

SLT revamping what it charges for city services

By Kathryn Reed

The South Lake Tahoe City Council next week is expected to adopt a fee schedule for services that better reflects the cost of doing business.

Last week the council heard a presentation about what is being proposed and directed staff to make some changes. Looking at the campground fees, how nonprofits are treated and possibly charging more than the cost of doing business – where legally allowed – are some issues council members wanted reviewed.

“We’re not in the charity business. I support the full cost of recovery,” Councilman Austin Sass said at the April 21 meeting. “We are a business. We are not in the business of underwriting businesses.”

One could argue giving incentives like commercial floor area for a developer to build on the corner of Highway 50 and Ski Run Boulevard, which the entire council approved, is underwriting a business.

Recreation was kept separate from the fee schedule because that is often an area where municipalities provide a subsidy to its citizens. Still, it is up to the council who pays what for which service.

It had been 10 years since the city last did a thorough analysis of the fees. The goal is for the city to know what the true cost of a service is. This was a cost-recovery study, not a market recovery study.

“The term ‘full cost’ means the direct and indirect costs borne by the city of South Lake Tahoe to deliver the service,”

the April 21 staff report says. "Direct costs are defined by the labor and materials expended specific to that program while indirect costs include city administrative functions such as central support departments that have an indirect role supporting the activities of the departments."

The fee schedule covers everything – from grading permits to getting a copy of a police report to renting facilities. Some fees like ticket counter space at the airport have been deleted, whereas a fire dancer permit is new.

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Notes:

- South Lake Tahoe City Council meets May 5 at 9am at Lake Tahoe Airport.

Calif. drought tests strength of water rights

By David Siders and Jim Miller, Sacramento Bee

High above a landscape parched by unremitting drought, Meadow Valley Creek courses through the northern Sierra Nevada and pools in a stand of alders behind a tiny, concrete dam.

Robert Forbes draws water from the reservoir through an overturned smokestack and into a ditch that has run west of Quincy for more than 100 years.

He adjusted a piece of plywood at its mouth to restrict the flow one recent morning. In dry years, Forbes said, "I start rationing people along the line."

Forbes' family's access to this water derives from an 1870s claim in Plumas County; and his antiquated management of the ditch – breaking ice with a shovel in the winter, negotiating irrigation schedules among neighbors when the weather warms – has persisted for decades with little intervention.

Earlier this year, the state Water Resources Control Board ordered more than 1,000 property owners to prove their water rights. This month, the board warned claim-holders to expect curtailments of their ability to divert water from rivers and streams.

The actions are significant because they include the state's most senior water rights holders – those claimed before California established its permitting process in 1914.

Read the whole story

Same-sex marriage case lawyers set to make history

By Todd Spangler, Detroit Free Press

WASHINGTON – One is a legend on the civil rights circuit, a veteran of battles for gay and lesbian rights and a MacArthur Foundation genius grant winner – who has never argued in the U.S. Supreme Court before but, nonetheless, may have recent history on her side.

The other is a baby-faced, bow-tied former west Michigan lawyer and former state solicitor general, easygoing and talkative, who has stood before the Supreme Court eight times already and has some key victories to his credit.

On Tuesday, when Mary Bonauto and John Bursch go before the court to argue the constitutionality of Michigan's 2004 same-sex marriage ban, they may make history: A decision by the court – expected by summer – could extend the right to marry to same-sex couples over the objections of several states, or deal a harsh blow to a gay rights movement that has been on a winning streak.

Michigan will be at the center of the case, though its national implications are well-known: In the balance is a patchwork of laws and legal decisions that currently allow same-sex couples to marry in 37 states and Washington, D.C., but prohibit it elsewhere, denying gay and lesbian couples and their children the legal benefits and protections marriage provides, but maintaining what has been the long-held, traditional view of marriage as being only between a man and a woman.

Read the whole story

Tahoe City-based guide recounts Nepal quake

By James Joiner, Daily Beast

High in the Himalayas, Everest climbers can only hope for the best after Saturday's devastating earthquake.

As the numbers of injured and killed – currently 5,900 and 3,218, respectively—rise in the wake of yesterday's earthquake in Nepal and aftershocks continue to rock the countryside, the first groups of evacuees from nearby Mount Everest's base camp have begun to straggle in to the ravaged capital of Kathmandu.

Massive avalanches, unleashed by the quake, destroyed the north side camp, killing 19 people, including Google executive, American Dan Fredinburg.

Pentagon Spokesman Col. Steve Warren said nearly 70 personnel, “including a USAID Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART), the Fairfax County Urban Search and Rescue team and several journalists along with 45 square tons of cargo,” took off this morning from Dover Air Force Base bound for Nepal, and are expected to arrive on Monday.

While in no way overshadowing the country-wide devastation wrought by yesterday’s quake, the extent of which is still unfolding, there is, on Everest, a chilling sense of déjà vu. This latest disaster comes almost a year to the day after the 2014 Everest avalanche that claimed the lives of 16 Nepalese guides, calling into question the overall safety and cultural integrity of scaling the legendary mountain, often perceived by the public as the pinnacle high alpine achievement.

We spoke with six-time Everest summiteer and founder of Tahoe City-based Alpenglow Expeditions Adrain Ballanger, who is staged at the northern base camp, just miles away from the avalanches and chaos, about what this horrific disaster could mean for the future of climbing on Everest. Given his limited cell and radio connectivity, Ballanger may not be aware of the scope of the damages in the rest of Nepal.

Read the whole story

Drought doesn't drain Vail

Resorts revenues

By Jason Blevins, Denver Post

The California drought and a warm spring in Utah pinched visits to Vail Resorts' ski areas, but season pass sales and targeted marketing to wealthy skiers pushed the resort operator's revenues ahead of the previous season.

North America's largest resort operator on Friday released results from its nine ski areas for the 2014-15 ski season showing lift revenue – including a portion of season pass sales – up 8.5 percent over the previous season.

Keeping with a common trend seen across the resort industry, visitors spent more. Vail Resorts' ski school revenue climbed 3.4 percent, dining was up 3.3 percent and retail and rental revenue increased 3.8 percent.

Read the whole story

Nev. Legislature may fund cloud seeding

By Jeff DeLong, Reno Gazette-Journal

As a late-season snowstorm swept toward the Sierra Friday, scientists prepared to do their thing. In this case, that meant activating mountaintop generators that spray chemicals into storm clouds, encouraging formation of ice crystals that fall as precious snow.

“It looks pretty good. We are pretty confident we will get the

opportunity,” Frank McDonough, an atmospheric scientist with Reno’s Desert Research Institute, said of the approaching storm’s potential..

And for the first time in six years, Nevada’s cloud-seeding program could get a little help from the Legislature, which is considering a bill to help fund a financially struggling effort. Local leaders, meanwhile, want to explore the potential of seeding Sierra storms in different ways, including through the use of manned aircraft and drones.

Even last winter, by the far the driest in a string of four dry ones, cloud-seeding paid off, DRI scientists recently reported to the Western Regional Water Commission. The commission is again being asked to contribute \$100,000 toward cloud-seeding operations next winter.

Read the whole story

S. Tahoe’s aging snow removal fleet a concern

By Kathryn Reed

Dismal snow years are good and bad for South Lake Tahoe’s Public Works Department.

The good means the aging fleet doesn’t have to be used much.

The bad is that the state reimburses the city in part for its snow removal expenses, which means fewer dollars will be in the coffer for next winter. That’s bad if even a normal snowfall accumulates.

Ron Corbett, fleet manager for the city, told the City Council last week, "We have a lot of equipment that is in dire straits. This is the oldest fleet I've ever seen." He's been around fleets for 35 years.

A \$20 a year parcel tax passed in 1989 is what the city relies on for buying equipment. (None of it goes toward operations.) In that time 15 snow graders-plows, one snowblower-loader combo and two snowblowers have been purchased. The three newest pieces were bought in 2007 and will be paid off next year.

There is no money in the kitty for new equipment until the current debt is paid.

The city received \$227,753 from the parcel tax last year. A snowblower costs \$750,000. Maintenance of the fleet is costing \$800,000 a year.

"This \$20 is not even close to (what is needed) to replace our equipment," Corbett said.

Voters were asked in 2005 to up the \$20 fee, but they said no.

The City Council in September 2013 voted to go back to the ballot box in 2014 to double the fee. That never came to fruition.

"I don't think it had a good chance of passing," Councilman Tom Davis told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Is it needed? Absolutely. Maybe it needs to be packaged with road repair and repaving."

He said the council's change of mind came about because other entities – Lake Valley Fire, the library and community college – were coming forward with tax initiatives and that the thinking was voters would not be happy to keep having their wallets tapped.

Davis also said it's hard for the public to see the need for equipment replacement when the snowfall has been lackluster

for the last few winters.

But what worries Corbett is he's not sure if the vehicles are taxed in a heavy winter, if they will be able to hold up to the demand.

The \$18 million fleet would cost \$30 million to replace today. Corbett urged the council to put aside money for fleet replacement. No such action was taken at the April 21 meeting.

Plenty of blame for California's drought

By Richard Goode

My grandfather used to tell the story of traveling from Bakersfield to San Francisco by boat as a boy in about 1910. First up the Tulare Lake, then up the San Joaquin River and through the Delta. In those days, water in California's San Joaquin Valley must have seemed inexhaustible.

Then, the lakes were drained and the rivers dammed; the valley floor was plowed and cities grew. Water was used at an ever-increasing rate. More and more wells were drilled and reservoirs built. There would be dry years and wet years. The water table dropped and wells went dry.

Last year, however, wells started going dry at an alarming rate. Residents in some areas have been without water for several months. The waiting list for a drilling rig to extend wells was up to a year. Today, up and down the San Joaquin Valley, signs along the freeway lament the water crisis. Everyone is ready to place blame, especially on the favorite

whipping boys: Los Angeles and agriculture. But the truth is everyone is to blame and there are no easy solutions. California just doesn't have enough water to meet the demand. Hydrologists have been warning us since the 1970s that this was coming.

To understand the water crisis, you have to understand the structure of California and the San Joaquin Valley. The San Joaquin Valley is a broad basin that is bounded on the west by the Coast Range, which is mostly comprised of marine sediments, and on the east by the granitic Sierra Nevada. This basin is filled with layers of sediments that have washed down from the mountains over millions of years. These sediments are saturated with water and vary in thickness from about 2,500 feet in the north to about 9,000 feet in the south.

In the south, where there was no outlet for the runoff, the vast Tulare Lake was formed. In years when water was in abundance, water overflowed the divide and into the San Joaquin River, which in turned flowed into the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta and then through the San Francisco Bay into the Pacific Ocean.

Before irrigation began in earnest in the 1930s as affordable pumps became available, much of the valley's farming relied on the winter rains for the crops, winter wheat, and other grains. The ability to pump water from the aquifer beneath the valley is a major reason the valley became one of the world's richest agriculture producing regions. Immense water projects allow California to store and transport surface water from the north, which generally receives more rain, to the dryer south. But even in wet years there is rarely enough surface water to meet the need. Groundwater is pumped to supply the difference between surface water availability and the demand for water.

California has been operating at a water deficit since at least the 1950s. Hydrologists estimate that on average 800,000 acre-feet per year are pumped from the aquifer annually. Last

year alone, closer to 2 million acre-feet of water were pumped.

This tremendous withdrawal of groundwater has lowered the water table. As the water table drops, shallow wells that are normally sufficient to provide water go dry. The well must be drilled to a deeper level to provide access to the lowered water table.

The aquifer is usually recharged by runoff from the Sierra Nevada and, to a lesser extent, the Coast Range on the west. As the river water flowed into the valley, it soaked into the soil at the base of the mountains and made its way into the aquifer. The damming of the rivers, while providing water storage, has removed this major source of recharge. As water is removed from the ground and not recharged, the clay layers in the ground begin to compact. This causes subsidence of the surface. A few miles southwest of Mendota, the ground has subsided by more than 30 feet since the 1920s. Last summer's pumping has accelerated the change, producing a subsidence rate of half an inch a month. Nearly all of this subsidence is permanent, thus reducing the capacity of the aquifer (and, ironically, making flooding worse in wet years).

With reduced snowpacks in the mountains during the winter, surface water is reduced and there is less water to share. This drying out is not just the present condition of the San Joaquin Valley; is the future of the American Southwest.

We have a bad habit of declaring a drought over when we receive several wet years in a row. But the damage of this drought is not reversible. Until we can recharge the groundwater at a rate equal to the withdrawal, California will be in a drought, no matter how much rain it receives. We may have already waited too long.

Richard Goode is a professor of geology at Porterville College and has lived in the San Joaquin Valley most of his life. His

great-grandfather settled in the Ducor area in 1880. He wrote this for Zocalo Public Square.

Station manager buys KRLT-KOWL

South Shore-based radio stations KRLT and KOWL are about to change ownership.

General Manager Steve Harness is buying 93.9-FM and 1490-AM from Cherry Creek Radio. The deal should be completed July 21. The FCC must still approve the transfer.

The on air talent and programming are expected to remain the same.

Harness has been with KRLT-KOWL since 2007. He started as a disc jockey, became program director, operations manager and then general manager last year.

The 39-year-old South Lake Tahoe resident started his broadcast career while in high school.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Troubling interdependency of water and power

By Felicity Barringer, New York Times

In Modesto, utility records chart an 18 percent rise in farmers' energy use in 2014 compared with 2013. No evidence shows exactly why this happened, but California's drought, now in its fourth year, sent many farmers to their wells to pump from hidden aquifers water that normally would be found at ground level.

Such measures are a timely illustration of the way water needs power – not just to move it, but to clean it and even, with desalination, to create it from brine. A large desalination plant being built to provide 7 percent of San Diego's water will require about 38 megawatts of power, enough for more than 28,000 homes. And it is no coincidence that primary owners of the 2,250-megawatt, coal-fired Navajo generating station near Page, Ariz., are water managers; they need the power to move water.

The converse is also true: Water is required for power – for hydropower; for extracting oil, natural gas and coal; and, most of all, for cooling power plants. A report from the Congressional Research Service projects that 85 percent of the growth in domestic water consumption from 2005 to 2030 will come from the power sector.

Read the whole story