

SLT council touches on annexing Meyers, electing a mayor

By Kathryn Reed

Is South Lake Tahoe about to redefine its boundaries? Will an elected mayor be the way the city is governed?

Kenny Curtzwiler who lives in Meyers and former South Lake Tahoe City Councilman Ted Long broached those topics. They both spoke at the Feb. 9 City Council meeting during public comments.

Councilman Jerry Birdwell at the end of the regular session got consensus from his colleagues to have an item on a future agenda that would help push the discussion forward. The idea is to have a community meeting to talk about possibly annexing portions of El Dorado County into the city limits as well as going from a general law city to a charter city.

“People who want to be annexed should do a grassroots (movement). Not the council,” Councilman Hal Cole said.

The council said it welcomes the discussion in a community meeting format, but does not want it to be at a council meeting.

Councilman Bill Crawford suggested Mayor Kathay Lovell attend the next Meyers Roundtable meeting to gauge what that group thinks of annexation.

He cautioned that it is expensive to become a charter city and that there are a lot of hoops to go through.

“Do we have the kind of people in this community who can give up their life or job for four years?” Crawford asked in

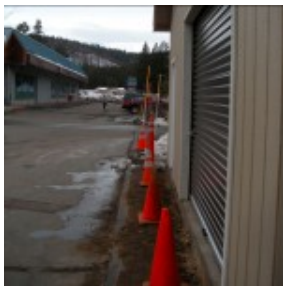
reference to an elected mayor.

Polluted groundwater sites on all ends of South Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

Chemicals polluting the groundwater throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin on the California side are keeping engineers working full time.

Most toxins are related to a chemical used in dry cleaning and the now banned fuel additive MTBE.



This building will house equipment to clean up a site.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

A temporary structure has been erected behind the Y transit center in the Raley's shopping center in South Lake Tahoe to house a remediation system.

At this site tetrachloroethylene (PCE) has been found in the

groundwater. It came from the laundry facility that used to have a self-serve dry cleaning machine. PCE is a chemical often used in dry cleaning. It has been in the soil at this location since the 1970s.

“As a result of that operation, leaks associated with PCE have contaminated the soil and groundwater,” said Chuck Curtis, supervising engineer at Lahontan.

He said the nearest well belonging to South Tahoe Public Utility District has not operated for years because it was also contaminated by a nearby gas station with MTBE, a fuel additive that has since been banned from Lake Tahoe.

“We have no active wells in the South Y area. We have written that area off for now and the future,” said Dennis Cocking, STPUD spokesman.

Insurance companies for the former property owner and current property owner will foot the bill – which is likely to hit millions of dollars in attorney fees and cleanup costs.

Jim Meredith, who works for the property management firm contracted by property owner Seven Springs Ltd., said they are working with Lahontan to solve the problem.

The current owners of the laundry facility were not the ones who owned it when the leaks occurred.

Lisa Dernbach, senior engineering geologist for Lahontan who is overseeing this project, said, “The contaminated soil and groundwater is mostly outside the front door of the Laundromat. We believe it’s from when they filled up the machine. We think they let the liquid drain out of the hose into the parking lot.”

A new filter and drainage system will be constructed. Air will be injected into the groundwater and a vacuum system used to suck vapors out of the soil. It will take about two years to

complete the process. Monitoring will be ongoing and continue one year after the cleanup work is done.

Ski Run situation

In the middle of South Lake is an ongoing cleanup site at the old Moss Chevron Station at Ski Run Boulevard and Highway 50 that is now Lake Tahoe Vacation Resort.

“This (cleanup) started a long time ago, in the '90s. We were hoping the ozone sparging would be really effective,” Brian Grey, engineering geologist with Lahontan, said. “It’s still years away before we will be looking at closing the case due to the fact they will have to employ another remedial effort out there to reduce the concentrations.”

Because the ozone flushing treatment didn’t work, engineers recently switched to air sparge.

Flushing the system helped with chemicals associated with gasoline, but had no affect on the MTBE, Grey said.

The toxic plume is not near any wells that STPUD owns. The nearest drinking well is in the gated Tahoe Meadows community. Lake Tahoe is the closest body of water that could be affected by the toxic plume.

Grey said extensive monitoring is in place and he doesn’t foresee the toxins reaching the lake.

He said there is a potential threat of vapors from the toxins reaching the hotel. The general manager of the hotel did not return a phone call.

Compounding the situation is contaminated soil excavated from the site was returned to the site.

The cleanup is partially being paid by Chevron, with the bulk being picked up by the state’s underground storage cleanup fund. Money for that fund comes from taxes drivers pay at gas

pumps in California.

Grey did not have a dollar amount on what has been spent or what the final cost is projected to be.

Stateline area issues

Several years ago residents in the Tahoe Meadows subdivision complained about the taste of their drinking water. Tests done by Lahontan revealed MTBE and PCE in the water.

Some homeowners are still on private wells, having opted out of the deal to hook into South Tahoe PUD. It is six private wells that are having problems.

Some MTBE in that area long ago was traced to Tahoe Tom's gas station, according to Cocking.

Grey said the MTBE source is unknown.

"Some think some of the former gas station up there (are responsible), but our samplings don't show that," Grey said.

Lahontan is in the process of figuring out where the PCE originated. A dry cleaner used to operate at the Village Center near Stateline.

Terry Hackett, managing general partner for the company that owns the Village Center, said a dry cleaners did not exist when he bought the property in 1980. He said they are working with Lahontan to find the source, but said his company and no lessee of theirs is responsible for the groundwater contamination.

Until the source of the leak is definitively identified and a remediation plan formulated, Tahoe Meadows homeowners with contaminated wells are advised not to drink the water, Grey said. PCE can cause cancer.

These houses are lakefront, which means PCE is also in Lake

Tahoe. Even though the state water agency has not tested the lake for PCE in this area, Grey said he does not believe the amounts seeping in pose a problem to humans or fish that swim in the area.

“There are no plans for testing Lake Tahoe,” Grey said.

Other contaminated locations

Dernbach said the most polluted dry cleaning site around the lake is in Kings Beach. A Tahoe City site is also being worked on.

“The problem is there is no state or federal cleanup fund to help them out,” Dernbach said of dry cleaning sites. “We let them drag out a little longer because they can’t afford to pay the cleanup at once.”

MTBE settlement

The nearly \$70 million a jury in San Francisco awarded the South Tahoe PUD in 2001 is almost gone. Cocking expects it to be used on MTBE related matters by 2012.

MTBE was first detected in 1996. STPUD sued dozens of oil companies, with Shell and a manufacturer of MTBE the last two to settle.

Cocking said the district’s belief the whole time was, “We didn’t put this in the water, it is going to cost millions of dollars and decades to cleanup, and the ratepayers should not shoulder the cost.”

The board made the decision to not allow any trace of MTBE in drinking water, even though that is stricter than what the law requires.

Hull repairs knock Tahoe Queen out of service

By Kathryn Reed

The Tahoe Queen is being dismantled. Sort of.

In order to comply with an anticipated visit by the U.S. Coast Guard in the fall, the paddle-wheeler will not churn the waters of Lake Tahoe until late April or early May. This is so workers can overhaul the interior of the hull.

The boat will remain docked at Ski Run Marina in South Lake Tahoe while crews do the work.



The Tahoe Queen will remain tied up through April.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

“This year our marine engineers came out and looked at the Tahoe Queen. They said we need to go into the bilge area where the inner hull is,” said Austin Sass, spokesman for Aramark, which owns the Queen and Dixie II on the South Shore. “In order to do that we need to disassemble all of the galley

equipment in the lower part of the boat. The walk-in freezer and grill have to be disassembled. You can't just move them."

Water and electricity will be turned off. The equipment is likely to be temporarily moved to upper decks where guests would normally be.

Sass said the inspection in the fall happens every five years. How inspectors test it will not require disassembling the boat again.

"Inspectors use special devices to measure the hull and whatever else they inspect," Sass said.

While the Queen is offline, divers will take off algae and other things that may have latched onto the outside of the hull.

Sass didn't have a dollar figure for what the work will cost or what it might mean in terms of lost revenue. He does not anticipate a rate increase for sightseers because of the work.

The Dixie is expected to pick up customers for the next few months with its offerings being expanded.

"I don't anticipate visitors to Lake Tahoe will have less of an opportunity to go out on the lake and enjoy Emerald Bay and enjoy the experience of cruising," Sass said.

The work is being done now in what is the slow season for cruising so when the summer crowds arrive both boats will be plying the water.

Even though the company released information about trips to Squaw Valley last month, those February and March excursions have been canceled.

Sass said the full Squaw boat trip schedule was originally cutback because work is being done at the Tahoe City Marina.

Garwoods Restaurant could accommodate the paddle-wheeler, but he said it was tricky to dock there because of the low lake level and the buoy field.

The water level to-date has not posed a problem for the Queen or Dixie on the South Shore.

The Queen began operating on Lake Tahoe in 1983. In 2008, it received a half million dollar makeover that had to do mostly with cosmetic and interior improvements.

Million-dollar home sales decline in Tahoe

By Jim Wasserman, Sacramento Bee

Sales of homes costing \$1 million or more fell sharply across the capital region and throughout California last year as buyers remained wary, large mortgages were hard to get and more homes slipped below the benchmark value, researcher MDA Dataquick reported Thursday.

The La Jolla firm counted 291 sales of homes priced above \$1 million in 2009 in Sacramento, Placer, El Dorado, Yolo and Nevada counties. A year earlier, the tally was 502 in the eight-county region. The capital region accounted for 1.6 percent of high-end sales in a state where coastal regions rule the luxury market sector.

Read the whole story

Dugard relocates, money scarce

By Jeanine Benca and Caterina Mellinger, Contra Costa Times

Kidnap victim Jaycee Dugard and her children have relocated to a safe, private location in a rural part of the East Bay, within driving distance of the house near Antioch where Dugard was kept most of her life, according to sources who have been helping the family.

For the past four months, donations from East Bay Fellowship â€” a Danville church whose leaders have a background helping victims of human trafficking â€” have been used to pay the rent on Dugard's new home,



Jaycee Lee
Dugard

said East Bay Fellowship Associate Pastor Mari Hanes.

Read the whole story

Contracts awarded to clean up Meyers Landfill

By Kathryn Reed

El Dorado County Board of Supervisors has awarded two contracts for work to be done at the toxic Meyers Landfill on the outskirts of South Lake Tahoe.

However, the decades-old lawsuit brought by the U.S. Forest Service against a slew of defendants must be resolved before work can begin. The feds own the land that the county used as a dump until the early 1970s.

The federal government filed a lawsuit almost 20 years ago when vinyl chloride was found seeping into the groundwater.

"They are working really diligently to settle it," said Gerri Silva, director of the county's Environmental Management Department, said of the lawsuit.

With the rule of no dirt being able to be moved until May 1 in the Lake Tahoe Basin, officials have their fingers crossed a settlement will be reached by then so the contractor can begin work on the cap. The cap on the old dump off Pioneer Trail could take all summer to construct.

Sukut Construction of Southern California was awarded the \$2.6 million contract. This is much less than the more than \$5 million the U.S. Forest Service had projected.

Sukut has worked on a number of landfill projects up and down California, with Jamestown the nearest site. Its website says, "Sukut is one of the nation's top landfill constructor. We provide a full range of construction for all elements for private and public landfills through landfill expansion, landfill repair and landfill closures."

The company is familiar with the South Shore, having been a subcontractor on work contracted by the county after the 2007 Angora Fire.

El Dorado also awarded a nearly \$240,000 contract to Geosyntec Consultants to oversee quality control. The company is headquartered in Georgia, but has offices in the Bay Area.

This oversight is required for Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) projects. Geosyntec has done work in the basin before for the Forest Service.

The case needs to be settled to have work begin because money is not in hand to honor the bids. A \$750,000 grant from the California Integrated Waste Management Board is all that's secured. Much of what is being discussed by attorneys is who will pay what amount.

Garridos, Dugard lived like a family, documents state

By Sam Stanton, Sacramento Bee

Jaycee Lee Dugard and the couple accused of kidnapping her as a child eventually became a family, taking vacations together, spending time at the library, raising pets and running a family business, court documents filed late Thursday claim.

The documents, made available this morning, were filed by Phillip Garrido's defense attorneys and claim that sexual activity involving Dugard ended after she gave birth to her second child by Garrido.

Read the whole story

Feds defend wild horse roundup, oil pipeline near Reno

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

In the fight against removing large numbers of wild horses from the northwestern Nevada range, a proposed \$3 billion natural gas pipeline is at the front lines, critics of the roundups said.

Activists who want the horses to stay on the range say the Ruby Pipeline project is the “smoking gun” that made federal officials decide to round up 2,500 horses this month from the desert about 100 miles north of Reno. The horses and burros will be sent to corrals and pastures in the Midwest and East.

Federal authorities and the pipeline firm denied the roundups have anything to do with the pipeline plan. Government officials said the horses would have been relocated even without the project because land and water resources can’t sustain large numbers of mustangs.

Read the whole story

EDC food stamp needs, foreclosures, unemployment rise

By Cynthia Hubert, Sacramento Bee

From rustic vineyards to elegant country clubs, the rolling hills of El Dorado County paint a picture of quiet wealth.

But the recession is taking a toll on an area that traditionally has been one of the most privileged in California.

El Dorado County's unemployment rate was 12.6 percent in December, matching Yolo's for the highest three-year jump in the Sacramento region. Foreclosures continue to batter the area, with 889 homes lost in the county last year, 150 more than in 2008.

[Read the whole story](#)

El Dorado County wines holding their own in recession

By Kathryn Reed

PLEASANT VALLEY – People are imbibing, but it's not all about California.

Argentina, Chile and Australia are cutting into the Golden

State's wine sales. Last year was the first time in 16 years that California wine shipments dropped, according to the Bay Area's Gomberg, Fredrikson & Associates.

2009 was a mixed bag for El Dorado County wineries, according to an informal survey taken last weekend.



El Dorado
County
wineries are
surviving the
recession.
Photos/Kathryn
Reed

Teena Hildebrand, who with husband Frank owns Narrow Gate Vineyards, said their sales were about 1.5-2 percent higher in 2009 than in 2008. Narrow Gate is in its fifth year of operation in the Pleasant Valley area.

At nearby Sierra Vista, owner John MacCready said sales were off by 10 to 15 percent in 2009 compared to the previous year.

"They aren't buying as many cases as they used to," MacCready said. "A lot of people who came up here worked for the state and the state put people on furloughs. That made a difference in their visits to the foothills."

In the six years Busby Cellars has been open, 2007 was the best year. Sales dropped in 2008, but came back some in 2009.

"Foot traffic is the same," owner Elliot Murphy said.

His wife and co-owner Sherri Graham added, “We used to see more full cases sell. People are buying more bottles.”



Sherrie Murphy is selling fewer cases at Busby.

At Latcham Vineyards in Fair Play, sales for the last three years have been consistent.

Owner Margaret Latcham said visits to the tasting room are tracking the same from year-to-year, but said people are watching what they spend.

People are looking for deals, according to winemakers in El Dorado. That matches the trend the more formal survey uncovered. On a statewide level, sales of bottles priced at \$20 or more were down between 20 and 30 percent. Wine costing \$6 or less increased by 5 percent.

At four El Dorado County wineries visited by *Lake Tahoe News* last weekend, no one was selling wine for \$6 or less.

“The consumer trend has been to buy two \$20 bottles instead of one \$40 bottle of wine, and many El Dorado wines hit that price point,” said Jolaine Collins, spokeswoman for El Dorado Winery Association. “In the end, quality and value trump all.”

Latcham’s wholesale business has picked up, with the owner saying she has a hard time keeping up with Costco’s needs.

Gold Rush Red, Latcham’s red table wine, proves people are

looking for deals. It was selling for \$7.89 a bottle during last weekend's Bring Out the Barrel event.

"There's a huge demand for less expensive wines," Latcham said.



Margaret
Latcham, left,
is not having
a problem
selling wine.

Usually 2,000 cases of Gold Rush Red are bottled a year. That number rose to 7,000 last year.

At Busby, their red table wine called Meyers Ranch, sells for \$9.50 a bottle. The owners have noticed people wanting to spend less. About 95 percent of their 2,000 cases are sold at the winery.

Nothing on Sierra Vista's tasting sheet sold for less than \$15 a bottle.

Wines at Narrow Gate run \$18-\$32.

"You don't come here to get a sale wine," Teena Hildebrand said.

She credits paying attention to the whole package, right down to making sure the restroom is clean, as to why people keep frequenting Narrow Gate. She said quality of wine and quality of service are imperative.

Hildebrand goes back to her college days of learning about marketing – price, product, place and promotion. She’s added a fifth P – people.

“Constantly analyzing the numbers, adding more events, creating gimmicky wines, or planning your next deeply discounted wine promotion simply feeds a roller coaster business plan. Being excellent at the four P’s leads to a much more consistent, dependable, “we can sleep at night – business,” Hildebrand said. “When you love people, all your financial decisions, marketing efforts, creativity and execution is born out of this value. How many times I have heard how the person behind the tasting bar is the single most important asset to the business. That person needs to reflect the image, values and energy of the winery.”

Narrow Gate bottles 26 varietals in 5,000-7,000 cases a year.

But Hildebrand also credits the people who came before her.

“We have benefited much from the trailblazing of our neighbors – like Sierra Vista, who risked and invested everything back in the ’70s to move here, plant vines, and open a winery. Plus, Holly’s Hill – who did the same in 2002 and invested heavily in their property, winemaking, etc., while reinforcing the family and hospitable atmosphere people are drawn to here,” Hildebrand said. “Then, Miraflores came on the scene in 2006, probably spending as much money as all of us put together to create a high quality winery with excellent wines and a gorgeous facility.”

The Murphys at Busby look forward to the two other wineries that are slated to open near them soon. They believe it will make Grizzly Flat Road a little destination instead of people traveling to Somerset for just their wines.

Sierra Vista’s MacCready is also a proponent of competition and having neighbors. But he is hurting because he’s getting a smaller slice of the consumer pie.

“The number of people coming to El Dorado County has not increased like the number of wineries has,” MacCready said. “Traffic (to Sierra Vista) has decreased in the last three or four years.”

The world keeps turning land into vineyards. California has 480,000 acres of wine grapes, with nearly 2,500 of those acres in El Dorado County. However, Argentina has 510,000 acres of grapes.

Although California produces 90 percent of the wine made in the United States, imports are gaining notoriety. Thirteen million cases were imported in 2009 – more than double from 2007.