

BlueGo is seeing red; more cuts needed



By Kathryn Reed

A \$211,000 shortfall is requiring BlueGo to tweak bus routes in South Lake Tahoe – again.

It seems like every few months officials from the South Shore bus agency come before the South Lake Tahoe City Council with either proposed route changes or fare increases.

On Tuesday there will be a public hearing on the proposed suspension of routes, including doubling the wait time for the main route on Highway 50 through the center of town. The BlueGo plan is scheduled to begin Jan. 13 and last until June 30 – the end of the fiscal year.

When the agency has budget hearings next spring, reintroducing the suspended routes is likely to be one of the topics.

South Tahoe Area Transit Authority (STATA) board members first must approve the changes at their meeting Friday at 1pm at the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency office in Stateline.

All but one affected route is in South Lake Tahoe. The lone Nevada route involves Whittell High School-Zephyr Cove on the weekends.

The route restructure should bring a savings of \$183,000. The entire operating budget is being looked at to see where other dollars can be saved.

"If we did any further cuts to the transit system, we would have impacted people's ability to get around," explained John Andoh, BlueGo administrator.

Andoh and the agency's accountant are the only two paid employees. BlueGo contracts with MV Transit to operate the buses.

The city, El Dorado and Douglas counties, the Stateline casinos, Ridge Tahoe and Heavenly Mountain Resort are some of the entities that make up STATA and pay into the bus service.

Funding comes from a variety of sources, including both states, the feds, grants and fares. But the money that one state ponies up cannot be used in the other state. This is why California is feeling the brunt of the route suspensions.

"Revenue is not coming in as projected," Andoh said. California uses property taxes to fund transit agencies, and those taxes are down significantly from years past.

The entire BlueGo budget is \$4 million a year.

Changing the operation



"What is a BlueGo?" tourists ask. A picture of a bus on the signs would answer that

question.

It wasn't until a couple years ago that BlueGo had an administrator or was operated as a coordinated transit agency.

The operating agreement from 1995 is still in affect. It is going to be reviewed Jan. 8 as well as the bylaws. Changes should be finalized in the coming months.

STATA members each get a vote. But in 1995 Harrah's Lake Tahoe and Harveys had different owners, so they still each have votes when in fact they are now one company.

On the flipside, when MontBleu and Horizon joined they were owned by the same company but are now under separate ownership.

"Friday's discussion is how do they add more members for additional revenue into the system," said Rick Angelocci, South Lake Tahoe assistant city manager and the city's alternate representative to the board.

(South Tahoe's rep and Mayor Kathay Lovell did not return a phone call. Neither did Nancy McDermid, Douglas County commissioner and chairwoman of STATA.)

About a year ago, Ridge Tahoe at the top of Kingsbury Grade was brought in to STATA. The time-share resort donated its vehicles and put up some cash.

Other lodging properties have expressed interest in joining as well. In the past, Sierra-at-Tahoe has been talked about as a potential member.

Looking forward and back

To attract bus riders, the board realizes it must make the system approachable. One definition of that is comfort.

"The city is getting new buses in a couple weeks. They have

extra heaters, extra CNG tanks so they can go farther without refueling, wider seats that are a little more cushiony and satellite radio,” Angelocci said.

He said these are things that will attract the “choice riders” – those who choose to ride BlueGo as opposed to those who have to ride the bus to get to their destination.



Most bus stops on the South Shore are exposed to the elements.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

Another thing that will change in the next year is installing bus shelters so people don’t have to keep sitting or standing in the cold. So many of the bus stops throughout the South Shore are just a bench. And because sidewalks are so haphazard and seldom shoveled even getting to the bench can be dangerous this time of year.

The City Council last fall allocated \$30,000 from its air quality mitigation funds to help fund the shelters. Grants are also being sought to help pay for shelters.

A former elected official said the city bought shelters in the past that were stored at Lake Tahoe Airport, but were never used. It’s unknown what happened to them.

Another issue for South Lake Tahoe on Jan. 12 will be deciding

in closed session whether to file a lawsuit against ATM, the transit operator before MV. The lawsuit ATM filed against the city in federal court for breach of contract was thrown out last year.

BlueGo is in debt about \$1 million to MV. Officials say this has to do with startup costs because the city's bus garage was in such disrepair when Area Transit Management abruptly quit operating days before it was scheduled to in December 2008.

It used to be that TRPA would float BlueGo the money when it came up short on cash, then have transit grants pay TPRA back. That was until two years ago when BlueGo was told it had to be a standalone entity without those crutches.

Angelocci said it could take four years to pay off that debt, unless the city tries to recover those costs in court.

MV had to fix buses, cleanup the garage and buy parts. Employees had to be hired and trained.

But no one in the city lost his or her job for not overseeing the ATM operation and allowing it to become what it became.

Multiple safety infractions led the city to want to get rid of ATM. Andrew Morris ran ATM after buying the company from Ken Daley in November 2006.

Daley formed ATM in 1985 and began running STAGE, the predecessor to BlueGo.

He was at odds with the city several times in those 21 years – sometimes regarding money. (Daley is now a real estate agent and will be installed as treasurer of the South Tahoe Association of Realtors on Friday.)

Daley was at the helm in June 2002 when a \$3.6 million deal was signed to bring what was touted as a state of the art bus system to the South Shore. Sixty-five telephones and 31 kiosks were supposed to be installed so passengers could find out

when the next bus would arrive.

It never worked. They were pulled offline within months and never returned to service. It's unknown what happened to the kiosks and the technology.

Tahoe area AT&T workers to lose jobs

KCRA-TV

SACRAMENTO – AT&T is planning to lay off 525 technicians statewide by the end of March.

Local union president Joel Nielsen said those layoffs would affect about 54 or 90 technicians that work out of Placerville and serve Auburn, Folsom, Placerville, Sacramento, Truckee, and the Lake Tahoe region.

Read the whole story

Carson Valley Inn's new owners plan \$10 mil. remodel

By Ray Hagar, Reno Gazette-Journal

With the stroke of midnight Monday, the transaction for the new ownership of the Carson Valley Inn was finalized. The new ownership team of noted thoroughbred owner Mike Pegram and the

Carano family wasted little time to begin renovations on the 25-year old property.

“At 12:01 last night, the Carano family and I became the proud owners of the Carson Valley Inn,” Pegram said. “We started right away moving out 260 old slot machines and putting in 200 new ones.”

A \$10 million renovation for the property is planned, Pegram said. The complete makeover will be done in three phases and should be completed within a year.

Read the whole story

Wild horses die in roundup near Reno

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

Two horses died and a third leaped over a fence and escaped through barbed wire in the first week of a roundup of wild horses in the Black Rock Desert 100 miles north of Reno.

The federal Bureau of Land Management, which plans to gather 2,500 mustangs over the next few weeks in areas near the Calico Mountains, verified Monday that two animals died during the roundup. As of Sunday night, 158 wild horses had been captured in the effort the BLM says is necessary to insure the health of the rangeland and horse herds.

One elderly mare was shot after BLM officials determined the animal was in failing health, and a 6-month-old foal who died during the roundup was determined by veterinarians to have a congenital heart defect, said Heather Emmons, BLM spokeswoman.

Young users warrant drug program in lower grades

By Kathryn Reed



With youths starting to try alcohol and other drugs at an earlier age, agencies throughout the South Shore of Lake Tahoe are trying to do something to curb that trend.

Drug Store Project is dropping a grade level, with the March 31 program targeting sixth-graders for the first time.

The all-day reality program is designed to get students to think about the choices they make and learn about the consequences if they choose to use.

Lake Tahoe Unified School District had run the program for six years. State budget cuts eliminated the job of the person who put it on and consequently the program.

Lisa Huard is now working as a consultant for Tahoe Youth & Family Services in South Lake Tahoe. She is in the process of developing the daylong program with the assistance of dozens of agencies, hundreds of volunteers and the financial donations of service clubs and others.

Sixth-graders from all schools in the South Shore will be able

to participate assuming their parents give consent.

“Last year alcohol use, marijuana and tobacco were up. We gather that information from Tahoe Youth & Family Services, Barton (Memorial Hospital) and probation,” Huard said.

Alissa Nourse, executive director of TY&FS, said, “Alcohol is always huge because it’s available in homes for free, unlocked.”

Huard said, “Prescription drugs are in homes and kids mix those things.”

Drug Store Project shows students what it’s like if they get caught with drugs “ jail, court, counseling, overdosing, grieving parents, death.

Most of the people involved are not acting “ it’s a real coffin, a real doctor, real police officers, a real judge. Only the student is acting.

TY&FS follows up with students as part of the debriefing process. It gives counselors a chance to talk about some delicate issues with students, to let them talk about life at home, and to show students that they have choices.

For more information about Drug Store Project, contact Lisa Huard at lisahuard@sbcglobal.net. She is looking for donations and volunteers.

Kirkwood powers up all lifts



Updated Jan. 3 at 4:54pm.

By Kathryn Reed

Kirkwood Mountain Resort ran chairs 11 and 2 today because the electrical connection to the rest of the chairs was not working. Resort officials say that problem has been solved.

Kirkwood anticipates all lifts being in operation on Jan. 4.

“The lifts are not reacting well with the power. This is a lift electrical problem,” Tim Cohee, vice president of the ski resort, said Sunday before there was juice to all lifts.

Power had been restored to all other parts of Kirkwood on Saturday and today after a fire at the power plant on New Year’s Day knocked out the electricity to thousands and forced the ski resort to close a couple hours early that day and not to operate Saturday.

For more details about the fire at the resort that is about 40 miles south of South Lake Tahoe, [click here](#).

West Slope visitor center may help South Tahoe

By Cathy Locke, Sacramento Bee

A request for a “visitor information” sign on Highway 50 has morphed into a program that El Dorado Hills Chamber of Commerce officials hope will boost regional tourism and local economies from Davis to South Lake Tahoe.

The chamber in early December received approval to operate a California Welcome Center. Expected to open by the end of March, it will be one of 15 centers so designated statewide.

Lights coming on at Kirkwood; lifts could run Sunday

Updated Jan. 2 at 4:51pm.

By Kathryn Reed

Lights are slowly returning to Kirkwood and lifts are expected to operate Sunday after a fire destroyed the power plant at Kirkwood on New Year's Day.

Power was restored to the village area in the late afternoon Saturday, with lifts and some residences to have electricity as the evening wears on. All residences are expected to have power by Sunday morning.

"In the next 12 to 14 hours we expect to have everything online," Tim Cohee, said at 4:30pm Saturday. Cohee is senior vice president at Kirkwood.

He said close to 500 people are still in the Kirkwood valley.

A fire in the power house the afternoon of New Year's Day reduced the building to ash, caused thousands of people staying in the resort community to spend the night without lights or heat, and left many hopeful the days of being off the grid are numbered.

Kirkwood Mountain Utilities provides power to the entire Kirkwood Valley, which has less than 700 residences with only a few dozen year-round residents; the ski resort that straddles the El Dorado-Alpine-Amador county border; and

lodging facilities that had a few thousand people staying over the New Year weekend.



Kirkwood's
power plant
goes up in
flames Jan. 1.
Photo/News 10-
ABC

Cohee said the delay in getting the power back on was an L-shaped coupling on one of the 300 transformers also went out. It took a while to find it.

Kirkwood employees bought lanterns and flashlights for those left behind. Cohee said it was like a Western movie watching people walk around with lanterns.

The plant that housed six diesel generators is a total loss, with damages in the millions of dollars. The valley usually used three generators at any one time during the winter, with the others considered backup. They are beyond repair.

Then there is the loss in tourism dollars. On New Year's Day lifts were closed two hours early. Those people were offered a 50 percent off voucher on a day of skiing. Lodging guests could get a full refund of 20 percent off they stayed in the dark.

The two-week Christmas-New Year's period is when cash registers go cha-ching at Tahoe resorts. Losing part of this last weekend could add up to big bucks.

Plus, the resort was feeding people who stayed – all gratis.

About 300 people took advantage of free cat skiing on Saturday. Tubing, snowshoeing and cross country skiing was also available to those who were at Kirkwood. Breakfast, lunch and dinner on Saturday were also provided.

This is not the first time fire has erupted at the facility near the decrepit employee housing structure – which survived unscathed.

In November 2004, a blast at the plant caused about \$100,000 in damage, had skiers stranded on the chairlifts and created the necessity for another backup generator to be brought in.

The New Year's Day fire is significantly worse. However, no skiers were stranded. The resort closed a couple hours early when smoke was seen in the plant.

Officials thought everything was fine when the smoke dissipated, but then the roof caught fire. It was made of wood, while the walls were brick.

Cohee said a filter on one of the generators created so much smoke you couldn't see inside.

"It burned for over three hours. You could see incredible flames," Cohee said.

Caterpillar brought in two more "Cat in the Boxes" by 9pm Friday. This makes three at the resort.

"We have more portable power than we've had fixed power," Cohee said of the diesel units look like 18-wheelers.

Assuming power can be distributed, Kirkwood plans to use the Cat in the Boxes through the ski season, anticipating only needing one as summer rolls around.

Cohee said construction on a new plant could begin in May.

“We will have a chance to modernize (the plant),” Cohee said. “At the point we get on the grid, that becomes the backup plant if we lose line power.”

In March, the draft environment impact report and statement will be released by the U.S. Forest Service and Kirkwood Meadows Public Utility District for the potential authorization of a 50-year special use permit for the construction, use and maintenance of a KMPUD power line connecting the electrical grid near Salt Springs with Kirkwood Meadows.

The line would connect with an existing Pacific Gas & Electric line. The new line would likely be on Eldorado National Forest land.

The final EIR/EIS could be released in October.

“We would much rather be on the grid. It’s much cleaner more reliable and the power is much less expensive at the end of the day,” Cohee said.

Voters have distinct choices in Jan. 4 special state Senate election

By Susan Ferriss, Sacramento Bee

Voters in one of California’s most conservative bastions, the 1st Senate District, will cast ballots Tuesday in a special runoff election to replace state Sen. Dave Cox, a Republican who died last July.

It's an obscure date for an election, turnout will likely be small, and political insiders say the victor is all but certain.

GOP voters have an 11-point registration advantage over Democrats in the district which includes parts of Sacramento County, all of Placer and El Dorado counties and stretches to the Oregon border.

That gives Republican Ted Gaines, 52, an indisputable leg up over his Democratic rival, Rancho Cordova Mayor Ken Cooley, 57.

But 18 percent of the district's voters are nonpartisan and Cooley could benefit from Gaines coming under attack by GOP rivals during a November primary fight for the Senate seat.

Read the whole story

Vegas wants in on Super Bowl; where's Tahoe?

By Richard N. Velotta, Las Vegas Sun

Executives with the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority and its contracted advertising agency, R&R Partners, will meet early this month to determine if the city's popular "What happens here, stays here" television ads can be aired during the Super Bowl.

Other tourism companies say they're working to capitalize on the National Football League's modified ad policy that would lift a ban that prevented cities with legalized gambling to run TV spots during the NFL's postseason.

This year's Super Bowl on Feb. 7 will be played in Miami, and the NFL's postseason begins Jan. 9.

Read the whole story