Fire chief worries about safety of S. Lake Tahoe

Publisher's note: ***This is the second of two stories about the South Lake Tahoe Fire Department.***

By Kathryn Reed

Fire – it's going to happen. Where? When? How destructive? Those are unknowns. But the reality is the resources are lacking in the city, the basin, California, Nevada and throughout the west.

"Mutual aid" has been talked about at all levels of the fire service for eons, but it wasn't until the deadly Wine Country fires last fall that the issue started making headlines.

Locally, the need for outside resources has been played out over and over again. Look at all the different fire trucks that often arrive at an event of any consequence. It's not just an event like the Angora Fire that demonstrates the cooperative nature and need of fire resources, it's much smaller blazes as well.

South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Jeff Meston was in Sacramento last month testifying before a legislative committee about the need to improve the state's mutual aid system. He is the president-elect of the California Fire Chief's Association.

Outside help didn't come to Santa Rosa last fall until six hours after it was requested. Help would take even longer to get to Tahoe.

Fire officials are lobbying the state to mobilize resources when there are red flag days or other threats like flooding and mudslides. This way the people and equipment are already deployed, so the destruction and loss of life would be less.

Meston's attention is also focused on local issues.

He is in the process of putting together a study called the Standards of Cover. It is an in depth look at all the safety issues in the city. Every dwelling in the city is being recorded – including the type of siding, construction materials and vegetation.

He had hoped to have it ready to be presented to the City Council in May, but that could be delayed since he now has the added role of being acting city manager. Still, he wants it before the council before budget discussions. It is more than three-quarters completed.

Meston believes the Standards of Cover, which the city has never had, should be the guiding document for decision-making for the fire department.

In the past the ISO (Insurance Service Organization) rating was something fire departments coveted.

"They don't verify any information. They say whatever the chief says is good enough for us," Meston said of the ISO process.

The city's last ISO rating from a couple years ago was a 4 (scale is 1-10, with 1 the best). Meston commented how that is the same score as the previous rating and that the on-duty resources have been cut significantly in that time.

Today SLTFD has eight people on duty at any given time. There are two three-person engines, one person in a squad and a battalion chief.

"Two issues really affect fire loss – how quickly you get there, and how many people you get there with to do the job," Meston told *Lake Tahoe News*. "The national standard is 17 and we send eight."

He said the document he is creating will not sugar coat the

“terrible” response times, staffing issues and the consequences – both real and potential.

“What has happened is our homes are far more combustible than the 1960s because of plastics, coverings,” Meston said. “We reach flash-over, when a fire consumes a great majority of oxygen and people in the house no longer survive; we reach it quicker than in the 1960s. So it matters how fast we get there to minimize the loss of life and property.”

The purpose of the document is to give elected officials facts to use when it comes to making decisions about the fire department. Meston will also include recommendations in the document.

“We need to have a discussion about priorities; about priorities citywide. We are trying to be everything to everybody and we can’t be,” Meston said.

Federal court will hold first-ever hearing on climate change science

By Stuart Leavenworth, McClatchy

WASHINGTON – A federal judge in San Francisco has ordered parties in a landmark global warming lawsuit to hold what could be the first-ever U.S. court hearing on the science of climate change.

The proceeding, scheduled for March 21 by U.S. District Court Judge William Alsup, will feature lawyers for Exxon, BP, Chevron and other oil companies pitted against those for San

Francisco and Oakland – California cities that have accused fossil fuel interests of covering up their role in contributing to global warming.

“This will be the closest that we have seen to a trial on climate science in the United States, to date,” said Michael Burger, a lawyer who heads the Sabin Center for Climate Change Law at Columbia University.

Read the whole story

Sandoval to create task force for school safety

By Meghin Delaney, Las Vegas Review-Journal

Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval announced Monday that he will create a task force to recommend a series of school safety initiatives for inclusion in the final state budget prepared on his watch.

“I have the benefit of building the next budget, which will be hopefully completed by the end of August,” he said. “This is a priority for me that I want to see go into the budget.”

Sandoval, who is in the final year as governor, announced the move after a two-hour meeting with school superintendents to discuss school safety in the aftermath of the shooting at a Parkland, Florida, high school last month that left 17 dead.

Read the whole story

McClintock rival files despite promise not to

By Emily Cadei, Sacramento Bee

In early January, Democratic congressional candidate Regina Bateson was unequivocal. If the state party endorsed someone else in her race, she would end her campaign so Democrats could focus on unseating Republican Rep. Tom McClintock.

“If someone else gets endorsed, I will not continue to run as an ‘unendorsed Democrat,’ because I think that would be counter-productive and jeopardize the end goal of beating McClintock,” Bateson, one of three Democrats running in the district, e-mailed the chairs of the Tahoe Truckee Democratic Club on Jan. 7.

Yet on Friday, Bateson’s campaign filed the paperwork to get her name on the ballot for California’s June 5 “top-two” primary, despite the fact that the state party endorsed fellow Democrat Jessica Morse last month.

Read the whole story

Man run over by neighbor on Gardner Mountain

Updated 2:26pm:

A 61-year-old South Lake Tahoe man was accidentally run over by a neighbor early Tuesday morning.

James Gregory Greenwood was pronounced dead at the scene. He lived with his 90-year-old father on 13th Street.

An autopsy will be conducted to determine the exact cause of death. It's possible he had died prior to the vehicle backing over him.

The driver was leaving his 13th Street home just after 5am March 13 to pick something up at the store. He thought he was going over a snow berm. When he returned he realized the bump was his neighbor, and then he called police.

School buses were rerouted to avoid the scene, which is near the entrance to Mt. Tallac and South Tahoe high schools.

Officers said there is nothing suspicious about the accident.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

SLT fire chief wants money for his department

Publisher's note: *This is the first of two stories about the South Lake Tahoe Fire Department.*

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe's fire safety is lacking. That's what the fire chief says.

"The city had set a goal of a response for 90 percent of all calls in four minutes or less. We meet that goal about 20

percent of the time. It is a really, really terrible number," Fire Chief Jeff Meston told *Lake Tahoe News.*

It's a staffing and money issue. In 2014, the city closed station No. 2 near South Tahoe Middle School. Ambulances are still there, but no firefighters.

When Meston took over as chief in fall 2013 the department had been reorganized so it had shift commanders instead of battalion chiefs. This was something the rank and file members lobbied for, and in turn they got better raises.

Meston saw that this command structure wasn't working and urged the return of battalion chiefs, as most fire departments have. Station two had to close to make the budget work with the personnel changes.

"Guess where the fire activity is and where response time is the longest?" Meston said, with the Al Tahoe area by station No. 2 being the answer. "That was a conscious decision that occurred that the council didn't have much to say about. I believe the elected officials are the ones who should determine fire (budgets)."

Ultimately it is the council that approves the budget, so the responsibility does stop there. It is also the city manager's job to balance the needs of the various departments based on the revenues available.

No department ever gets everything it wants.

Meston, who is now acting city manager, has a chance to bring his concerns to the council's attention in a more direct manner. On the April 3 agenda the mid-year budget is expected to be up for discussion.

When there are excess revenues they often get reallocated at this meeting. Staff, with heavy influence by the city manager, makes recommendations, with the council being the ones with

the final say.

“The reality is when you compare us to every other like city in the state of California, we are second from the bottom in terms of general fund budget,” Meston said. “Usually a city spends half of its budget on police and fire. Ours is under 50 percent.”

The current fiscal year’s General Fund budget is $38.8 million, with fire getting 15 percent of that, and police 24 percent.

When it comes to what the budget allocates to personnel, 64 percent of the General Fund goes to salaries and benefits for all employees. Of the $24.73 million, police top out at 35 percent of that figure with $8,714,744 and fire is second at 22 percent with $5,403,998.

Those numbers are before contract negotiations are even settled. It’s possible any “extra” money that is talked about next month will be spent on raises for workers. Talks have been going on for months, with a resolution having been expected earlier this year, but then the city manager debacle ensued and changes were made to who was negotiating on the city’s behalf.

Calif. water use back to pre-drought levels

By Paul Rogers, San Jose Mercury News

California’s water conservation habits, refined and improved over five years of drought, are quickly evaporating.

For the seventh time in the last eight months, the amount of water saved by urban Californians has declined, according to new data from the State Water Resources Control Board. In other words, lawn sprinklers are back on, showers are getting longer and overall, California's water use, after five years of conserving, is now back to where it was before the drought began.

"You don't want to jump to a conclusion and say the sky is falling, everybody has forgotten how to conserve," said Felicia Marcus, chairwoman of the water board. "But having been through what we've been through, we obviously want people to stay aware and redouble our efforts."

Read the whole story

Tahoe Vista man arrested, 2 WCSO deputies hurt



Patrick K. Walsh

A Tahoe Vista man was arrested Saturday on charges of battery on police officer, drug possession and trafficking.

The incident started March 10 at 10:45pm when a Washoe County

sheriff's deputy initiated a traffic stop on Tahoe Boulevard near Winding Way in Incline Village.

"The passenger of the vehicle provided the deputy with a fictitious name and took a folding knife from his pocket against instructions from the deputy. The suspect placed the knife on the hood of a patrol vehicle then, as deputies attempted to handcuff him, the suspect fled," deputies said.

After a short pursuit, the suspect got into an altercation with several deputies.

Patrick K. Walsh, 34, was transported to a hospital in Reno for treatment, then taken to the Washoe County Detention Facility.

Two deputies were also taken to a Reno hospital where they were treated and released.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

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1 in 3 Nev. motorists may see rise in auto insurance

By Ken Ritter, AP

About one in three Nevada motorists, or as many as 600,000 people, could face a 9 percent jump in auto insurance rates this summer when the state raises the basic required minimum levels of bodily injury and property damage coverage, officials said.

The increase, effective July 1, could amount to about $10 more a month for average policyholders who have minimum bodily

injury coverage of $15,000 per person and $30,000 per accident, plus basic $10,000 per accident in property damage coverage, according to figures provided to state lawmakers when they approved the increase last year.

Read the whole story

EDC wants to buy property in South Lake

El Dorado County has long been in need of additional office space in South Lake Tahoe.

If supervisors on Tuesday say yes, a 6,435-square-foot building on Sandy Way will be theirs.

Owners of Tahoe Beach Retreat have title to the building. Prior to their ownership it was a post office. The U.S. Postal Service closed that site in June 2010.

The purchase agreement price is $1.25 million.

This deal has been in the works for about a year.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report