Human trash a problem for wildlife

By Devin Middlebrook

Bears, raccoons, and other wildlife in search of an easy meal are increasingly visiting residential areas in the Tahoe-Truckee region. It may not always be obvious, but a bag of garbage, bowl of pet food, or plate of leftovers left outside your home or vacation site can harm wildlife.

Of all the wildlife and human interactions, encounters with bears are becoming the most common. The Tahoe basin and surrounding foothills are prime black bear habitat. Forty percent of the California black bear population inhabits the Sierra Nevada.

A typical wild bear diet consists of berries, grasses, plants, nuts, roots, honey, insects, and small mammals. In urban areas adjacent to undeveloped wildlands, bears are optimistic scavengers and are attracted to easy food sources such as improperly stored human food, pet food, birdseed, and garbage. Once a bear has discovered an easy source of food, they will remember that location and return on a regular basis.

Bears that grow accustomed to people can become complacent and lose their fear of humans. This is referred to as human habituation, and it often forces wildlife officials to kill the bear because of the threat it poses to humans. For residents who don’t take steps to discourage bears, these interactions can cause expensive property damage, result in fines from local jurisdictions, and pose dangers to visitors and neighbors.

“Residents and visitors living in bear country have a responsibility to the wildlife whose habitat we share, and also to human neighbors. Improper storage of food or garbage is attributed to 95 percent of all human-bear conflicts," said Madonna Dunbar, resource conservationist with the Incline Village General Improvement District. "By removing the attractants, we can reduce risk to both people and wildlife. Preventing access to garbage and food is the easiest way to reduce the risk of human-bear interactions."

The most secure way to store garbage at your home is by installing a bear box, a large metal enclosure to house trash cans. While the boxes cost an average of $1,000, they offer the highest level of security from bears. To help homeowners, some local jurisdictions are now offering programs to subsidize the cost of purchasing bear boxes.

Placer County offers no-interest loans for homeowners in Placer County east of Colfax, including Lake Tahoe. Eligible homeowners can apply for a five-year, interest-free loan that homeowners repay through a $22 per month surcharge on existing quarterly garbage bills.

Learn more about this program **online**.

The Incline Village General Improvement District offers a rebate for homeowners who have an approved bear box installed after July 1, 2015.

The rebate is valued at $150 and is available for single-family and multi-family homes (without dumpster trash service). To learn more about this program, go **online**.

No matter where you live in Lake Tahoe, it is important to do your part to protect native wildlife by properly storing your garbage, food, and other attractants.

Devin Middlebrook is an environmental education specialist at Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. This article first appeared in Tahoe In Depth.

No opposition to STPUD rate increases

By Susan Wood

Looks like the thousands of South Tahoe Public Utility District customers are going with the flow in respect to proposed water and sewer rate increases.

The district scheduled a workshop on May 12 to gather input and provide a presentation on the infrastructure-laden plan. No one showed up.

The capital improvement plan with rates amounting to a 6.5 percent increase for water and a 6 percent uptick in sewer services generated zero feedback. The public absence demonstrates a huge departure from meetings two years ago that created a little unrest.

"I am surprised no one showed up. We put a lot of effort into advertising it. Maybe what's happened is we made extensive outreach to the community, and even though they had to be confirmed each year, the rates were adopted for five years. We talked about the projects, and it brought out a lively discussion (two years ago)," Executive Director Richard Solbrig told *Lake Tahoe News* Thursday night.

South Tahoe PUD plans to install more fire hydrants this summer. Photo/LTN file

In 2014, the district sent a five-year notice to all its customers – 14,000 water and 18,000 sewer – to meet Proposition 218 guidelines. The measure requires local governments to gain voter approval to increase taxes, fees and charges.

The infrastructure-laden plan will be folded into a larger discussion when the district takes up its 2016-17 budget May 19. The meeting is delayed from 2pm to 6pm because of the Amgen bike race.

The STPUD 2016-17 budget rounds out to about $40 million between the two utility services.

A typical consumer will pay an additional $15.36 per quarter from the $122.30 water bill and $94.35 sewer statement. Two years ago, the increase was $13.62 per quarter.

If it passes the board as expected, the improvement plan for the year appears to be aggressive and ambitious.

Over the long haul, water expenditures call for $43.7 million over the next decade and $57 million for sewer in that timeframe.

For starters, the installation of water meters is about halfway done, with about 5,000 more to do.

Solbrig lamented over California's laborious process in settling a low-interest loan to help fund the massive project. Even though the loan is 1.6 to 1.8 percent, "interest payments are significant."

The feedback on the whole metering process has been tenuous at best.

"In general, most people think meters are a fairness issue, and that they should pay for what they use," Solbrig said.

In other words, some customers thought their bills would go down.

But the delivery of water and sewer is different compared to rate setting for electric and gas. It's based on infrastructure regardless of how often residents inhabit their homes. Case in point – fire protection becomes a steady constant need "whether you're living in it or not."

Luther Pass pump station is part of

the 2016 capital improvement plan. Photo/LTN file

The cost is in the delivery of the product – not the product – when it comes to water.

Solbrig also addressed the specific earmarking of the money gained by rate increases.

“One hundred percent of the rate increases are driven by infrastructure needs,” he said.

Beyond meters, South Shore residents will also notice 105 additional fire hydrants installed in places that are “strategically located to meet the fire departments’ standards for fire flows,” he added. The hydrants are placed alongside the stretches where the new, larger 6-inch water lines lie. The U.S. Forest Service absorbed $400,000 of the $1 million plan through a grant designed for fire suppression.

And Tahoe knows about fire.

One of the scariest times during the 2007 Angora Fire was two days after the start when the back blaze reversed and jumped Highway 89 toward the Tahoe Keys in the Lukins Water district jurisdiction. The small company had just announced major challenges in having adequate flows.

Fire districts are requiring hydrants spaced within 250 feet of properties. Some sketchy areas include the uphill side of Pioneer Trail and pockets in the Sierra Tract, Solbrig mentioned.

On the sewer side, the district wants to rehabilitate concrete treatment tanks and replace electrical equipment and motors at the Luther Pass Pump Station. This station sends all of the recycled wastewater from the district over the Highway 89 pass to Alpine County.

STPUD also plans to replace equipment that fails to meet standards, namely for air quality regulations. One mentionable is the standby generator at the wastewater treatment plant, a necessary device in case of an electrical outage.

TTD puts promises about loop road in writing

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE — The Tahoe Transportation District board on Friday took action regarding the proposed loop road in an attempt to avoid creating more blight in an already blighted area.

In other words, board members don't want another Ta-hole as was created with the Chateau project when it went belly up because financing hadn't actually been secured and a consolidated parcel map was never filed.

The board, with little discussion, on May 13 unanimously approved what it calls principles.

Before doing so the board learned there is already money in the pipeline for acquisition of property. The district is promised $1,109,333 through the Federal Transportation Improvement Program. This is nearly $900,000 less than was requested, though it's routine to get less funding than desired.

Key principles include:

- Starting road construction after all rights-of-way are secured and replacement housing is established.
- Not demolishing anything until the project is fully

funded.
- Keeping the current highway open until the new highway is finished.

The loop road is designed to route Highway 50 near the state line behind the casinos starting near Pioneer Trail and coming out at Lake Parkway. The current highway would then become a city-county street.

Some of the other principles are:

- Using eminent domain by the district only to complete the needed right-of-way. (Other jurisdictions like South Lake Tahoe and Caltrans could still use eminent domain.)
- Having new deed-restricted affordable housing constructed or acquired as deed-restricted, which means the amount someone may charge for rent or resale is limited by the deed and any buyers or renters must meet the financial criteria.
- The priority option for new deed-restricted housing will remain in the project area.
- The majority of funding for all project elements will come from federal and state sources.
- Utility location will be included as part of the project costs.

The draft environmental documents are expected to be released later this year.

Decision in Santiago, Briggs

case nears

It’s still unknown if El Dorado County taxpayers will be cutting another check to former supervisors Norma Santiago and Ron Briggs.

Norma Santiago

Their attorney as well as special counsel for the county was in Placer County Superior Court on May 13 pleading their respective cases. The dispute is being heard in Auburn because El Dorado County judges said they have a conflict.

The county hired outside counsel because most members of the county counsel’s office have represented the former supervisors on various matters in the past.

The former elected officials contend they are owed back pay to the tune of about $90,000. Each was termed out in January 2015. At no time during their tenure did they say they should be paid more money.

The California Constitution states that county supervisors’ salaries must be set by ordinance. It is the county’s position that Santiago and Briggs were paid in accordance with the county ordinance.

Both sides have seven days to turn in additional written arguments and evidence to the judge. He will then make a ruling.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

BLM boss: Wild horse program faces $1B budget crisis

By Scott Sonner, AP

The head of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management says his agency has a billion-dollar problem.

Neil Kornze says the BLM is fighting an uphill battle to protect federal rangeland across the West while managing tens of thousands of wild horses and caring for tens of thousands more already rounded up in government corals.

Kornze told The Associated Press the agency may not have done as well as it could have in recent years to underscore the environmental and budgetary crisis looming in its wild horse and burro program.

He estimates $1 billion will be needed to care for the 46,000 wild horses and burros currently in U.S. holding facilities over their lifetime, combined with future efforts to shrink the population of the record-67,000 now roaming public lands in 10 western states.

Failed deadline may cost EDC taxpayers millions

By Kathryn Reed

Even though the funding for El Dorado County’s new public safety headquarters in Placerville has not been secured, the price has escalated by millions of dollars, all because of inaction by the chief administrative officer.

Supervisor Shiva Frentzen wrote a letter to her colleagues and then read it into the record at the May 10 board meeting. In part it talks about how she requested an agenda item for that day’s meeting about the debt service on the facility.

“This request was to address Sheriff [John] D’Agostini’s concern about the $2.2 million annual debt service for the public safety facility based on the 2.875 percent APR. The verbal update that I received from assistant CAO stated that the county will miss the deadline to lock in at rate of 2.875 percent APR resulting in a possible rate of 3.5 percent APR. Failure to lock in at 2.875 percent APR could cost the El Dorado County taxpayers an additional $10 million over the next three to four decades,” Frantzen said.

She wanted time to discuss this revelation. She was denied the opportunity to do so in a formal manner, and the other board members had little to say after she read the letter.

Frantzen, before Tuesday, even suggested a special meeting should be called just to discuss this issue. It never happened.

CAO Larry Combs, who is an interim leader working part time, sent a letter May 9 to the board and sheriff saying a comprehensive presentation about the facility is set for June 14. That discussion, he said, will include “construction plan including possible phasing, updated costs, likely financing terms within the USDA loan, and related repayment/budgeting options.”

(Combs didn’t check D’Agostini’s availability for that date. The sheriff will be out of town regarding a federal subpoena.)

The discrepancy in interest rates is because the county is unable to make a June 1 deadline to seek federal financing.

Combs' letter goes on to say, "Staff convened a meeting of the Facility Finance Committee on March 30, 2016, to seek a recommendation, for board approval, to proceed with the USDA financing option. At that time it was believed that there was a possibility that, if all components of the application came together in time, the county may be able to meet the USDA's June 1, 2016, deadline to receive the second quarter interest rate of 2.875 percent. However, upon subsequent discussions with USDA representatives in April, a number of actions were identified as needing to occur prior to final application submittal, which precluded staff from being able to submit a complete application by June 1. The current 2.875 percent interest rate expires June 30, 2016. A new interest rate will be announced at that time. Given the current market, it is unlikely that the quoted interest rate will vary significantly."

No matter the interest rate, the 2016-17 budget presented by Combs to the supervisors does not include the debt service for the facility. Combs has said, "Current debt payment estimates for a loan of $50 million and a term of 40 years equal approximately $2.2 million per year."

D'Agostini took issue with Combs' letter, firing back a response to the Auburn resident as well as to the supervisors.

"The $2-plus million to purchase the property was monies from the sheriff's office's prior year fund balance that was specifically set aside for such purpose," the sheriff wrote. "Arch Nexus (the design firm) and the sheriff's office will have the necessary information for the loan application ready by the deadline."

He disagreed with the CAO's assessment that the architect had a role in delaying the process.

D’Agostini stressed the need for time lines and more factual information from the CAO’s office.

CHP helicopter aids rescue on American Canyon Trail

By Cathy Locke, Sacramento Bee

A California Highway Patrol helicopter crew aided in the rescue of three people Thursday morning after their small utility vehicle rolled down an embankment along the American Canyon Trail near the El Dorado County community of Cool.

As crew members of CHP Helicopter 20 were flying over the Folsom Lake area about 9:30am, they monitored a call reported a utility that a utility vehicle had gone over the side of a canyon and people were injured.

It was reported that trail maintenance personnel were riding in the utility vehicle along the trail when it rolled over, down a 40-foot embankment, ejecting all the occupants.

Read the whole story

EDC faces lawsuit over Dollar

General store

By Lake Tahoe News

The Georgetown Preservation Society is challenging El Dorado County Board of Supervisors' approval of the construction of a 9,100-square-foot Dollar General store.

Attorney Donald Mooney of Davis, who is representing the West Slope organization, said his client has exhausted all other administrative remedies.

The court documents, which were filed May 6, allege that the county failed to adequately analyze the project's environmental impacts or provide mitigation measures that would reduce such impacts to less than significant.

The writ says, "Respondents abused their discretion and failed to proceed according to law in that they failed to require the preparation of an environmental impact report for the project, despite the existence of a 'fair argument' based on substantial evidence in the record, that the project may have a significant effect on the environment."

Impacts outlined in the writ include those to wetlands and biological resources, traffic and circulation, geology and soils, water resources and water quality, and aesthetics. Another impact, not specifically mentioned in the writ, but one evident throughout the entire process was the strong feeling of many area residents that a massive Dollar General store did not belong in the historic downtown of this former mining community. Dollar General revised the building design a number of times, but residents remained largely unconvinced that it fit the county's Historic Design Guidelines which say new buildings in historic county areas like Georgetown must reflect the type of architecture typical of California's Gold Rush period.

At the April 5 Board of Supervisors meeting Georgetown-area residents pleaded with the board to not make a decision that would forever alter the character of their home. Before the vote, Supervisor Shiva Frentzen commented, “I don’t see a single person here to support this including the Divide chamber … there are some areas where you need to honor the locals.”

This lawsuit now enters a growing stream of land use-based lawsuits filed by local residents against the board’s planning decisions.

The writ names the county, supervisors, Simon CRE Abbie LLC, and Denton and Carolyn Beam. Simon CRE Abbie is a commercial real estate company and the project applicant on behalf of Dollar General. The Beams are the current property owners of the three Main Street parcels.

Dollar General is a nationwide chain of box stores that offer a range of lower-priced merchandise and groceries.

EDC judicial race a heated political battle

Roland Tiemann, left, and Nelson Brooks are battling to be El Dorado County Superior Court judge.

By Kathryn Reed

El Dorado County's lone contested judicial race on the June 7 ballot is turning ugly, with the challenger accusing the incumbent of misleading the public about political contributions.

Ashlee Titus, an attorney with a law firm out of Sacramento, on May 10 filed a complaint with the Fair Political Practices Commission on behalf of Roland Tiemann who wants to unseat Nelson Brooks. The document alleges Brooks did not file the proper financial paper work in a timely manner.

"Mr. Tiemann is grasping at straws because he is behind in the campaign," El Dorado County Superior Court Judge Brooks told *Lake Tahoe News*. "There is no truth to any of the allegations."

District Attorney Vern Pierson told *Lake Tahoe News*, "It appears to be a pathetic attempt to resurrect a failing campaign."

When told about the FPPC complaint by *LTN* on May 12, Brooks spent that night reviewing his paperwork with his campaign treasurer who is a certified public accountant. Brooks said a document might have been filed a couple days late, to which he would not be surprised if he were fined. That would be the normal protocol.

Brent Lowder, a political consultant acting as Tiemann's spokesman, told *Lake Tahoe News*, voters should be concerned with "how sloppy they have been with their filings."

Lowder went on to say, "Someone running to be or continuing to be county judge should be expected to follow the law if they expect county voters to support them to enforce the law."

Most of Brooks' campaign has been self-financed – to the tune of $300,000 from he and his wife. Small contributions add up to less than $15,000.

It can be a big deal if contributors' names come out after votes are cast because some voters are swayed – more often away from a candidate – if a controversial donor surfaces. Early voting started May 9 in El Dorado County and vote-by-mail ballots were sent this week.

Asked why he believes Tiemann is running, Brooks said, "I think he has been put up to it by a judge who wants to be presiding judge and he knows he doesn't have the votes for that with the current makeup of the bench. He wants to pack the court."

The judge Brooks is referencing is Steve Bailey. Bailey has made it clear he wants to replace Judge Suzanne Kingsbury as the presiding judge.

The El Dorado County bench is a bit divided among those who support each candidate. On Brooks' side are Kingsbury, Kenneth Melikian, Vicki Ashworth, and Jim Wagoner. Supporting Tiemann are Dylan Sullivan and Warren Stracener.

Sullivan, who was endorsed by Kingsbury when she ran a couple years ago, lost her original assignment last summer. Kingsbury made that decision. There has been a rift between the two since then.

Neither Sullivan nor Bailey could be reached for comment.

Brooks was first appointed to the bench in 2009 by then Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger. He won the current six-year term a year later. Prior to that he had been an attorney for more than 25 years.

Tiemann has been an attorney for 10 years, the minimum required to be a judge in California.

Tiemann has appeared before Brooks a few times. Since the campaign started the judge has recused himself.

Survey: Teens addicted to mobile devices

By Sharon Noguchi, San Jose Mercury News

Just how badly are we addicted to our mobile devices?

It may be even worse than we admit, according to a survey by children's advocacy group Common Sense Media. The San Francisco-based organization bills the study released Tuesday as the first to explore parents' and teens' growing dependence on the tech gadgets that are supposed to empower us.

Nearly 59 percent of parents think their teens are addicted to their cellphones, tablets or laptops — 50 percent of teens agree — and 27 percent of parents believe they themselves are addicted. The survey polled 620 parents and 620 teens.

Read the whole story