed

To save $200,000 in the 2010-11 Lake Tahoe Unified School District budget, three classified positions have been axed and 12.5 hours a day of elementary office assistants slashed.

The decision came Tuesday night even though it won’t be until this afternoon that the California School Employees Association votes to ratify the one-year agreement.

The school board voted 5-0 to ratify one-year contracts with CSEA and South Tahoe Educators Association.



Lindsey Oakes tells the LTUSD board why Lia Story should keep her job. Photos/Kathryn Reed

It was a bit of an emotional process. About a dozen South Tahoe High School cheerleaders stood in support of Lia Story, who is their coach and works in the school office.

In the shuffle of positions, as of today she will be out of a job soon. Though the positions are set in stone, the people aren't necessarily locked out of a job. How things work, the most junior on the totem pole of the job classification being eliminated loses their job. On the flip side, that person rises to the top of the re-hire list over people from outside the district. That means people who believe they are out of a job, like Story, could end up with a job by the time the 2010-11 school year starts the week before Labor Day because it's possible others may voluntarily leave the district.

"She is kind of a like a mom to me," Lindsey Oakes said of Story. "She was directly involved in helping me graduate. I'm not sure I would have graduated (last week) without her."

The students' teary pleas clearly moved the five-member board.

"We know if we let someone go in this community, there is no place for them to go," board member Sue Novasel said.

Novasel, Wendy David and Larry Green are expressed regret in having to cut positions.

Finding common ground

Bernadette Santana, representing the classified union and a former school board member, spoke of the amicable process in reaching consensus. STEA President Deb Johnson and Human Resources Director Jim Watson said the same.



Bernadette Santana, CSEA presdent, praises the negotiation process.

This is a huge step forward in harmony among the district office, school board and bargaining units. It was only a few years ago that employees were picketing, filling board meeting with rancor and threatening to strike.

That’s not to say everything is peaceful. STHS teacher Derek Allister said he didn’t have a chance to vote on the contract and that it wasn’t until Tuesday afternoon that he learned about the loss of classified staff. Allister said he and other teachers are willing to endure more cuts if it means saving jobs.

“If you take a little out of my paycheck to keep them here, I will write that check,” Allister told the board.

(Per state law, teachers must be notified by March 15 of any layoffs. The district cut 5.688 positions at that time.)

The classified cuts include the attendance technician at STHS as of Jan. 30, administrative assistant at the district office, and half a position each of instructional aid tech and pupil services secretary at South Tahoe Middle School.

All employees will have one furlough day, which will be Nov. 24. This brings the number of instructional days to 184.

With health insurance going up 13 percent, that in effect brings the take home pay down for everyone. The district has a cap of $9,232 that it pays for employee health benefits so it will not be picking up any of the costs associated with the increase. On average it will mean $1,500 more per employee per year for health insurance.

Part of the contract is classified staff are protected from mid-year cuts, except for bus drivers because routes can change based on enrollment.

Budget issues

Also at the meeting, the board approved the 2010-11 budget.

With this being the sixth time CFO Deb Yates has brought the issue before the board, not much was left to do but vote. Yates said she is hearing that further cuts by the state to education look unlikely. However, Sacramento for the umpteenth year missed its deadline to pass a budget.

Declining enrollment continues to plague the district. The loss of 139 students this year equates to $720,000 the district won’t receive next school year from the state.

The board has kept its commitment to class size reduction for K-3, though the ratio in grades 1-3 will go from 1:20 to 1:22.

Keeping cuts as far from students as possible has been the

board’s mantra.

Green said it’s better to not have a new book than to make more cuts in staff. Books and supplies have been reduced from $2.96 million in the 2009-10 budget to $1.34 million in the 2010-11 budget. Supplies are all inclusive – including things like toilet paper, light bulbs, pencils and paper.

Energy grant to bring new lighting to South Tahoe

South Lake Tahoe received of a $131,311 grant from the California Energy Commission that will be used for energy-efficient lighting.

The money will be used on a custom retrofit and replacement of all 88 pedestrian walkway lights on Ski Run Boulevard to low-wattage LED lights and replacement of approximately 100 high-energy use florescent lights to low-wattage LED lights in the city’s parking garage and offices and replacement of standard wall switches to motion detector light switches.

These projects will provide an immediate reduction in energy costs and expected long-term savings in maintenance costs.

The installation of the new efficient lighting will be handled primarily by city personnel to allow the majority of the cash to go directly to the equipment.

Public, employee panels divided on SLT city manager

By Austin Fay

A community panel reached an informal consensus to recommend Tony O’Rourke to the City Council to be the next city manager of South Lake Tahoe.

Seven community members spent 90 minutes questioning the two finalists Monday morning.

It may have been a waste of time for everyone involved because the City Council interviewed the men on Sunday, with Councilman Bill Crawford choosing not to be part of the process. After they were done with the session they reached the same conclusion – O’Rourke would be better than Mike Segrest.



Tony O'Rourke delivers answers at the public forum June 21. Photo/Austin Fay

O’Rourke has signed the necessary paperwork to start the background and reference check process.

However, that process will not begin immediately because the two other groups interviewing the candidates Monday – employees and department heads – were not as convinced O'Rourke is the man for the job. (Redevelopment Director Gene Palazzo was not an interviewer because he applied for the job and is still technically a candidate.)

It's possible the council will bring in three more candidates to be interviewed in the next week. The council still needs to reach consensus to do this. If more candidates are brought in, the three panels will be asked to reconvene to interview the next group.

If O'Rourke is not in the top two, the background check process will not begin.

About four city employees drifted in and out of the room at Lake Tahoe Airport during the public interviews, but were not available for comment. There was one person attending the meeting who was not a city employee.

A city manager is needed because Dave Jinkens is ending his eight-year stint as city manager on Aug. 7.

Who's on the panel?

The public panel was made up: Claire Fortier, vice chairwoman of the Sustainability Commission; Michael Berg, chairman of the Planning Commission; Chip Morrow, chairman of the Parks and Recreation Commission and on the Sustainability Commission; Sherry Miller, Airport Commission and the airport director; Hermano Aragon, Latino Affairs Commission; B Gorman, president/CEO Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce; and Ken Sands, representing the South Lake Tahoe seniors.

The South Lake Tahoe Chamber of Commerce and TACCD did not send representatives.

City Attorney Patrick Enright facilitated the process Monday.

Members of the panel were looking for different elements in a new city manager, but a common thread was the city needs an "agent of change." O'Rourke, in his slate-grey suit and businessman demeanor had "done his homework" the panel agreed, and was the strongest candidate to be that agent of change for South Lake Tahoe.

Questions were similar for the two interviews, with each representative having the opportunity to ask two questions, though some panel members asked more. Each interview lasted 90 minutes.

Questions entailed important issues the new city manager will wrestle with: fiscal policy in tough economic times, utility-related issues, the convention center project, annexation issues, collaboration with government agencies, anecdotal evidence of building consensus among other elected officials, as well as potholes.

The candidates

"He does come from the private sector, but he's got a wealth of public service as well," panel member Berg said of O'Rourke.

Segrest has been town manager in Moraga, a tony East Bay community of about 17,000 people, for more than a year. He also served as city manager of Snowmass, Colo. He is an avid sailor. One of the motives for Segrest's considered relocation to this "very charming community" is his wife's allergies.

O'Rourke touted his self-described "passion for the public," while emphasizing his experience in the private sector. O'Rourke has a background in marketing and managing, as he is executive director of Beaver Creek Resort Company based in Avon, Colo., a town of about 6,500 people and a regional population of about 61,700. During Monday's public interview he placed an emphasis on "creating a brand" of South Lake Tahoe combining his experience in private sectors.

“Being a city manager is effectively the same position as being the CEO of a company,” O’Rourke said.

Segrest has had much experience in the public sector and was forward in citing his strengths, which were finances and his decisive personality.

Post-interview comments

“If Tony doesn’t accept (the position), I would not be happy with Michael, and would like to look at additional people,” Gorman said with nods of approval from most of the panel.

Segrest responded to many questions with wandering, non-specific answers, giving way to a veneer of politician-speak; or, textbook answers that didn’t reflect a nuanced understanding of the issues facing South Lake Tahoe.

When speaking about budgets and money O’Rourke referred to $100,000 as “not a small sum,” while Segrest thought $700,000 was “not a lot of money.”

Interviewers were given reaction-prompting sheets where they were also able to make comments during the interview. *Lake Tahoe News* was denied access to the documents collected from interviewers at the end of the session because it’s a personnel matter, Enright said.

The City Council does not have a date set to make a decision, but may reconvene in “seven to 10 days” to make a decision, according to Enright.

2 dogs sought in biting incident at Cove East

El Dorado County Animal Services is searching for the owners of two dogs that are connected to a dog bite incident that occurred June 15 at approximately 5pm at Cove East in South Lake Tahoe.

A man was bitten by one or two dogs as he was walking near the entrance of the California Tahoe Conservancy land near the Tahoe Keys Marina. The man encountered the two dogs fighting and attempted to break up the fight. One dog is described as a smaller shepherd mix, with black, tan and white coloring. The other dog is described as a medium-sized chocolate Lab mix, with brown coloring.

Both of the dogs had collars and were on leash with their owners when the incident occurred, however, no contact information was exchanged. The dog owners were both women.

Although the man’s injuries were minor, Animal Services would like to speak to the owners of the dogs to verify that the dogs are current on their rabies vaccinations so that the man does not have to have post-exposure rabies treatments.

Anyone with information is asked to contact Animal Services in South Lake Tahoe at (530) 573.7925.