Fallen Leaf Lake concessionaire issue nears resolution

By Susan Wood

The board tasked with running Fallen Leaf Lake operations agreed to start negotiations with a local electrician to run the store and marina in the small mountain haven near South Lake Tahoe.

In a complete turnaround of events, Saturday's meeting, which included snippy comments between board members, concluded with Community Services District board President Mike Kraft declaring it the most "positive" gathering, applause and a unanimous 4-0 vote in favor of South Shore residents' Rob and Sandy Wirths' proposal as concessionaires.



The Fallen Leaf Lake board is close to having a concessionaire for this summer. Photo/Kathryn Reed

With an eye on summer approaching, the district sent board

member Jennifer Thornton to meet with the Wirths – who run Innovative Electric – to hash out the final contract. Thornton pledged to return with either a thumbs up or down by April 10. Board members are optimistic because the Wirths have seen the contract as a baseline for what's expected.

At the end of the meeting at Lake Tahoe Airport, a collective sigh of relief seemed to embody the embattled board, which has run up against months of opposition by a segment of the community that did not want former concessionaires John and Ruth Rich ousted. After 14 years of operating the hub of the mountain village, the couple found themselves at odds with the board about accounting practices and an agreement over rent to be paid to the district, along with other issues.

The quagmire led to a breakdown in talks with the Riches, legal threats by the community, former board President Dana Clark resigning, and the previous choice of concessionaire after the Riches' stint to opt out less than a month after agreeing to take the helm.

As it stands now, the contract calls for a $121,500 minimum rent to be paid to the district for revenue gained by the concessionaire for running the store, café and marina under a six-year lease. The concessionaire needs to put up a $20,000 security deposit to assure performance of the lease.

"If I would look at that contract for a job, I would do it," Kraft told Rob Wirth, who was one of about 20 people in the room for the meeting that lasted more than four hours.

When Rick Firkins backed out of the concessionaire role last month, Kraft ran an advertisement to find a replacement. In Saturday's meeting, Thornton questioned his authority to do so and insisted he should have called an emergency board meeting.

"You were out of line," she said.

On numerous occasions like this one, Kraft pointed to the

clock ticking as motivation for his actions. And with that, tensions mounted.

At one point, he told Thornton to “zip it” when she repeatedly demanded he follow the bylaws and involve the board more in selecting a concessionaire.

To that, Thornton barked that she wasn’t a child.

After a break, the board plowed through its agenda and civil conversation resumed. When the agenda returned to the concessionaire, it was as though clouds had lifted when Wirth gave his five-minute pitch to run the operation.

“I’d like to bring a good attitude and fresh community feel, which I think is needed, especially after sitting in on this meeting,” he said, adding he’d like to use a team effort from those he knows and bring the community together. The issue has divided the mountain village for almost a year.

Wirth came armed with letters of recommendation, including one from Food and Beverage Director Dave Dennis of Stanford Sierra Camp. The two men worked together for seven years at the lake’s university retreat.

Beyond running an electric company, Wirth has served on the Barton Hospital Foundation board and the South Lake Tahoe Code of Appeals Commission. Since 1988, he’s lived at Fallen Leaf Lake with his family, where he enjoys water skiing and backcountry snow skiing.

It’s for these very reasons Wirth would like to make improvements to enhance the experience at Fallen Leaf Lake. He wants to add more hiking equipment to the store inventory and provide lakeview dining at the café.

In Wirth’s response to the request for proposals, he agreed to the financial terms in spirit and threw in a broiler and backup generator for good measure.

His proposed café menus are extensive and personal. Included are “Rob’s hearty quiche” and “Mom’s macaroni salad”. His children have put in their two cents, too. They want board games at the village store.

The plan is to have the operation running by Memorial Day weekend.

In other business:

• The board agreed to declare a special election for August to fill the seat vacated by Clark.

• In July, the district needs a two-thirds vote to continue a special tax to pay for the fire district at an annual rate of $660 per improved parcel. El Dorado County is no longer providing funds to augment the Fallen Leaf fire district.

• The board also hashed out its five-year fire master plan and plans to soon hire a fire chief.

• The district decided to take up board member Terri Thomas’ idea to spend up to $500 for improved communications, which would be anchored by a newsletter.

Tahoe businesses turning food waste into compost

By Kathryn Reed

By separating out food waste for composting, Embassy Suites in South Lake Tahoe last year reduced the amount of trash it produced by 33 percent. Yes, the hotel’s occupancy was down in 2009, but only by 8 percent.

David Hansen, director of engineering for the property, has been spearheading all things green at the Stateline area hotel. He is also the key to making Compost Tahoe a reality.



Other members of Compost Tahoe are Joanna Walters, Tom Wendell, Garry Bowen, Chris Taylor and Erik Taylor.

“Compost Tahoe has more of an educational piece to it,” Hansen said of the local compost movement.

He would like more people to use compostable products, which are different than biodegradable.

According to Compost Tahoe’s website, “Compostable: means an item will break down completely into soil, water and carbon dioxide with no leftover residue. Biodegradable: means an item will break down into smaller and smaller pieces.”

Another goal is to get people to use the end product – the composted material as a soil amendment. Embassy does this.

For a while Hansen was making two trips a week to Full Circle Compost in Minden to deliver food scraps and other compostable material. With South Tahoe Refuse starting a pilot compost program and businesses besides Embassy now on board, Hansen can let others do the driving.

Last week Zephyr Cove Resort joined the pilot program. Both Marriott properties on the South Shore are interested. Whittell High School may be another player.

“We are trying to reduce the amount of solid waste refuse we produce,” said Mark Smith, project manager and environmental steward with Aramark. “There are a lot of items that go in this besides just food waste and food prep.”

(Aramark owns the two paddle-wheelers on the South Shore, and Zephyr Cove Lodge.)

Locally, Aramark doesn't use many compostable products besides food. However, coffee grounds, eggshells, nutshells, tea bags without a staple, cardboard without tape, paper towels, napkins and shredded paper are all compostable.

One thing that makes Embassy unique is that it uses compostable plates, flatware and cups – so even more is going into its bin.

"We are using mostly recycled content material. We have not gone full-bore with compostable material. We thought this would be a first step," Smith said of separating out food waste.

Just like what Embassy had to do, it is a matter of training employees to learn what goes in the compost container and what keeps going into the regular trash.



An employee at Embassy Suites separates food waste for composting. Photos/Provided

"In the bin is a bag that is compostable," Hansen explained. That bag is then tossed into a dumpster just for composting that STR picks up.

“This is part of integrated recycling. A good amount of weight is in food waste,” said Jeanne Lear with South Tahoe Refuse.

Every city and county in California must divert waste from landfills by 50 percent. South Lake Tahoe has set a goal of 55 percent. STR expects to hit 50 percent when the Resource Recovery Center opens in April. Eliminating some food waste will help hit that target as well.

In the pilot program that started with Embassy in February, the garbage company wants to see how big of a route it could handle, how much compostable material properties will collect, what it’s like to take a front loader to the Minden facility once a week, and the benefits and drawbacks of the program.

Just like normal garbage, the amount of compostable waste will fluctuate with the seasons – another concern of the refuse company’s.

Lear said she envisions bigger properties participating in the composting program. Douglas Disposal, which the group owns in the Carson Valley, is looking at Walmart having a composting bin.

STR’s permit from the state does not allow it to compost on-site in South Tahoe. Residential compost pick up is not likely. Lear also pointed to the difficulty of collecting compostable material at businesses in strip malls because of space, the greater potential to contaminate the compost bin, and logistics.

A definitive time line to know if the compost route is working hasn’t been set.

The other part of the equation is with Full Circle Compost. If the goods being delivered by STR aren’t actually compostable, there is no reason for them to keep accepting the matter.

But it’s also possible to contaminate the plastic recycling

program if large quantities of compostable plastic gets mixed in with recyclable plastic.

It’s back to that education component. People need to know what they are using and what to do with it when they are done.

“This is a great for the community. It could make the South Shore sustainable powerhouse that it should be,” Hansen said of the compost program.

Publisher’s note: ***Read Lake Tahoe News on March 30 to find out what compostable products are all about.***

Bay Area man dies in snowmobile accident

Kevin Robert Rudnicki, 43, of Oakley died in a snowmobiling accident in Alpine County.

Thursday’s single-vehicle accident occurred near Utica Reservoir.

The accident is under investigation.

McClintock rips government, but provides no solutions

By Kathryn Reed

Rep. Tom McClintock rattled off a slew of statistics about how bad the national debt is going to be in the next five and 10 years – mostly because of government bailouts and the week-old national health care plan.

The Republican whose district office is in Granite Bay, but who got elected to the 4th congressional district without living in it, was at South Tahoe High School on Saturday talking to a largely partisan audience of more than 150 people.

“There is twice as much money out there as there was last year,” McClintock said in his 15-minute opening speech. “The federal government should not bail out people who make bad decisions.”



Rep. Tom McClintock speaks to constituents Saturday. Photos/Kathryn Reed

He received a resounding roar of applause to this. Many of his statements were met favorably by his constituents.

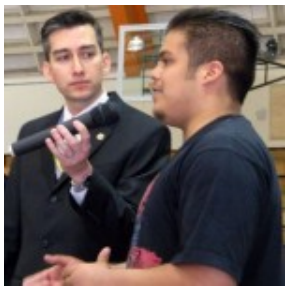
However, “out there” wasn’t exactly defined. Talk to anyone on the South Shore and there is less money out there than a year ago. The state of California has told cities to expect a 20 percent decrease in sales tax this year compared to 2009. Unemployment numbers for South Lake Tahoe are expected to come

out Monday, with the figure to hit 18 percent.

“Two-thirds of economic growth depends on consumer spending,” McClintock said.

The congressman didn’t have definitive ideas for where the jobs that bring the cash to fill the wallets so the people have something to spend are going to come from.

“You guys have failed us,” Jesus Herrera, a junior at STHS, said. “I haven’t seen anything from either party that’s creating a more secure future.”



STHS student Jesus Herrera talks as Norman Gonzales holds the microphone.

McClintock did not defend everything his party has done. He said he was against attacking Iraq and added that it should take an act of Congress to go to war.

“There were some very serious mistakes made by the Bush administration. This administration is doubling down on them,” McClintock said.

He said he believes people voted for President Obama not because of his policies, but because they didn’t want John McCain for fear it would be like a third Bush term. McClintock

said the country is getting a second Jimmy Carter term.

When Larry Green, Lake Tahoe Unified School District member, brought up the inefficiency of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, McClintock said, “I think No Child Left Behind needs to be repealed.”



Tom McClintock

The congressman believes the difference in education today compared to the 1960s when California had one of the best systems in the country is that teachers were in charge of their classrooms and had more of a say over curriculum.

However, this doesn’t explain why other states with a similar structure, as well has having to work within the federal mandates, do better on test scores.

Many people brought up health care and how the costs have affected their lives, how insurance companies are making decisions for them, and how employer plans leave little choice.

To this McClintock said government destroyed freedom of choice because they give tax credits to employers for health care.

McClintock, like the 11 attorneys general who’ve filed suit against the government, believes the health care plan signed by Obama is unconstitutional. He does not believe the government should force people to have health care.

But the reality is government forces things on people every day. No one has the option to opt out of paying for Social

Security or Medicare, though McClintock seems to support that idea.

This pep rally of sorts fired up the believers, who mingled afterward with the congressman and in small clusters. It left others wondering what this man is going to do about everything he doesn't like and if he is going to stop blaming others for all the ills that consume this country.

Brzezinski returning to head EDC Animal Control

By Shanna McCord, Santa Cruz Sentinel

SANTA CRUZ – Deja vu might best describe Henry Brzezinski's career in protecting animals.

Brzezinski, head of the county's Animal Services Authority, is moving back to El Dorado County to take the same position he held there for nearly six years before landing the Santa Cruz job in June 2008.

Before working in El Dorado County, Brzezinski ran the Santa Cruz SPCA briefly in 2001.

Read the whole story

BLM gets boost for Nevada wild horse management

By Frank X. Mullen Jr., Reno Gazette-Journal

The more horses that are removed from the range, the higher federal care and feeding costs soar.

They are about to go a lot higher.

President Barack Obama's 2011 budget proposal calls for a $12 million increase in the Bureau of Land Management's $64 million wild horse and burro program. If approved, that would bring that portion of the agency's budget to $75.7 million.

Read the whole story

DCSD to narrow superintendent choices next week

By Kathryn Reed

Douglas County school board will have a special meeting March 30 to narrow the field of superintendent candidates to no more than three.

Six people were interviewed this week to run the district which has schools at the lake and in the Carson Valley. The closest candidate hails from Washoe County, with some from outside Nevada and one from Canada.

After the board decides on the finalists at the Monday meeting at 6pm in Minden, site visits and background checks will be

conducted.

It’s possible the board will schedule another special meeting to pick the superintendent. The decision could also be made at the next regular meeting on April 13.

John Soderman is the interim superintendent. He took over for Carol Lark who resigned mid-school year.

He will begin the recruitment for a principal at Whittell High School. Sue Shannon gave notice this week she will be retiring from the Zephyr Cove school in June. It’s possible the next superintendent will have final say over who is at the helm of the 7-12 school.

South Tahoe gang members plead guilty

South Lake Tahoe police officers are calling this week’s sentencing of three gang members the dismantling of the command structure of the Cyclones street gang.

Jorge Casillas, Carlos Trejo and a 16-year-old male pleaded guilty to first degree burglary, assault with a deadly weapon and participating in a criminal street gang in the June stabbing of a 15-year-old South Lake Tahoe youth.

Casillas was given 11 years and four months in state prison for the June incident and an earlier crime involving a gun. Trejo’s sentence is one year in county jail and five years of probation. The teenager will be sentenced later.

The Cyclones street gang is a clique associated with the South Side, or Sureño, street gangs originating in Southern

California and the California State Prison system.

This is the second such street gang in South Lake Tahoe to have its command structure deconstructed by South Lake Tahoe gang investigators in the last year. By November 2009, several East Side Familia gang members and their leader had been arrested on charges ranging from drug sales to firearms and attempted homicide. The East Side Familia was a local street gang associated with the North Side, or Norteño street gangs, also originating in Southern California and the California State Prison system.

These investigations have led to the identification of several street gangs operating in and about South Lake Tahoe, with more than 500 gang members and their associates being contacted. The Cyclones and East Side Familia street gangs are only two of the street gangs contacted by police gang officers. Other gangs range from tagging crews, white supremacist and non-traditional street gangs.

Although the police department's gang officers view these convictions as victories, they also view them with concern. It is not uncommon for street gangs to re-assemble command structure or to splinter off forming other street gangs once their core has been disrupted.

The police department has formed a new task force to deal with new threats to investigating officers involved in this attempted homicide investigation.

Bijou school seeks $300,000

grant to turn scores around



By Kathryn Reed

Money is so often touted as the difference between high and low academic performing schools.

Bijou Community School might get to test that theory. Bijou expects to receive a nearly $300,000 grant in May that must be spent by Sept. 30. The grant may prove money does make a difference when it comes to education performance.

Bijou is in the lower socio-economic echelon in the district. For many, English is not their first language nor is it spoken at home.

Bijou is just one of many troubled schools in the state. On Wednesday, the Nation's Report Card was released. California shared last place for reading scores with Louisiana, Arizona, New Mexico and Washington, D.C. New Jersey and New York are at the top. Those states spend close to twice the amount of money per child than the roughly $8,000 California doles out.

The South Lake Tahoe elementary is one of about 200 schools at the bottom of the rung, according California Department of Education stats released this month. Even so, it has made significant improvements, especially with the 64-point gain on the 2009 Academic Performance Index.

The API is part of the federal No Child Left Behind mandate. NCLB has criteria for schools to meet based on comparing apples to oranges in that this year's fourth-graders' tests will be compared to last year's instead of each grade level

showing improvement or a decline from year to year.

It’s possible if Bijou does well on this year’s tests, it would be off the federal watch list.

It was decided at the Lake Tahoe Unified School District meeting Tuesday that Bijou would bypass going after American Recovery and Reinvestment Act dollars because the strings attached mandate that by the first day of next school year, which begins in August, one of the following intervention models would have to be implemented:

• replace the principal and at least 50 percent of the staff;

• close Bijou and convert it to a charter;

• close Bijou and enroll the students at higher-achieving schools in LTUSD;

• transform the school by changing how students are taught.

“There’s no logic involved. It’s offensive,” Jim Watson, director of Human Resources, said of the intervention models. “(Bijou) has taken on this challenge of improvement whole-heartedly already. It doesn’t make sense to close, disband or give-away that school.”

The $300,000 the school is going after is a federal School Improvement Grant. The plan is to have 18 days of summer school starting in July for more than half of the 500 students. The school day would be 3.5 hours.

Principal Karen Tinlin and her staff devised a plan last week to bring in Guided Language Acquisition Development trainers to teach the staff for a couple days in this method and then have it used on the students in the summer.

“It’s a program that really does help our English learners, which is where we struggle,” Tinlin said.

Parents would be part of the process. Technology like Netbooks and white boards could be bought with the funds. The grant pays for all supplies, teacher time, necessary meals, support staff and the coaches.

Bijou will know in May if was awarded the grant. Watson said there is no reason to believe the school won't get the money.

Poachers sought in killing of deer near Carson City

By Pete Krajewski, Reno Gazette-Journal

Nevada game wardens are looking for poachers who killed three deer west of Carson City on Feb. 25, including one doe who was pregnant with twins.

Two does were found killed, with nearly all of the meat taken, and a buck was also discovered nearby in Voltaire Canyon, Rob Buonamici, Nevada's chief game warden said. Two near-term embryos were found discarded near the gut pile of the animals, Buonamici said.

Read the whole story