Meyers CCC center about to get $13 mil. overhaul

By Austin Fay

MEYERS – The California Conservation Corps Lake Tahoe Residential Center is moving forward with its estimated $13 million facility improvements.

Construction includes renovation of the minimalist 84-corps member residential areas, new dining hall, gymnasium, and classrooms for corps member use.

The CCC in Meyers will begin renovations this summer. Photo/Austin Fay

Bids for the project open May 26.

State estimates for construction and renovation of the 42,719-square-foot Lake Tahoe Residential Center is set at $13 million. That’s approximately $304 per square foot.

The CCC project has been a long time in the making; state bonds that were released for use nine years ago are funding renovations.

It will likely take two building seasons to finish the project.

From 1989 to 1997 Tahoe CCC was headquartered in the Meyers location, and has since relocated twice. Once was to Echo Summit and then back to the Meyers building. The latest relocation to Meyers was five years ago, which meant expelling two local businesses and relieving the economic burden of a then-struggling senior living facility.

The agency also must believe it is a private entity by the way it conducts itself. Apparently the officials in Meyers and Sacramento who did not return multiple phone calls have forgotten it is taxpayer money that pays their salaries, keeps the organization running and will foot the construction costs.

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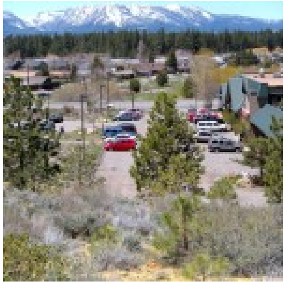
County to close parking lot used by Stateline businesses

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Douglas County officials on Thursday let businesses in the Nugget Building at Stateline know the 57 parking spaces on the west side of the building will be off-limits to their patrons.

Today, property owner Chuck Bluth plans to deliver a letter to each county commissioner expressing his side of the story and asking to be put on a future agenda so the matter can be worked out.



The parking lot angling to the left of the Nugget Building in Stateline will be off-limits as of June 1. Photo/Kathryn Reed

When Bluth bought the property earlier this year from Mike Laub he knew nothing about the parking lot deal that had been in place. In July 2009 a 15-year lease between the county and Laub expired. The county has not received a dime since then even though it has tried to collect from Bluth and Laub.

The odd-shaped lot is partly off Kahle Drive, borders Kahle Community Park, has an entrance off Highway 50 and goes to the edge of the building that is anchored by Sushi Pier. It’s still referred to as the Nugget Building because a casino by that name was once there.

Justina Caviglia, deputy district attorney for Douglas County, said before the 1994 deal was inked the county was getting $5,000 a month for the parcel. A lump sum of $99,500 was paid for the lot’s use 15 years ago, with the money going to the neighboring park.

Prior to the sale of the Nugget Building the county had been working with Laub to work out a month-to-month lease. That never came to fruition.

The other side of the building has parking, with a couple spots in the back.

What it will mean to the businesses in the complex if the county parking spaces are removed remains to be seen. The entire building is not occupied. But with three restaurants, the need for parking is evident.

Laub sold the Nugget Building early this year and then bought the former Bill's Casino parcel, which he had intended to turn into a strip club. (Commissioners' thwarted those plans with a vote after Laub bought the property from Harrah's Entertainment.)

It was Laub's responsibility, according to the county, to maintain the lot, which included plowing it. But the county plowed it this winter.

Bluth said he knew nothing about the parking lot issue until the county contacted him.

Clearly the lot has not been kept up by anyone. Some potholes are filled with muddy water. Others are 3-feet in diameter. Curbs are decaying. Landscaping appears to be non-existent, though an argument could be made it's native vegetation.

What is it worth?

In April the county secured two appraisals on the lot. Johnson Perkins & Associates Inc. say it's valued at $5,000/month and Anthony J. Wren, MAI put a $7,732/month price tag on the parcel. A 2007 state law requires the county to charge the higher price.

Bluth said he isn't about to pay more than $90,000 a year for a parking lot.

"That would be 76 percent of my gross rental revenue on that property," Bluth told *Lake Tahoe News.*

Bluth contends the parcel was appraised based on it being developed in the future and not its current use, which is all he would use it for.

Differing opinions

Caviglia and Steve Mokrohisky, assistant county manager, met with *Lake Tahoe News* in Stateline on May 20 to talk about the issue. They said Bluth doesn't return phone calls.

"Mr. Bluth has never responded to my offers," Caviglia said.

Bluth shared with *Lake Tahoe News* his written communications with the county. A letter from Caviglia to Bluth dated April 14 talks about the appraisals, mentions a draft lease and a desire to meet and discuss the issue.

The assistant district attorney sent a letter April 19 to Bluth telling him not to contact the appraisers.

"Any attempt to influence or attempt to influence either appraiser to change its appraisal is a criminal act …," the letter says.

Bluth told *Lake Tahoe News* that as a developer for the last 40 years he is well aware of the role of an appraiser. He also believes the county didn't tell the appraisers the parcel is only for parking.

Caviglia said a corner of the property has gone through the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency with approval to be developed, but that she does not know where that stands or what might go there.

On April 26 Bluth wrote a letter to county Commissioner Nancy McDermid because she represents the lake, even though she lives in the valley. She is also on the TRPA board.

"It is my belief that approaching this in a positive manner is the best way to resolve what I inherited when I purchased the building, because I was not informed of the parking situation that has been ongoing for many years with previous owners," the letter says. He then offered seven dates in May, all of which have since passed, as possible meeting dates.

A letter dated April 29 from Caviglia to Bluth gave him a deadline of May 5 to respond to her. "Douglas County will take appropriate action to protect its ownership rights of the property, which may include closing the parking lot," the letter states.

On May 5, McDermid responds via email to Bluth saying county counsel has advised against a meeting.

On May 11, Bluth emails McDermid his disappoint with her response and further said, "I attempted to set up a meeting with the District Attorney's office and one of the appraisers, but I was turned down and threatened, which simply amazes me."

Digging in their heels

Bluth is not one to shy away from a fight. Bluth and the TRPA have gone back and forth in court and out of it regarding his house near Glenbrook. He is the former owner of the Cal Neva casino in Crystal Bay. He sold it in 2005.

"When I owned the Cal Neva I dealt with 12 agencies and none with this kind of behavior," he said.

He is to the point where he doesn't see it making economic sense to rent the parcel at the price quoted.

The county plans to block access the Tuesday after Memorial Day weekend.

"We are in a tough spot. We tried to go through the process," Mokrohisky, the assistant county manager, said. "Our belief is business owners didn't do anything to cause this."

He and Caviglia had a letter to hand the business owners, which include attorney William Cole, Cilantros Mexican Grill, UPS, Sushi Pier and Thai Delight.

"If they close off the lots so no one can get to my space, what are they going to prove, they are the big dog in town? We all know that. They have the authority to do what they want. Usually they don't abuse power," Bluth said of Douglas County officials.

Bijou postal branch's final delivery in June

By Kathryn Reed

June 18 will be the last day people can retrieve mail from the Bijou branch of the South Lake Tahoe post office.

After months of speculation, the U.S. Postal Service decided May 20 to close the small facility in the middle of South Lake Tahoe. In February the Incline Village branch was closed. Talk is the Stateline branch is next to go.

All of this is an attempt to save money, though the official word from the USPS is it has to do with service, too.

"We don't close facilities just to save money, but we have to be smart with our resources," USPS spokesman David Rupert said.

Shuttering Bijou is estimated to save the agency $2 million over 10 years.

With only 40 percent of the boxes rented, the office is hardly bustling. Other branches can absorb the boxholders or people can choose to have home delivery.

No date has been given when a decision on the Stateline branch will be made. The difference across the state line is no home delivery exists in this area of the South Shore.

Boxholders and employees will be told of Bijou's future today. The landlord was notified Thursday. One person is employed at Bijou. She will be relocated to another facility in South Lake Tahoe.

CalPERS controversy involving Stateline man heats up

By Dale Kasler, Sacramento Bee

Controversial pension fund placement agent Alfred Villalobos launched a broad defense today against a state lawsuit accusing him of plying CalPERS officials with favors. He also demanded that his assets be unfrozen.

The former CalPERS board member denied several of the allegations contained in a lawsuit filed two weeks ago by Attorney General Jerry Brown, among them that he gave a Lake Tahoe condominium to former CalPERS Chief Executive Fred Buenrostro. In reality, Villalobos said in a court filing, Buenrostro paid him $600,000 for the property.

Brown sued Villalobos, Buenrostro and Villalobos' firm Arvco

Capital of Stateline, Nev., alleging that Villalobos showered Buenrostro and two other CalPERS officials with gifts to influence investment decisions. As a placement agent, Villalobos was working on behalf of private equity firms seeking investment dollars from the pension fund.

Read the whole story

STPUD passes sewer-water rate increases on split vote

By Kathryn Reed

It took five motions Thursday afternoon before the board voted 3-2 to increase sewer rates 2 percent and water rates 2.5 percent.

South Tahoe Public Utility District customers can expect to see higher bills beginning July 1. Based on the quarterly billing system the South Shore district uses, the average residence will see an increase of $2.94 on each water bill and $1.71 for the sewer bill. This amounts to an $18.60 increase per year for sewer and water combined.

STPUD board member Mary Lou Mosbacher

is against raising fees. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Board member Mary Lou Mosbacher had her finger on the “no” button most of the day. She was against all of the ideas except the one brought forward which was to have no increase at all.

Also in the no category on the final vote was Jim Jones. He favored a 4 percent increase on sewer and water.

Although the proposed rate increase has generated a lot of chatter, in the end only 87 of the 17,000 ratepayers protested the increase in writing. About 10 people were in the audience on May 20 – with half being staff. No one from the public spoke.

Much of Thursday’s dialog among the board centered on whether the public in this economy could handle another increase of any sort and the infrastructure needs of the district.

At the May 6 budget review-rate hike meeting, it was agreed the 4 percent across the board rate hike proposed by staff would be brought back at 2 percent.

The vote of a 2 percent hike on sewer and water failed 3-2, with members Dale Rise and Chris Cefalu the two in favor of it.

Board member Eric Schafer said he would revise his vote and resubmit the motion. However, for legal reasons that is not allowed. That’s how the half percent came about. It appeared to be the only way a majority would agree.

“I respect the process used today,” Schafer said after all of the votes. “When you are elected, you are elected to vote and not abstain for some ridiculous reason.”

Garrido hearing postponed by judge

By Sam Stanton, Sacramento Bee

A judge today postponed a hearing for Phillip and Nancy Garrido until next month, with officials saying a psychiatrist who treated him in the 1990s was delivering her medical records to court as ordered.

The records had not been sent in time for a hearing last month, which sparked today's court session.

Both Garridos were in court briefly today and Nancy Garrido attorney Stephen Tapson said later that the two had taken advantage of a five-minute phone call the court had allowed in May. Tapson said he assumed they spoke about God because "that's what they're into."

Read the whole story

EDC assessor, judge candidates make case to be elected

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE — The two candidates for El Dorado County assessor squared-off Wednesday before an audience that included their boss Tim Holcomb, who is retiring.

Retired El Dorado County Judge Gene Rasmussen and sitting Judge Suzanne Kingsbury were also at the Soroptimist International of South Lake Tahoe forum at Harveys Lake Tahoe.

Keith Brooks had it easy because his opponent for the judgeship based in Cameron Park, Robert Huckaby, chose not to attend.

Michael Gordon and Karl Weiland

All three candidates were given time to make an opening statement, then answered a few questions before making a closing statement. All will be on the June 8 ballot in California.

Karl Weiland is the current assistant assessor and has been endorsed by Holcomb. Michael Gordon is the senior appraiser in the assessor’s office. Brooks was appointed to the bench almost a year ago, and therefore is the incumbent.

Neither assessor candidate had one defining statement that set him apart from his opponent. It was that Weiland threw out more statistics, was a bit more polished and had longer answers than Gordon.

Weiland is the No. 2 guy in the office. Gordon is lower on the totem pole, but the most experienced appraiser.

When asked about assessments on property in the Angora burn area, both said Proposition 8 should be applied so people are not adversely affected with higher rates. But that isn't what happened. And people affected by the fire were in the room.

Both said it's up to the county tax collector to go after delinquent taxpayers.

Brooks primarily handles civil litigation, but said it is imperative judges understand all facets of the law because they have to fill in for their peers.

Keith Brooks

He is familiar with Tahoe, having worked in the casinos out of college, met his wife on the South Shore and they have a house in Lake Tahoe.

Brooks is not sure penalties for crimes will go by the wayside even in a depressed economy because it costs money to deal with the issue. He does see community service as a potential solution, though not completely.

He believes in a holistic approach when it comes to dealing with juvenile crime – like drug court and Court Appointed Special Advocates.

These candidates have been invited back to the South Shore next week. The South Tahoe Chamber of Commerce is hosting a forum for the offices of El Dorado County judge, sheriff and assessor on May 25 at 6pm at the South Tahoe Senior Center at 3052 Lake Tahoe Blvd. in South Lake Tahoe.

Single-car accident snarls traffic in South Lake

An accident late Wednesday afternoon in South Lake Tahoe prompted phone lines to be busy as locals tried to figure out what happened.

A dispatcher for the South Lake Tahoe Police Department said a vehicle went off the road near Grocery Outlet and the Upper Truckee River about 4:15pm.

No major injuries occurred, but the dispatcher didn't know if anyone was taken to Barton Memorial Hospital.

Calls were left with the police department's watch commander. Until officers return calls it's not known what caused the accident, who was involved and the true extent of injuries.

The accident did cause quite a backup on Highway 50 – mostly in the eastbound lane. Several police cars were at the scene as well as South Lake Tahoe fire vehicles.

County threatens to sue South Tahoe over redevelopment

By Kathryn Reed

Redevelopment is going to happen – unless El Dorado County sues to stop South Lake Tahoe from going forward.

Judi Harkins was tasked with being the messenger for the county at Tuesday’s council meeting. She read a letter into the record from the Board of Supervisors stating that entity’s adamant belief the city should not go forward with its plans, and calling into question the city’s blight findings.

This was the second reading of the ordinance. It’s now official.

The council voted 3-1 to create the 3,100-acre redevelopment area that spans about 20 percent of the city from the airport, to the Y, to past Harrison Avenue.

Councilman Bill Crawford, a longtime vocal opponent of redevelopment, reminded the council, staff and nearly full house that although this is being touted as a funding mechanism, the Heavenly Village project resulted in the general fund being raided of $7.2 million to cover costs. This in turn took money away from roads and other common uses for that pot of money.

Councilman Hal Cole recused himself because of owning property in the area. He is working on a deal to change that status.

Until a lawsuit is filed, the redevelopment plan goes forward. No specific project is part of the plan. Eminent domain is not an option.

What it’s designed to do is create tax increment based on property tax values – with the county, South Tahoe Public Utility District and others having their share cut, thus the reason for the disharmony – and creating a pool of cash that property owners could use, per city approval, for improvements.

It’s similar to what the Ski Run Business Improvement District is doing as it taps into redevelopment dollars from that area.

Divided South Lake council threatens Ski Run BID future

By Kathryn Reed

Nearly one-third of the money it takes to maintain Ski Run Boulevard’s landscaping and bike trail is in jeopardy of disappearing.

Every year the business improvement district that includes more than 70 businesses and property owners in this area of South Lake Tahoe must come before the City Council to renew the BID. On Tuesday it was not approved. Neither was it denied.

Councilmen Jerry Birdwell and Hal Cole recused themselves because of, respectively, owning property on the street and nearby. Because the matter involves money it necessitates the remaining three to vote in unison for the BID to go forward.

Councilman Bill Crawford abstained. Abstaining is allowed without cause or reason needing to be given.

“I am not opposed to what is going on at Ski Run. But over the years all kinds of public money was spent there,” Crawford told *Lake Tahoe News* after the meeting. “No one bothered to talk to me about why I abstained two weeks ago so I don’t know what silly game they are playing. I think we can get out of the business of having to dicker with this group every year.”

The vote Crawford referenced was when the council voted to have it on this week’s agenda, which was not a monetary issue.

It was agreed Tuesday that the issue would be brought up at the next council meeting – June 1.

Brian Des Rochers and Barbara Tenney, both board members of the Ski Run BID, spoke at the meeting. They have a commitment from Crawford to sit down in the coming days to get his view on the matter.

“It wasn’t quite what we anticipated. It definitely was shocking,” Des Rochers said of the vote after the meeting.

Nonetheless, Des Rochers said the businesses would continue with the On the Run theme, events like Saturday’s cleanup day, the June 5 bike festival and parade, and the third Thursday night of the month for live music starting June 17.

The reality is the money allocated to the BID that is threatened was for landscape maintenance, not for marketing and events.

If the allocation is not approved by the council, that body will have to decide if finding the money in the general fund to maintain Ski Run, partial funding or letting it turn into something like the weeds along Linear Park on Highway 50 will be the option. (The latter keeps happening even though the now defunct Core 24 Charities helped get a water line put in by Tahoe Meadows for irrigation and gave the city $20,000 to beautify the area, which hasn’t happened.)

Redevelopment money ($5,000 this fiscal year) has been used to pay for a consultant to run meetings, fly her in and put her up in a hotel. It’s not known why one of the lodging facilities on the boulevard didn’t offer a free room. Money also went to pay for meeting spaces – all were on the boulevard.

“(Redevelopment funds) can’t pay for ongoing maintenance, but they can be used to help stimulate new business development,” explained Gene Palazzo, who heads the city’s Redevelopment Agency. “They need some seed money to get things going. Redevelopment can help with that.”

The BID has requested another $5,000 for this fiscal year that would be spent on nonprofit incorporation fees, a website and newsletter startup costs. Because those dollars were wrapped into Tuesday’s entire BID proposal, they will not be forthcoming at this point.

The city’s Parks and Recreation Department oversee maintenance of the boulevard between Highway 50 and Pioneer Trail. (The marina side is not in the BID.)

Parks Director Gary Moore said for fiscal year 2010-11 it is projected to cost $29,900 to maintain that stretch of the city.

The money would go to:

• $11,800 – landscaping. This includes fixing sprinklers, mowing, edging, replacing dead trees or trimming broken limbs.

• $5,300 – water. There is a meter on each end of the boulevard.

• $4,600 – electricity. There are 80 light standards. (With LED lights being provided by a state grant, that cost is likely to come down in future years.)

• $4,000 – bike trail maintenance. One mile of pavement is on each side of the road.

• $4,200 – light maintenance. More than 20 bulbs are replaced each year, and ballasts need repair.

The money would come from:

• $11,300 – BID. The property owners pay $2 per linear foot of frontage on Ski Run. Businesses are assessed a percentage of their gross income. All of this is collected in July via business license renewals.

• $10,000 – Measure S. Each mile of bike trail receives $5,000 for maintenance. An exception by Measure S overseers allows this money to be used on lighting issues with the theory being the bike trail is used at night by cyclists.

• $8,600 – Parks and Recreation general fund.

The BID collected $10,500 for the 2009-10 fiscal year that ends Sept. 30. This means the maintenance for the boulevard should not be in jeopardy this summer. But it's not known for certain.

Finance Director Christine Vuletich said in an email response to a phone message that she could answer questions today about the issue – but that didn't work for *Lake Tahoe News'* deadline.

The question to her would have been: With the money collected based on a July 1-June 30 fiscal year per business license fees and the city on an Oct. 1-Sept. 30 fiscal year, is the money collected for the BID divided between two fiscal years or used solely in what would be an upcoming fiscal year?

The money collected for and by the BID members is essentially a self-tax. That is why Mayor Kathay Lovell does not understand Crawford's reluctance to continue on with the 7-year-old BID.

"To me it's a no-brainer. It doesn't cost us anything," Lovell said.

No one in the BID's jurisdiction protested the assessment.

It's possible the BID members could collect the fee themselves. But the money would not have to go to landscaping.

They could use it all on marketing, promotions and/or events.

This means the city would still be left with the decision as to what to do about landscaping on Ski Run Boulevard. When the California Tahoe Conservancy put up $1.5 million for the bike trail, lights, curb and gutter the deal was the city would maintain it all. This means with a BID the people on the street pay for it and without a BID it will most likely come out of the general fund – which means other locations in the city could see fewer dollars.