

South Tahoe's American Legion struggling to stay viable

By Kathryn Reed



South Lake Tahoe American Legion members are hoping their chapter does not go the same way as the local Veterans of Foreign Wars affiliate – by the wayside and being disbanded by the national organization.

With fewer people joining the legion, it is a real possibility South Lake Tahoe may one day not have an American Legion chapter.

“We need people to join,” said George Ramirez of American Legion Post 795 Stella Van Dyke Johnson. “We know there are a lot of veterans in town.”

Ramirez was speaking at the annual Memorial Day festivities this week. His plea was to those in attendance and beyond.

The legion has 114 members, but has a hard time getting a quorum of seven at its monthly meetings. The Legion meets the third Tuesday at 6pm at the hall on Highway 50 in the middle of town.

“We want to get the next generation involved. The vets from the Iraq wars are not joining (the Legion),” Ramirez said.

The local auxiliary also needs members. The women’s group meets the third Wednesday at 5:30pm at the hall.

Congress created the American Legion in 1919, a year after

World War I ended. There are 3 million men and women in the world who are part of the Legion.

Someone is at the South Lake Tahoe site Thursday-Sunday starting at 4pm to answer questions about joining the Legion or renting the facility. For more information, call (530) 541.8788.

Nitrates a growing problem in California's drinking water



By Julia Scott, California Watch

The water supply of more than 2 million Californians has been exposed to harmful levels of nitrates over the past 15 years, a period marked by lax regulatory efforts to contain the colorless and odorless contaminant, a California Watch investigation has found.

Nitrates are the most common groundwater contaminant in California and across the nation. A byproduct of nitrogen-based farm fertilizer, animal manure, wastewater treatment plants and leaky septic tanks, nitrates seep into the ground and can be expensive to extract.

Read the whole story

El Dorado County grappling with millions of dollars in cuts

By Kathryn Reed



El Dorado County is looking to adopt a budget for 2010-11 that has \$49 million less than the current one. Property taxes are projected to be down by 4 percent, sales tax off by 11 percent, and vehicle license fees reduced by 4 percent.

To attain the balanced budget for the fiscal year that begins July 1 there may be a reduction of 70 full-time positions, or 3.8 percent of the workforce.

In the \$410,246,922 budget, 48 percent, or \$195,248,053, is general fund dollars. This is the discretionary part of the budget. The bulk of the budget is money with strings attached that the county has no say in how it's spent.

The recommended budget is likely to be voted on June 22 or June 29. Any revisions based on what the state comes forward with will likely be adopted in September. With the state wrestling with a nearly \$20 billion shortfall, the impact to all counties and cities could be more dire than what the governor came out with in his May revise.

The Board of Supervisors begins budget workshops June 7 at 9am, with another one June 9 at 9am and a third, if necessary, on June 10 at 9am. All are in Placerville.

“People are not purchasing as many goods that are taxable. That is a double whammy for us because a lot of state revenue is based on sales tax,” said Mike Applegarth, senior administrative analysis for El Dorado County. “If the money is not there, we cannot spend it.”

When it comes to property tax, people are having property reassessed at a lower rate as well as buying at lower values. This means less coming into the county coffers.

El Dorado County Economic Snapshot

Median Housing Price (March)	Unemployment	Single
Family Permits Issued		
2006: \$515,000 percent	701	4.6
2007: \$479,000 percent	405	5.1
2008: \$359,000 percent	205	6.9
2009: \$335,000 percent	72	11.3
2010: \$294,950 percent (March)	n/a	13.6

Unbalanced departments

All but the District Attorney’s Office and Sheriff’s Department have come forward with a balanced budget. The DA needs to trim about \$250,000 and the sheriff \$460,000 to make the numbers work that Chief Administrative Officer Gayle Erbe-Hamlin has come up with.

Law related expenses, including these departments as well as public defender and courts, account for 65 percent of the

general fund.

For the upcoming fiscal year the DA's office has been asked to cut \$539,000. It is more than half way there.

Jody Albin, fiscal administrative manager for the DA's office said, it's possible three or four prosecutors will lose their jobs if the CAO gets her way with the cuts. Placerville has 15 active prosecutors, while South Lake Tahoe has six.

"It becomes a balancing act between what we are able to handle," Albin said.

She said District Attorney Vern Pierson plans to tell the board again that certain crimes will not be prosecuted if more cuts come down on his department.

"Aid to fire" is a phrase that is likely to be heard a lot next week during the budget hearings. It's an issue with the DA, sheriff and assessor. Fire departments in the county are supposed to be self-sustaining, but that has not always been the case. The current budget calls for \$1.3 million from the general fund to go to various fire agencies.

This in turn means there are fewer dollars in the general fund to go to the District Attorney's, Sheriff's and Assessor's offices.

Sheriff Fred Kollar is being told to trim an additional \$460,000 from the upcoming budget year.

It's possible supervisors will pass the working budget this month without the DA and sheriff issues resolved. The final figures may not be realized until July, county officials said.

As for timing of things to be discussed on Monday, an internal email from Erbe-Hamlin says, "I am putting the DA's discussion down as first Policy Issue for discussion. This will come after the Overview, Structural Deficit discussion. Cannot tell for sure the time needed for those items since that will be

the opportunity for the board to ask questions and provide input. Policy Issue discussion could be late morning June 7 or sometime right after lunch.”

Kollar said three scenarios are being talked about for his department. They include eliminating vacant positions, restructuring the department (he doesn’t have specifics on that yet) or contracting out food services at the South Lake Tahoe and Placerville jails.

The sheriff’s department has 377 employees. It was at 400 2.5 years ago.

For 2010-11, the Sheriff’s Department budget is about \$53.4 million. Of that, about \$41.5 million is from the general fund and the rest comes from the state, feds and grants. The total budget in 2008-09 was \$55.4 million.

“We are doing less things. We are not doing the nice to have stuff,” Kollar said. “About two years ago we eliminated the DARE program in grammar schools. About a year ago we eliminated school resource officers. We used to have four deputies and a sergeant assigned to special events detail.”

The department handled 85,000 service calls with 80 patrol officers last year.

Kollar said the public probably hasn’t noticed the cuts made to his department, but he doesn’t know how much longer it will go unnoticed.

But another thing that may go unnoticed is the 10 percent raise many in Kollar and Pierson’s departments have gotten in the last two years under Measure 504. The Charter Review Committee recommended to supervisors they take the issue to the voters in November. The board said no and the automatic raises stayed on the books, though it’s not a countywide raise, just for certain departments – like the sheriff’s and DA.

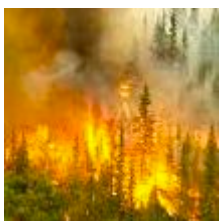
Looking forward

Even after the Board of Supervisors finishes with the 2010-11 budget, the reality is the forecast is bleak for future years. Erbe-Hamlin is projecting a deficit of \$15 million for fiscal year 2011-12 based on today's forecasts.

For the last three years the general fund has gone backward. The trend before the financial crisis hit was for a growth of 4 percent to 7 percent.

"All indications are that the fiscal situation will continue to worsen over the next year or more. Property taxes continue to decline; there are potential increases of 2-4 percent in our PERS rates, and there is still much uncertainty in regards to state actions," Erbe-Hamlin says in her staff report.

Wet winters tend to lessen threat of wildfires



By Paul Rogers, San Jose Mercury News

Regardless of how wet the winter, fire officials often broadcast the same warning as summer begins: "Prepare for a bad fire season."

If it didn't rain much, they say conditions are bone dry. If it rained a lot, they often say the tall grass translates to lots of fuel.

So what's the real story?

A *Mercury News* analysis of rainfall and fire records over 40 years shows the worst fire seasons come after dry winters, not wetter ones like the one we've just had.

Read the whole story

Ranked by acres burned, 12 of California's 15 worst fire seasons back to 1970 – including the four very worst – all occurred in years after drier-than-normal winters, according to the analysis.

Client refuses to pay Stateline man over CalPERS charges

By Dale Kasler, Sacramento Bee

Alfred Villalobos, the former CalPERS board member accused of bribing pension fund officials, is having trouble collecting some of the fees he earned for his work.

Court records show at least one of Villalobos' clients – Aurora Capital Group, the investment firm headed by Republican power broker Gerald Parsky – is refusing to pay \$2 million.

That could cause headaches for state officials, who are trying to corral Villalobos' assets as they pursue a \$95 million lawsuit against him. In the suit, Attorney General Jerry Brown says the Lake Tahoe businessman bribed three CalPERS officials to steer investments to his clients.

LTCC board figuring out what to do about president's position



By Kathryn Reed

Who the next president of Lake Tahoe Community College will be may not be known for some time, but the board is likely to decide June 8 on a process for finding that person.

At a special board meeting Wednesday morning the board accepted the resignation of President Paul Killpatrick. His last day is July 16. He has taken a job with a community college in Washington.

At the meeting June 2, a large contingent of faculty and classified employees expressed a desire to have an interim president. The idea they proposed was to have Sue Niehoff, vice president of Business Services who has been at the college since February, and Tom Greene, who starts as VP of Academic Affairs and Student Services this summer, share the duties of president.

An interim president by statute could have the position for a year, with the possibility of extending it another year if

certain criteria are met.

More public input will be sought next Tuesday.

With Killpatrick's departure being six weeks away it would be near impossible to have a permanent replacement in place. The board will have to decide what to do for the short term as well.

Other considerations are whether the search will be handled internally or via a consultant. With so many jobs having already been consolidated, the burden of being on a presidential search team could be too great.

Plus, the college is ramping up for the fall accreditation process, the introduction of an all-consuming software system and is in the throes of a budget crisis. Summer is not the ideal recruiting time for this level of position – December, into spring is when larger pools of candidates can often be found.

The meeting is at 6pm June 8 in the Aspen Room.

Nevada marine reptile from 240 million years ago identified

By Frank X. Mullen, Reno Gazette-Journal

Scientists have identified a new type of marine reptile, which 240 million years ago roamed the sea that became the Nevada desert.

Judging by the size and sharpness of its teeth, the recently-

discovered ichthyosaur was a fierce predator that ate various prey including his fellow fish-lizards, researchers said. When the find was reported at a conference in England in September, Science News said the specimen could be the “T-Rex of the seas.”

Nadia Frobisch, a vertebrate paleontologist at the University of Chicago, and her team unearthed the fossil in the Augusta Mountains of central Nevada in 2008 and are studying it. She said ichthyosaurs, Nevada’s state fossil, have been dug up in the region for decades, but the recent specimen is bigger than a killer whale and may be a new species or even a new genus.

Read the whole story

Councilman did legal work to evict Broc’s Puppies

By Kathryn Reed

When the city attorney found out Tuesday that a councilman did the legal work to evict Broc’s Puppies, he said, “I’ll talk to Bruce.”

Bruce Grego, the councilman in question, believes because the work had nothing to do with the ordinance he voted on a year ago that bans future stores like Broc’s in the city limits, there is nothing wrong with having worked on the eviction.



Bruce Grego

"It was for failure to pay rent. It was a standard vanilla eviction," Grego said. "The eviction was not based on a violation of the ordinance."

Broc's Puppies has been in the news for years. Part had to do with the city deciding to ban the sale of live cats and dogs, then the store on Highway 50 near Tahoe Keys Boulevard was raided by law enforcement, the owner was arrested on a parole violation and is back behind bars, and then the property manager had the business evicted this spring.

Don Huggins is the property manager for owner Helen Edgin. Huggins said he had Grego file the paper work involving the eviction.

Huggins and Grego have a long history of working together. Grego leases the building his law office is in from Huggins. Huggins has been a client of Grego's many times.

"I was a client long before Bruce became my tenant," Huggins said. "He has done my eviction work on apartments for 10 years or more. I paid for everything Bruce has done for me."

South Lake Tahoe City Attorney Patrick Enright has been busy keeping track of all of Grego's dealings.

Enright said the dollar amount of the work involved would dictate whether Grego has a conflict in helping to evict a business that he has also cast votes about. He earned \$495 for the job.

Grego's involvement with the Broc's eviction came as a surprise to his council colleagues.

Grego's ethics were called into question this spring for which he faced an inquisition of sorts for having the city reimburse him for outside legal counsel expenses. The city was left with a black eye and Grego got paid.

Another issue involving Grego is his lease with Huggins. On Friday, Enright was shown a lease agreement between Grego and Huggins. He was not given a copy of it.

If the agreement were for more than one month at a time, Grego would not be able to vote on issues related to the redevelopment area the council approved in May. No written agreement existed between the two men until May 28.

Strife over what to do with Tahoe's aging urban areas

By Jeff DeLong, Reno Gazette-Journal

Redevelopment of aging, polluting urban areas will prove critical to restoring Lake Tahoe's troubled environment in coming decades, Tahoe land-use regulators insist.

Environmental groups counter that the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency appears to be steered on a path that could substantially alter the lake's rustic characteristics, bringing taller buildings and denser development around the lake.



Razing the Biltmore and starting over is one example of redevelopment controversy.

The emerging debate comes as TRPA, established by Congress in 1969 to save an endangered national treasure, prepares a new strategy guiding land use for the next 20 years. The stakes are high, both sides agree.

Read the whole story

Disabled out-of-towner crippling local businesses

By Kathryn Reed

"It is nothing more than a guy going through town and making money."

Those are the words of David Kelly, president of the Tahoe Area Coordinating Council for the Disabled (TACCD). He is the face and voice of the disabled on the South Shore. And he is not happy with what a paraplegic from Carmichael is doing to

businesses in Lake Tahoe.

Scott Johnson is a 48-year-old attorney. He drives around in a white van. Sometimes a passenger accompanies him. Sometimes he films places. He takes notes of cars without proper stickers parked in handicapped spaces and he looks if ramps exist at businesses. He is extremely adept at sending out form letters.



Re/Max Realty
in South Lake
Tahoe has been
targeted by a
disabled
attorney.

Letters are addressed to the “landlord/business operator” and state they have 90 days to voluntarily bring the property to code or 60 days to provide Johnson with a disabled access compliance report and a post-construction review within six months.

It appears to be Johnson’s mission to take cash from small businesses all over Northern California because he was forced to a wheelchair after being struck by a drunken driver several years ago. Web searches show preponderance for this type of behavior. South Lake Tahoe is his latest cash cow.

When local disabled groups are against him, the motive seems more sinister than sincere.

Unfortunately, no phone number has been located for Johnson’s company, Disabled Access Prevents Injury Inc. at 5150 Fair

Oaks Blvd., Ste. 101 in Carmichael. Perhaps a bit of irony is the street address is the legal code number for someone who is mentally ill.

At the TACCD's monthly meeting last week two certified access specialists (CAsp) spoke to the group about what recourse people may have.

Jeri Oishi, owner of Enchanted Florist, was at the meeting. She had received a letter from Johnson the week before.

"It's not one of those things I can ignore and it will go away," Oishi said. "I have a customer who has been here a number of times in one of those big motorized wheelchairs and he has no problem coming up the ramp so I know it works."

She said someone from the Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce came by the florist inviting her to a meeting June 10 about the issue, but said first she would have to join the chamber.

"Yes we are bringing in an expert CAsp inspector and an attorney. As you know 'membership has its privileges' and hence this event is being offered to members first at no cost," B Gorman, executive director of the Nevada-based chamber, emailed *Lake Tahoe News*. She further said non-members could attend by invitation-only at \$20 as space permitted.

The problem with the Americans with Disabilities Act is little or no wiggle room exists if a business is out of compliance by a half inch even if it works for the people it was designed to help.

Kelly knows of construction being a couple degrees off and Johnson wanting to fight it.

"I think it is wrong. This is not what the ADA was meant to be. It's far from it," Kelly said.

All the business owners contacted by *Lake Tahoe News* said they

want to work with the law, help people with disabilities – but they don't want an out of town swindler taking their money.

Clint Schue knows ignoring the threats from Johnson is not an option.

"I researched the guy. He is the same guy who sued the prior owners. They settled with him for several thousand dollars to make it go away," the owner of Brothers Bar said.

That's why settling isn't a long-term solution. Johnson or anyone else can come back with another complaint.

Schue said Johnson came by his place in his white van in April. He asked about a ramp. Schue told him about the temporary one. Now a permanent one is in the back. The rails went up last week.

Re/Max Realty received a letter from Johnson last month.

"They aren't even trying to come into my place. They drive by, send a letter and try to settle," said Jesse Chamberlain of Re/Max in South Tahoe. "It would be one thing if he had an actual real estate transaction going on. It almost seems like they are harassing us."

Interestingly, Re/Max's offices are across the parking lot from TACCD's.

Before the long weekend the white van was filming the Black Bear Inn. The vehicle went up and down Ski Run Boulevard taking pictures of the various businesses.

Kelly is working with South Lake Tahoe officials to have a building inspector become a certified access specialist. Then a sticker can be placed in a business' window that should be enough to keep Johnson and his ilk at bay.