

Dynamite brings down precarious boulder on Hwy. 50

By Carlos Alcalá, Sacramento Bee

California Department of Transportation crews used dynamite to dislodge a huge chunk of granite from a hillside above Highway 50 near Bridal Veil Falls this morning.

The boulder was not in imminent danger of falling on the roadway, but officials decided to bring it down before it posed a hazard.

Read the whole story

Reno working on breaking up gridlock

By Jeff DeLong, Reno Gazette-Journal

It doesn't take much to make a little mess a much bigger one.

And that might be no truer than when it comes to traffic. As anyone knows, a minor fender-bender can easily turn an already busy road into a frustrating sea of stationary brake lights.

Local and state transportation officials are now considering a high-tech answer to the problem mirrored on a system already in place in Las Vegas and many other cities.

Read the whole story

LTCC students move out; money and culprit still missing



By Kathryn Reed

The Alder Inn and Lake Tahoe Community College's ties are no more. All of the students who had called the hotel home moved out when fall quarter ended last week.

The trouble came earlier in the school year when Joseph Balius, who claimed to own the Ski Run Boulevard complex, left town. He is whom the students paid their rent to.

The real owner of the property is June Stefani. She never saw the students' rent money.

Balius had a lease option to buy the property from her, but he was delinquent on his payments to Stefani. That agreement expired earlier this fall and that's when everything came to light.

But some of the transactions remain murky.

A document dated Sept. 29, 2004, lists former South Lake Tahoe City Councilman Ted Long as the one on the lease to buy agreement with Stefani. No other document of record could be found showing he sold the lease to Balius for \$1 as he told *Lake Tahoe News* in October.

Stefani and her attorney also say Long has not been involved

in the property for years, but evidence of that fact has not been found at the El Dorado County Records Office.

Trudy Hancock was best friends with Kira Balius for five years, watched their kids and lived at the Alder Inn – and still does. She, too, believed the couple owned the hotel. She also said Joseph Balius and Long were best friends.

Long did not return a phone call.

“I would have bet my bottom dollar they would not have done this,” Hancock said of the Baliuses. “I thought I was a pretty savvy lady. We all got ripped off.”

Hancock is staying on to keep an eye on the property as a contract employee. She said Stefani plans to turn it back into a hotel during peak periods like this week and not operate it as an apartment complex like what Balius had done.

Donna Hall, a parent of one of the students, had only good things to say about the college’s role in the matter. LTCC had long boasted about the Alder Inn as being a great place for students, even promoting it on the website.

“They went beyond their legal liability. They have agreed to split the damages with us,” Hall said. “The college is just being wonderful.”

A spokesperson with the college did not return a call asking how much LTCC has paid out.

The students who are continuing on with their studies at LTCC have found other living arrangements.

Hall has no intention of going after Balius in civil court, but she does hope law enforcement tracks him down.

“Everyone took their lumps. The owner and students are victims of this man,” said Bob Henderson, Stefani’s attorney.

Henderson said his client also does not intend to pursue civil action against Balius.

Stefani was not available for comment.

Henderson added, "I think he should be pursued by law enforcement. The total amount of damage looks like between \$20,000 and \$30,000. That is substantial."

Officer Rick Martinez with the South Lake Tahoe Police Department is investigating the case. He doesn't return phone calls. All his superior Lt. David Stevenson could say is that nothing has been forwarded to the District Attorneys Office.

Those close to the case speculate Balius and his wife, Kira, and their children are in the Las Vegas area.

Blasting massive boulder on Hwy. 50 may snarl traffic

KCRA

Work crews in El Dorado County were planning Monday to blast a giant boulder looming on a hillside above Highway 50, a key route that connects the Sacramento area with Lake Tahoe.

The 400-ton rock, which is hanging precariously above the road about 20 miles east of Placerville near Bridal Veil Falls, poses no immediate danger, but the California Department of Transportation is worried it will fall in the future.

Read the whole story

El Dorado to build \$89 million courthouse

Bill Lindelof, Sacramento Bee

An \$89 million El Dorado County courthouse in Placerville is one of five new courthouse projects to receive initial funding authorization by the state Public Works Board.

The funding marks the start of the projects. The authorization gives the Administrative Office of the Courts the green light to start looking for a site for the new courthouse in El Dorado County.

Read the whole story

Weather advisory issued for Lake Tahoe

Publisher's note: *Updated as of 7:29am Dec. 21.*

A winter weather advisory for Lake Tahoe has been issued by the National Weather Service from 10am Monday to 9am Tuesday.

Snow is expected to begin falling Monday morning and is likely to get heavier as the day progresses.



Dark skies on
Dec. 20 in
Washoe Meadow
State Park
along the
Upper Truckee
River.

Photo/Kathryn
Reed

Four to 8 inches could fall at the lake, with 6 to 12 inches
above 7,000 feet.

Snow is expected to drop to 5,500 feet.

Parking garage keeps losing money; rates to increase

By Kathryn Reed

Owning the parking garage at Heavenly Village continues to be
a financial quagmire for South Lake Tahoe.

The albatross will be on the books until at least December
2012. Based on how the bonds are structured, the city cannot
attempt to unload the concrete facility until then.



It will cost more to park at Heavenly Village in January.

The 425-space garage is 50-60 percent empty most of the time. Projections are for another year of losing money – about \$140,000 this fiscal year. It costs \$1.3 million a year to operate the garage and pay the debt on the 7-year-old facility.

Raising rates is the prime way to increase cash flow. That will happen Jan. 15.

The City Council this month approved going from 30-minute increments to 20 minute. It now costs \$1.75 per half hour and next month it will be \$1.25 every 20 minutes. This is an increase of 25 cents an hour.

The daily rate will go from \$23 to \$25.

Winter is the busiest time of year for the garage because skiers and boarders park there to access the gondola to ride to the top of Heavenly Mountain Resort.

Blaise Carrig, chief operating officer for the resort, was at the council meeting to see what would be approved and how it might affect his guests. The bulk of Heavenly's riders access the mountain via the gondola, though many of them walk from the surrounding hotels.

Carrig and Gene Palazzo, who oversees the Parking Authority

and Redevelopment Agency for the city, have talked in the past about creating a lift ticket-parking package. Nothing has come of those discussions.

“We see the fee being nominal, but during the current economic climate we would like to see prices remain steady for guests,” Russ Pecoraro, Heavenly spokesman, said.

Palazzo had recommended the four-hour validation for the movie theater be reduced to three. In 2007 the council boosted it to four hours from 2.5 hours. The council this month chose to leave it at four hours.

Jerry Bindel, who is on the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority board and president of the South Lake Tahoe Lodging Association, has suggested to the city that it have a couple free days of parking a year for locals in an attempt to drive traffic to Heavenly Village. The city isn’t biting on that suggestion.

Locals tend to park at Harrah’s for free and walk over to the village.

One moneymaker for the city is selling advertising space in the garage to merchants in Heavenly Village.

Becoming automated has also cut costs – and it eliminated jobs, too.

The city got stuck with the garage when the developer of the entire project backed out of building it. This forced the city to meet parking demand and infuse another \$6 million into the redevelopment area.

This is on top of the \$7.2 million that was “borrowed” from the general fund to build the center. The Redevelopment Agency is paying back that money in \$500,000 increments each year.

Storms bring good news for Sierra snowpack

By Robert Perea, Reno Gazette-Journal

Last weekend's snowstorm brought a marked increase in the snowpack for the Walker River Basin, according to the figures collected by the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service SNOTEL monitoring sites..

Basin wide, the Walker River Basin SNOTEL sites jumped from 60-percent of yearly average on Dec. 11 to 100-percent of yearly average on Dec. 14, before falling back to 98 percent on Dec. 15.

[Read the whole story](#)

Low-income housing stock to increase in South Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

A 56-unit low-income housing project was unanimously approved Thursday for South Lake Tahoe.

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's Governing Board signed off on development. Construction could begin in summer 2010 next to the fire station at Ski Run Boulevard and Pioneer Trail.

Pacific West Communities of Boise is the developer of the nearly \$17 million project.

Potential residents will need to make about 60 percent of the median income for El Dorado County. This is about \$25,000 for a single person and \$52,000 for a family of three.

“Fifty-two percent of our population is estimated to meet that income level,” said Nancy Kerry, housing manager for South Lake Tahoe.

These units are also considered workforce housing.

Kerry expects them to be filled fast because the 76-unit Sierra Gardens project at the Y has a lengthy waiting list.

Like that project, which was developed two years ago, the new one will allow for 1.5 vehicles per unit.

The developer has agreed to be as green as possible – using LEED guidelines, pervious concrete, energy efficient windows-doors-appliances, and making it as sustainable as possible.

The next step for the developer is to secure tax credits and private financing. South Tahoe’s Redevelopment Agency loaned the project \$1.5 million and the state contributed \$2.1 million.

The city’s Planning Commission mandated local contractors be used and that emphasis be put on contractors who hire locally, not just have an office here.

Vacancy signs up and down Highway 50

By Kathryn Reed

Coming off the worst November on record, lodging properties on the South Shore are hoping the holiday season will resurrect their businesses.

Jerry Bindel said many properties have dropped their prices to lure tourists to Lake Tahoe. But he isn't sure this brings new people to town, but said instead it is more likely to get the people who are on the fence to make a decision.



Business
owners hope
more tourists
fill hotel
rooms.

Photo/Kathryn
Reed

As general manager of Lakeland Village, president of the South Lake Tahoe Lodging Association, member of the Tourism Improvement District and board member of Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, Bindel has his pulse on what is going on in town.

But one only need look at all the vacancy signs and empty parking lots to know the crowds have yet to arrive. With this being the last day before winter break for many schools

throughout the country, the headlights are likely to be streaming toward Tahoe in the days to come.

The trend of last-minute bookings is continuing. Fortunately, the snow has the phones ringing. This time last year it was dry roads and dirt on the slopes.

Bindel said the number of bookings for the two-week holiday period is decent, as are holiday periods in 2010, but otherwise it's lean.

"If you are by the (Heavenly) gondola, the numbers are better (than this time last year). If you're not, you're lucky if you are doing the same as last year," Bindel said.

Marketing dollars are needed to drive business to Lake Tahoe. Starting today lodging guests in South Tahoe will pay a \$1 or \$1.50 more per night. The assessment by the Tourism Improvement District was OK'd by the City Council earlier this month.

It means hotel-motel guests will pay a \$3 assessment and time share-property management operators collect \$4.50 a night.

For the 2008-09 fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, the TID collected \$1.2 million. With the new rates, the TID expects to generate \$1.8 million in 2009-10.

South Lake Tahoe councilmembers a couple years ago stopped allocating funds for marketing, despite tourism being the primary business in town. This is why the lodging association decided it needed to take matters into its own hands.

When heads are not in beds, it affects nearly every other business in town " no one is in town to gamble, get a massage, eat out, buy products or ski.

The money is used for marketing. Ten percent of what is collected goes directly to events. Bindel has long been a proponent of bringing more events to town " ones locals and

tourists would be interested in and possibly midweek when things are slow.

The irony is the transient occupancy tax the city collects from hotels is one of the three main revenue sources for the general fund. Sales tax is another. Without tourists, those coffers are bare.

In years past the city has allocated more than \$300,000 a year to the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority. No more. Instead it spent about that much money in the last year fighting to get rid of two employees who won their right to stay employed.

One has to wonder if the money had been spent on marketing the town, if the economy would be better and unemployment not close to 20 percent.