

Holiday shopping season comes down to the wire

By Anne D’Innocenzio, Associated Press

NEW YORK — Despite an early start, sales data provided to the Associated Press shows that stores may once again have to rely on procrastinators to save the holiday shopping season.

Sales were up 1.8 percent from Nov. 1 through Monday compared with the same period a year ago, according to data tracker First Data Corp., which declined to provide sales figures.

The numbers are modest considering the National Retail Federation, the nation’s largest retail trade group, expects sales for the entire season — November and December — to rise 4.1 percent to \$616.9 billion.

The slow growth also comes at a time when retailers tried to do a number of things to jumpstart the season and encourage shoppers to spend. Some offered “holiday” discounts as early as Halloween instead of waiting until the day after Thanksgiving known as Black Friday. And more stores opened on Thanksgiving Day itself to offer people early enticements to spend.

But the incentives seem to have backfired. Shoppers took advantage of the earlier sales and hours, but that had the effect of syphoning away sales from Black Friday, which is typically the biggest sales day of the year.

“The numbers are lower than what people expected them to be so it will be interesting to see what happens in the final days of the holiday shopping season,” said Rishi Chhabra, First Data’s vice president of information and analytics.

As a result of the modest sales, retailers are making a big

final push to lure shoppers into stores. And they're employing tactics they've had to use since the recession.

Dennis May, CEO and president of Hhgregg Inc., said the consumer electronics chain, added a "buy more, save-more" sales event for the week that ended Saturday. And it's also extending the cutoff date for online shoppers who want to pick up their items in the store until noon Christmas Eve. Last year, the cutoff date was Dec. 23.

"I think the consumer is very savvy," he said. "They're not shopping with abandon. They're not throwing their budgets to the wind. "

Major retailers including Macy's and Toys R Us are offering marathon shopping hours. Kohl's, for instance, is opening its stores for 132 hours straight until 6 p.m. Christmas Eve. That compares with 108-hour stretch last year.

"Customers can rely on us around the clock for their last-minute gift-giving solutions," said Michelle Gass, Kohl's chief customer officer.

Despite the frenzy, retailers don't necessarily have to panic. There still are big potential spending days ahead, including this Saturday, which some industry watchers are saying could be the biggest shopping day of the year. In fact, the average holiday shopper had completed only 52.9 percent of their holiday shopping as of December 10, according to a survey of more than 6,165 shoppers conducted by the retail trade group.

But retailers also have to watch their bottom lines. Shoppers have become more accustomed to deals, and many aren't willing to pay regular price anymore.

Indeed, C. Britt Beemer, chairman of America's Research Group, said 60 percent of 1,000 shoppers polled last weekend said they were only buying deals this holiday season. That compares with 40 percent last year.

But all the discounts eat away profits. According to First Data, the number of transactions rose 1.8 percent, but the average transaction was flat at \$73.85, showing how heavy discounting can hurt the bottom line.

“I don’t think it’s great out there,” said Ron Friedman, head of the retail and consumer products group at accounting firm Marcum LLP who estimates that holiday sales will be up 2 percent from last year. “People are out in the stores and shopping, but they’re all looking for deals.

Indeed, some shoppers are hesitant to spend a lot, despite some recent good economic news. Average gas prices nationally have dropped and the unemployment rate is at a six-year low. But some shoppers still struggle with higher costs and stagnant wages.

“I have to still watch what I spend and make sure everything’s on sale,” said Teresa Conrad, 51, who was shopping recently at a suburban Indianapolis mall.

AP business writer Tom Murphy in Indianapolis contributed to this report.

King Fire restoration proposals being sought

Eldorado National Forest is seeking comments as it prepares an environmental impact statement for the King Fire Restoration Project

There will be an open house Jan. 13 at the Best Western Plus Placerville Inn, 6850 Green Leaf Drive, Placerville from

6-8pm. A presentation on the proposed action will be followed by questions and answers with the planning team, and an opportunity to talk to specialists about specific aspects of the project including fuel reduction, tree salvage, reforestation, wildlife, watershed protection, and research.

The forest is currently proposing to treat 14,000 acres of national forest that burned with high severity.

The objectives are:

- Reduce risk from falling dead, dying, and defective trees;
- Reduce long term fuel accumulation in strategic locations to improve control of future fires;
- Restore diverse vegetation including conifer forests in a manner that improves future resiliency;
- Expeditiously remove fire killed timber to generate funds for restoration and contribute to the societal need for wood products;
- Take advantage of research opportunities to increase knowledge regarding the environmental effects of large fires, how to reduce the risk of future fires, and how to restore resilient forests.

A complete description of the proposed action and project maps is online, then click on King Fire Restoration Project.

Issues or concerns identified during the current scoping phase will be used to develop project alternatives prior to releasing a draft EIS. There will also be another comment period when draft EIS is released in the spring.

Nev. benefits from last-minute congressional action

By Amber Phillips, Las Vegas Sun

By the skin of their teeth, congressional lawmakers passed a \$1 trillion budget through next summer, OK'd all military spending and approved a series of tax breaks.

Amid sometimes high-stakes drama, Congress got it all done in a flurry of last-minute legislating and back-room deals during the lame-duck session.

It was also Sen. Harry Reid's final few weeks as Senate majority leader. The Nevada Democrat will hand over power to Republicans when the new Congress takes over in January.

But Reid and the rest of the Nevada delegation made sure that plenty affecting Nevada made it into the final pieces of legislation of the 113th Congress – with at least one major caveat.

Read the whole story

Poll: Race is country's most important issue

By Mark Berman, Washington Post

For the first time in more than two decades, more than one in 10 Americans say that race is the most pressing issue facing

the country, according to a new Gallup poll.

The poll showed that 13 percent of Americans think that race relations and racism are the most important problems, the same number of people who said the economy, and more than than those who cited unemployment (8 percent), immigration (7 percent) and terrorism (2 percent), among many other things.

In fact, the only thing that more people named as a problem was general dissatisfaction with the government, Congress and politicians, with 15 percent of people citing that.

Read the whole story

Roads expected to be crowded during holidays

AAA projects 98.6 million Americans will journey 50 miles or more from home during the year-end holiday season, an increase of 4 percent from the 94.8 million people who traveled last year. The holiday period is defined as Dec. 23-Jan. 4.

This upward trend marks the highest forecast growth rate for the year-end holiday season since 2009 and the highest travel volume for the holiday period on record.

Nearly 91 percent of all travelers (89.5 million) will celebrate the holidays with a road trip, an increase of 4.2 percent from 2013. Air travel is forecast to grow 1 percent from 2013, with 5.7 million travelers taking to the skies.

Low gas prices continue to help boost disposable income. Today's national average is at the lowest level in five years and 70 cents lower than last year.

The calendar is having a positive effect on the number of travelers expected this year. This year the holidays land on a Thursday, creating a holiday travel season that is one day longer than last year's and the longest since 2008, offering travelers more options for departures and return trips.

According to AAA's Leisure Travel Index, hotel rates for AAA three diamond lodgings are expected to increase 4 percent from one year ago, with travelers spending an average of \$143 per night compared to \$138 last year. The average hotel rate for AAA Two Diamond hotels has risen 5 percent, with an average cost of \$108 per night.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Amazon Sunday delivery coming to S. Tahoe

Amazon's Sunday delivery will be available in South Lake Tahoe starting in January.

The packages come in the morning to the post office and are delivered that same afternoon.

Las Vegas was the pilot for the service, and it has been rapidly expanding. Reno and Carson City has had the delivery for the last two Sundays. However, it will not be available on the Nevada side of the South Shore because there is no home delivery there.

New technology is being developed to better streamline the process.

“A yellow-armed machine scans everything. It tells the clerk scanning what route it goes to,” Suzanne Phillips, interim manager of postal operations, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “It prints out turn-for-turn for the route.”

Having these physical directions will make it easier for the Postal Service to enlist the help of drivers from other offices or ones who are used to a different route.

– Kathryn Reed

SnowGlobe still in search of permanent location

By Kathryn Reed

Where will the stages for SnowGlobe 2015 be located?

That is a question many people would like answered.

Promoter Chad Donnelly has a three-year contract with South Lake Tahoe to bring the three-day music festival to the city. While this is the fourth year for SnowGlobe, it is the first year of the latest contract.

A big condition of the contract is that the ball fields adjacent to Lake Tahoe Community College can only be used in subsequent years if it's deemed the artificial turf can sustain such activity. That answer won't be known until the spring.



SnowGlobe is returning to the ball fields next to Lake Tahoe Community College Dec 29-31. Photo/LTN file

“Last year the team thought the field could only take one more year. And because the college is using it for soccer, it is getting used for that as well,” City Manager Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The city and college own the field. However, when it was built with what was Measure R money, the taxpayers agreed to the measure with the belief it was a community ball field.

Now the college is adding to the wear and tear by having resurrected the men and women’s soccer programs. A question is whether LTCC should be contributing to the maintenance costs of the field. Plus, there is money in the just approved Measure F that deals with fields.

“When it comes to the field where SnowGlobe is happening, the city is in the driver’s seat, as the community field is under the control of the city, not LTCC. We just have first right to scheduling for our programs,” Kindred Murillo, LTCC president, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

If the field were replaced during the life of the SnowGlobe contract, a new venue automatically has to be found. When the field is replaced, funds will come from what is now Measure R.

“We really need an event location in town,” Kerry said. “And

with Hard Rock coming on line, we'd really like to keep it on the South Shore. We will explore any option if we can't have it on the field. To lose it to another location would be disappointing for economic reasons as well as we have it running smoothly."

Donnelly would also like to keep it within the city limits – especially since that is whom he has the contract with. He said it is premature to be discussing the possibility of moving the festival across the state line.

"In a perfect world I don't necessarily know that it is the best fit (at LTCC). I love the location and our partners there and there are things that make it very special, but there are a few different places that could potentially add to the experience," Donnelly told *Lake Tahoe News*.

He would not reveal what other locations he might prefer.

One thing that needs to be taken into consideration is the festival keeps growing. In the first year about 9,000 people attended each night. This year Donnelly is predicting close to 15,000 per night.

Donnelly said the growth is a "testament that people like the city of South Lake Tahoe, the festival, and the opportunity to ski and snowboard."

Discussions about changing locations will take place between Donnelly and the city when he is here later this month for SnowGlobe. Also on the table is the possibility of bringing a summer festival, with a different music genre, to town.

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Notes:

- SnowGlobe is Dec. 29 from 3-11pm, Dec. 30 2:30-11pm, and Dec. 31 2:30pm-Jan. 1 at 1:30am.

- The city's hot line is already up and running – 530.542.6001.
 - There will be fireworks all three nights.
 - Tickets are still available.
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Amador County man guilty of deer poaching

A Plymouth man has been convicted in Amador Superior Court on multiple deer poaching charges.

Gary Michael Creason Jr., 24, was fined \$19,520 for activities involving the take of trophy deer out of season.

Acting on a tip, wildlife officers from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife contacted Creason at his home in July 2013, where they found him in possession of several sets of trophy deer antlers and deer meat. Creason admitted to taking deer out of season, using another person's tag and to pursuing trophy bucks outside the hunting season.

The \$19,520 fine was on top of three years of probation, loss of all hunting privileges during that timeframe and forfeiture of all wildlife evidence seized.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Feds forecast wet conditions for next 3 months

By Paul Rogers, San Jose Mercury News

There is a 75 percent probability of average or above-average precipitation between January and the end of March for California, according to a new report by federal scientists – the first time in five years such a wet outlook has been predicted in the state during the first three months of a year.

“This is good news,” said Steve Baxter, a seasonal forecaster with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which issued the report on Thursday predicting that the harsh reality of California’s historic drought may finally be giving way to wetter days ahead.

“There are not indications of a monster wet season,” he said. “It’s unlikely that the drought will be broken this year, but it’s likely that it will be improved.”

Pacific Ocean temperatures, which are warmer than normal, along with satellite imagery and computer models, are showing a greater likelihood of low-pressure systems, which can draw storms to California, Baxter said. There still is also a 65 percent chance of mild El Niño conditions developing this winter, which could further increase chances.

Meanwhile, reservoirs continued to slowly rise across Northern California after three weeks of drenching rains. And another report out Thursday also offered an additional glimmer of hope. The U.S. Drought Monitor, a weekly map issued by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and other agencies, showed that 32 percent of California is in “exceptional drought,” notably down from 55 percent last week, due to the recent rains.

Read the whole story

Caesars subsidiary to file for bankruptcy

By J.D. Morris, Las Vegas Sun

Casino giant Caesars Entertainment, which for years has struggled with massive debt, announced today that its largest subsidiary reached an agreement with key creditors on a financial restructuring plan.

The subsidiary, Caesars Entertainment Operating Company or CEOC, will file for bankruptcy in mid-January, the company said in a statement. Bloomberg News reported this morning that an agreement was in the works.

Read the whole story