

Management firms change Tahoe rental market

By Kathryn Reed

Owning a vacation rental may be a luxury, but it is also a business.

And for most people, they would prefer a middleman handle the business end. That's why property management firms became so popular. The industry for a time had become static, but now it is growing and changing.

With about 75 percent of the residences on the South Shore being owned by second homeowners, there is a definite market for people to handle renting them. While not all of those people put their property on the rental market, a large percentage do.

The going rate is 30 to 50 percent of a night's fee to handle renting the property. The firms deal with noise complaints, cleaning services, and checking people in and out.

TurnKey is a firm out of Austin that this fall opened an office in South Lake Tahoe. It's biggest selling point is that for the first year it takes a 14 percent cut, with that figure going to 18 percent in subsequent years.

It is handling properties from Glenbrook to Christmas Valley and out to Camp Richardson. Expanding to the North Shore and Truckee are goals.

"We had been with the other company a long time. We were dissatisfied," John Puccinelli of Cupertino told *Lake Tahoe News*. "It was brick and mortar. This is Internet. I thought that's where the future is."

He has owned a vacation rental in the Tahoe Keys for 20 years

and was with the same company that whole time. Puccinelli said it was time for a change and opted for TurnKey.

One thing that TurnKey does that most other agencies don't do is treat vacation rentals more like hotels. While hotels and airlines traditionally raise and lower rates based on peak times, vacation rental rates are often stagnant – except perhaps for Christmas, New Year's and Fourth of July – the three busiest weeks of the year in Lake Tahoe.

Jon Sween, general manager of the South Lake Tahoe office, said being able to tweak prices for clients allows for annual revenues to be greater and less emphasis on actual nights rented.

Using algorithms for people inquiring about a rental helps operators in Texas to determine if queries were sent out to multiple agencies or just TurnKey. This then allows them to direct their resources to whom they deem to be the most serious potential renters.

Technology is something that separates TurnKey from other rental agencies.

"I like the ability for them to change door locks remotely and track people when they come in and out of the house so they can provide security for the house as well and not just for vacation rental," Roger Isaac told *Lake Tahoe News*. He has had a vacation rental off North Upper Truckee for a couple years and is now using TurnKey. "When a vacation renter comes up they change the lock remotely so each person has a personalized entry key to come in the house."

TurnKey also uses an Android tablet to communicate with renters. This includes eliminating the traditional binder full of info in the rental; it's on the tablet. The tablet is also available for guests to use while in Tahoe to research places to go.

Housekeepers must take 25 photos with it when they are done. Guests are asked to rate the cleanliness when they check in.

“If they check five, the housekeeper receives a bonus. If it’s a one, we call the client about it right away,” Sween told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Renters also receive a welcome call when they arrive; which in part is to check on any issues at the get-go.

The tablet also has a built in decibel meter. This has to do with noise being the biggest complaint about vacation rentals. If it gets too loud, the renters are sent a message to keep it down. They don’t know (until now) that their noise level is being monitored.

TurnKey isn’t the only newcomer to the market. Denver-based Evolve mailed info to owners last month offering 10 percent fees. Evolve and Red Awning offer marketing and reservation services only. TurnKey will do the same. It just means no active management, just bookings.

Tahoe shelter helps 7 more puppies left for dead



Pet Network Humane Society
in Incline Village is trying
to save abandoned puppies.
Photo/Pet Network

By Associated Press

A Lake Tahoe animal shelter has provided a new lease on life to another litter of puppies left for dead in a trash bin.

Volunteers at the Pet Network Humane Society in Incline Village have nursed back to health seven pups abandoned in Susanville, California, only a couple days after they were born.

The animals were discovered Oct. 29 in a trash bin behind a Radio Shack with their umbilical cords still attached.

The nonprofit Pet Network was contacted after the animals were taken to the Lassen County Animal Shelter, which lacked the staff to care for them.

Pet Network spokeswoman Brittney Schilpp said the prognosis is upbeat for the four females and three males, and they'll eventually be put up for adoption.

"All of them are healthy and looking great," Schilpp told the Associated Press. "They're chubby and walking around. We're no

stranger to the scenario and lucky to have such a strong volunteer base to care for them.”

Last year, the shelter provided similar care to a litter of six puppies found abandoned in a trash bin at a South Lake Tahoe gas station only a few hours after they were born. The animals all wound up with permanent homes.

“It usually takes between six to eight weeks before they’re ready for adoption,” Schilpp said. “The care for them is time consuming since they have to be fed every two to three hours by bottle.”

The Pet Network is accepting donations for care of the puppies and applications to adopt them. It will cost the shelter \$1,000 each for the canines’ care until they’re adopted.

Group leaders acknowledge it’s unlikely the person or persons who dumped the puppies will be caught in either case. Under California law, they would face felony charges.

The newborn dogs should have instead been taken to a veterinarian’s office or animal shelter, preferably with their mother to improve their chances of survival, they say.

Breath test being developed to detect pot

By Melissa Santos, News Tribune

A team at Washington State University is working to develop a breath test that could quickly determine whether a driver is under the influence of marijuana.

Law enforcement officers already use preliminary breath tests in the field to estimate drivers' blood alcohol content. But no similar portable tool exists to test for marijuana impairment via a breath sample.

Stoned drivers have become an increasing concern since Washington voters legalized recreational use of marijuana in 2012. A quarter of blood samples taken from drivers in 2013, the first full year the initiative was in effect, came back positive for pot.

WSU chemistry professor Herbert Hill said that existing technologies – including those already used by airport security and customs agents to detect drugs and explosives – can be re-purposed to test breath for THC, the psychoactive component of marijuana.

Read the whole story

Thanksgiving weekend sales slide 11%

By Hiroko Tabuchinov, New York Times

Have Americans finally had enough of Black Friday madness?

Sales, both in stores and online, from Thanksgiving through the weekend were estimated to have dropped 11 percent, to \$50.9 billion, from \$57.4 billion last year, according to preliminary survey results released Sunday by the National Retail Federation. Sales fell despite many stores' opening earlier than ever on Thanksgiving Day.

And though many retailers offered the same aggressive

discounts online as they did in their stores, the web failed to attract more shoppers or spending over the four-day holiday weekend than it did last year, the group said. The average person who shopped over the weekend spent \$159.55 at online retailers, down 10.2 percent from last year.

Over all, 133.7 million people shopped or planned to shop at stores or online over the four-day weekend, 5.2 percent fewer than last year, the federation said. And shoppers spent an average of \$380.95 over the four days, 6.4 percent less than the \$407.02 they spent last year.

Read the whole story

Supreme Court to weigh whether Facebook rants are threats

By Irin Carmon, MSNBC

What does Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts think about Gamergate? How seriously does Justice Clarence Thomas take Facebook rants? And will Justice Anthony Kennedy's First Amendment enthusiasms extend to rap lyrics?

All of these intriguing questions are on the table at the nation's highest court Monday morning with oral argument for *Elonis v. United States*. The case features a Pennsylvania man, Anthony Elonis, who claims his Facebook rants about killing his estranged wife and others were rap lyrics. Having been convicted of those threats, Elonis is asking the court to put down a standard for what counts as a "true threat," which is

not protected by the First Amendment: Should that test be how the speaker intended the comment, or whether the recipient felt threatened?

Elonis comes just in time for national debates over Internet bullying and stalking, about rape culture and violence against women, and about the role in the press and artists in publishing provocative material. It may also make some of the nine justices squirm. They aren't exactly known for their technological aptitude, nor their pop culture savvy, and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg recently accused her male colleagues of having a "blind spot" around gender.

Read the whole story

Bees' future may depend on their past

By Carl Zimmer, New York Times

The future of bees may depend on understanding their past.

Bees are in trouble, any entomologist will tell you. Honeybee colonies in the United States have suffered devastating losses in recent years. But colony collapse disorder, as it's called, affects only the species kept in beehives – the European honeybee, *Apis mellifera*. There are almost 20,000 species of wild bees, and they aren't faring well, either.

Nearly a third of bumblebee species in the United States are declining. In the Netherlands, more than half of the country's 357 species of wild bees are endangered. Many species of

plants, including crops, depend on wild bees to spread their pollen. When they lose their pollinators, they may suffer, too.

“It’s essential to know what is causing those declines,” said Jeroen Scheper, a graduate student at Alterra, a research institution at Wageningen University in the Netherlands.

But it is not enough to consider the many challenges – from pesticides to parasites – that wild bees face right now. “We need to go back in time,” said Scheper.

Read the whole story

Uber may take fight to Nev. Legislature

By Scott Sonner, AP

RENO – Uber Technologies’ legal battle with Nevada’s highly regulated taxi industry over Internet ride-sharing may be headed back to the political arena now that a judge has at least temporarily banned Uber’s unlicensed operations statewide.

Whether his restraining order put the brakes on an unregulated transportation service, or pulled the plug on emerging technology, is one of the questions lawmakers may be left to decide if Uber can’t persuade state regulators to find a way to marry its virtual world with the real one on the Las Vegas Strip and the streets of Reno.

Uber says it’s the victim of overzealous enforcement of antiquated laws that never envisioned smartphones that could

“e-hail” transportation on demand. It’s unclear whether any bills that would change the regulations are in the works. None of the brief summaries of the hundreds of bills lawmakers and state agencies have requested so far mention ride-sharing.

The company said late Wednesday that it temporarily stopped offering rides in Nevada as a result of the ruling.

“It’s unfortunate that Nevada is the first state in the nation to temporarily suspend Uber,” company spokeswoman Eva Behrend said in an emailed statement.

Nevada’s attorney general says the multibillion-dollar company finds itself in park because it thumbed its nose at regulators and deliberately broke the law to maximize profits as long as it could.

Uber refused to seek the licenses because it maintains it’s a technology company, not a motor carrier.

Chief Deputy Attorney General Gina Session suggested the company may have been picking a fight in court “to get attention before the legislative session and get some momentum.”

“Uber’s approach is to start operations in open violation of the law in hope a groundswell of public opinion will override the regulatory concerns,” she told Washoe District Court Judge Scott Freeman. She said the company acquiesced before in agreeing to regulation elsewhere, including Nebraska, South Carolina and Maryland.

“When it wants to, it can work with regulatory oversight,” she said. “Why not in Nevada? Are we the Wild, Wild West?”

Freeman said he thinks he knows why.

“They can save a lot of money if I let them operate without regulation because I find they are not a common carrier,” the judge said during a nearly seven-hour hearing late Tuesday.

At one point, he directly questioned Uber officials on the witness stand as to why they suddenly abandoned discussions with the state and launched in Nevada Oct. 24 without any regulatory authority.

"Discussions were under way," he said. "Two days later, all heck breaks loose."

"Or heaven," Uber lobbyist John Griffin countered, "depending on your perspective."

From the consumers' perspective, Uber says its Internet application matching riders with drivers using personal cars is cheaper, more efficient and more accessible, especially in underserved neighborhoods.

Uber argues its service is not public because it's available only to "members of the online community – in sharp contrast to a taxi driver who just happens to be picking up literally anybody on the street," Uber lawyer Donald Campbell said.

The state disagrees.

"Just because you don't wait on the curb doesn't mean you're not available to the public," Session said.

Even before the ruling, Campbell suggested Uber may take a different approach going forward, whether it's in the courthouse or the statehouse.

"We get the message," he told the judge.

Chief explains SLTFD staffing

Lake Tahoe News asked South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Jeff Meston about staffing issues at station two.

Here is his response:

"Fire station two has two personnel assigned to it; a shift commander whose role is to provide 24-hour dedicated supervision to the on-duty resources, provide for consistency, safety and accountability for daily crew assignments and to coordinate all emergency responses.

"We also have one engineer assigned to the squad at that station whose emergency response capabilities include rescue systems, ventilation, forcible entry, advanced life support EMS and a variety of technical rescue components that the department has. This deployment supports our additional engine and medic units deployed at stations one and three.

"Our daily staffing has remained consistent at 10 and we staff up based on conditions that include red flag wildland warnings, inter-facility transfers that take medic units off the hill and for special events that require a more robust emergency response.

"We now also for the first time meet the national standard for an effective fire response delivering 15 personnel to a first alarm assignment with our automatic aid agreement with Lake Valley, staffing can also be augmented with mutual aid from Tahoe Douglas, CalFire and USFS.

"We were able to dedicate a shift commander based on our recent collective bargaining agreement which met a significant city goal, and we accomplished this with no increase to our budget, no addition of personnel all within our modest staffing levels. We implemented this approximately 30 days ago and have found that a dedicated

shift commander has improved our operations immensely.”

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Slow-growth issues not going away in EDC

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

El Dorado County voters just rejected three growth-control initiatives amid a \$1 million dollar opposition campaign funded by developer and real estate interests. Yet a ballot sequel already looms for 2016 as voters, once again, will consider measures restricting development in the Sierra foothills county.

Two other citizen-backed measures, which were withheld from the 2014 ballot for further study by county officials, have now received the go-ahead to appear on the county's June 2016 ballot.

The Board of Supervisors on Nov. 21 approved a public vote on an initiative to ban approvals of new subdivisions, apartments and commercial projects if they lack reliable water supplies or connections to public water systems.

Read the whole story

Biggest U.S. casino cuts back on gambling

By Michael Melia, AP

HARTFORD, Conn. — Foxwoods, the largest casino resort in North America, is reducing its number of slot machines and table games to free up space for nightclubs and other new attractions as it adapts to fierce competition, the new CEO said in an interview with The Associated Press.

It's a transition that CEO Felix Rappaport says probably should have started years earlier, held up perhaps by emotional attachments, and one that reflects a decline in the number of people gambling inside the cavernous Foxwoods Resort Casino on a given day.

"We think we have too much gaming," Rappaport said in the interview Monday.

The tribal-owned property in southeastern Connecticut has 5,800 slot machines and 350 table games, spread across several individual casinos. Foxwoods is identifying gaming areas that can be converted for other purposes in a process that Rappaport said would likely leave it with closer to 4,800 slot machines and 250 table games.

Foxwoods enjoyed a monopoly on casino-style gambling in the region for years after it opened in 1992 and had 6,300 slot machines and 380 table games before the Great Recession introduced a decline in gambling revenue that has yet to be reversed.

Now, the embattled resort is positioning itself to endure competition that is expected only to intensify in coming years with as many as three casinos in Massachusetts. Foxwoods and its local rival, Mohegan Sun, already have been losing revenue

to casinos in the New York City area and Rhode Island's Twin Rivers Casino, which recently added table games.

At Mohegan Sun, Tribal Gaming Authority CEO Mitchell Etess said on a conference call with industry analysts last week that its gaming floor has shrunk but he does not anticipate more big cuts.

"I think we've really done a good job at getting the floor down to what's manageable and what's right and then scheduling it for the times when the people are here," Etess said.

Rappaport, a Philadelphia native, was named CEO last week by the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation. He joined Foxwoods in February and had been part of a management team focused on expanding the resort experience including new nightclubs, restaurants and an outlet mall expected to open in the spring.

He worked previously as president of the casinos Excalibur, New York-New York and Luxor in Las Vegas, where he saw each property have a "golden era" and then have to adapt and sometimes contract with changes in the marketplace. Rappaport said Foxwoods is evolving in the same way, adding attractions with the goal of stirring excitement and keeping visitors on the property for longer periods of time.

"The industry in general has become less gaming centric," he said. "I think in Foxwoods' case we have exactly the same opportunities."

He said he expects Foxwoods will move toward earning 65 or 70 percent of its revenue from gambling – down from 80 percent – as it leans more on entertainment and other offerings.

Associated Press writer Stephen Singer contributed to this report.