

Couple with baby rescued along Rubicon Trail

By Siemny Chhuon, KXTV

RUBICON SPRINGS — A California Highway Patrol helicopter rescued a young Fairfield couple, their 4-month-old daughter and their friend from the Rubicon Trail in El Dorado County Tuesday.

It's a story Elizabeth Oldknow will one day tell her daughter.

"I still don't know how to completely process it," Oldknow said.

Oldknow, her husband, their baby and their friend set out on a fun day trip Tuesday along the rocky Rubicon Trail. But then their Jeep got stuck in Rubicon Springs.

"Obviously, it was a mistake to go as far as we did," Oldknow said. "I wish we turned around sooner."

With no way out, they were forced to spend the night in the woods. Fortunately, they found a campground.

Read the whole story

S. Tahoe overhauls employee benefits package

By Kathryn Reed

While South Lake Tahoe employees will have more in their

paychecks, it's going to cost many of them more to retire. This is because retiree health care coverage is going away for almost all current workers.

The South Lake Tahoe City Council at a special meeting this morning at 8 is expected to approve agreements with five of the six bargaining units. A tentative agreement has been reached with the 11-member Police Employees Association that will come back to the council at a later date.

"Transformative" is the word City Manager Nancy Kerry and Mayor Hal Cole used during an exclusive interview with *Lake Tahoe News* this week when describing the changes that are about to unfold.

By changing the health care plan, eliminating retiree health benefits for employees not yet retired, and modifying coverage the city will see a cost savings of \$1.5 million a year for each of the next three years. This starts with the fiscal year that began Oct. 1. The city is taking that savings and reinvesting it in the employees.

So, while there are raises and the introduction of deferred compensation programs that are similar to the private sector's 401(k), the money for these benefits has already been allocated and nothing is being taken away from the public to make it happen.

"The most important element of the overall financing strategy for the restructuring of wages and benefits is that it is funded from current and anticipated available resources, not additional taxes from the taxpayers, and in fact, it will reduce the city's and therefore the taxpayers' contribution payments to the other post-employment benefits trust over the next many years," Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*.

When Kerry was hired the unfunded liability for health care was \$47 million. With getting retirees onto Medicare, that figure dropped to \$25 million. Today's changes should bring

that amount to \$15 million. An actuarial study will be completed after the first of the year that will provide a detailed analysis of the unfunded liability.

"We could never have set enough aside," Kerry said of the promises previous councils and city managers made to employees.

Kerry has been working to resolve the health care and other unfunded liability issues for nearly three years. Cole said he tried to address the issue with previous city managers but they never wanted to deal with it or said nothing could be done.

"Pressure forces you to be innovative," Kerry said. She said it took a strong council and knowing the community would not tax themselves to deal with the debt or raises.

While in years past each employee group usually got the same percentage of raise, that is not happening now. The pot of money has been split equitably, which means fairly by dollar amount and not percentage. Each group decided if they wanted the money in the form of raises, deferred compensation, health care or other benefits.

Salaries will increase between 2.5 and 4 percent this year and next, and from zero to 4 percent in 2016-17. It has been nearly five years since most employees received a raise.

The city was paying \$19,000/year for a family health plan. Now it will be paying \$12,000.

A change is that employees may opt out of the health plan – something that was not allowed before.

"We have to stay self-insured because we have so many retirees. They are the most expensive," Kerry explained.

There are 800 people in the plan, though only 175 of them are employees. Without the change, that number could have grown to

1,200. When the current crop of retirees and their dependents are no longer covered by the city then officials can look at not being self-insured.

The city has created what it calls Plan A. That is a basic health plan that has a \$5,500 deductible. The city picks up the cost for singles, couples and families. Vision and dental are no longer offered. If people want a better plan, they can pay the difference for it.

Changes in the first year will see a positive net fund balance of approximately \$500,000. The recommendation is for that money to be set aside to pay for changes in the following two fiscal years.

For employees who are close to retiring and would not have been saving for post-retirement benefits there will be a transitional plan.

Council members and current retirees are also impacted by the changes. The latter have always been subjected to whatever current employees agree to. This means they will be on Plan A for health coverage, with the option to upgrade if they want.

Councilman Tom Davis is considered a retiree because when he left the council he took on retiree status – unlike Cole and Brooke Laine when they initially stepped down. Even though Davis is on Medicare, when he retires again from the council this will allow him to tap the city's supplemental health insurance for the rest of his life like all other current retirees. The other current council members are eligible for Plan A and will receive no medical benefits when they leave the council.

South Lake Tahoe is the only public entity in the Lake Tahoe Basin that offers any retirees medical coverage. It's also one of the only public agencies to have not given raises in the last five years.

It's possible the changes South Lake Tahoe is making to its medical plan will be precedent setting. City officials have been asked to speak to other cities about what South Lake Tahoe has accomplished in overhauling its health care offerings.

King Fire 100% contained

After nearly a month, the King Fire east of Pollock Pines is 100 percent contained.

This means there is a ring around the fire, but it is still burning. People can expect to see smoke from the interior of the fire area until the area experiences significant rain or snow this winter. Most of the 97,717 acres burned are on the Eldorado National Forest, though part of the Tahoe National Forest also burned.

It started Sept. 13 by a man who remains in jail charged with arson. Twelve houses were destroyed and 68 outbuildings were lost.

A Burned Area Emergency Response Team is assessing the post-fire threats to life, safety, property, and critical natural and cultural resources on the national forest.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Studies: Talking to your car can be dangerous

By Joan Lowy, AP

WASHINGTON – Just because you can talk to your car doesn't mean you should. Two studies have found that voice-activated smartphones and dashboard infotainment systems may be making the distracted-driving problem worse instead of better.

The systems let drivers do things like tune the radio, send a text message, or make a phone call while keeping their eyes on the road and their hands on the wheel, but many of these systems are so error-prone or complex that they require more concentration from drivers rather than less, according to studies released Tuesday by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety and the University of Utah.

One study examined infotainment systems in some of the most common auto brands on the road: Chevrolet, Chrysler, Ford, Hyundai and Mercedes. The second study tested the Apple iPhone's Siri voice system to navigate, send texts, make Facebook and Twitter posts, and use the calendar without handling or looking at the phone. Apple and Google are working with automakers to mesh smartphones with infotainment systems so that drivers can bring their apps, navigation and music files into their cars.

The voice-activated systems were graded on a distraction scale of 1 to 5, with 1 representing no distraction and 5 comparable to doing complex math problems and word memorization.

The systems were tested by 162 university students and other volunteers in three settings: a laboratory, a driving simulator and in cars while driving through a Salt Lake City neighborhood.

Apple's Siri received the worst rating, 4.14. Twice test drivers using Siri in a driving simulator rear-ended another car.

Chevrolet's MyLink received the worst rating, 3.7, among the infotainment systems. Infotainment systems from three other automakers – Mercedes, Ford and Chrysler – also were rated more distracting for drivers than simply talking on a hand-held cellphone. "What we continue to see from customers is that they demand this level of technology in their vehicles, that access to music and access to calls is now a critical part of the driving experience and so we're looking at innovative ways to provide that," said Chevrolet spokeswoman Annalisa Bluhm.

Apple noted in a statement that researchers didn't use the company's CarPlay or Siri Eyes Free, which are designed for use in cars. However, David Strayer, the University of Utah psychology professor who led the two studies, said researchers consulted with Apple before beginning the study. The study used an iOS 7 version of Siri that was tweaked to be nearly identical to the iOS 8 version, which was just recently released, he said.

The systems with the worst ratings were those that made errors even though drivers' voice commands were clear and distinct, said Strayer. Drivers had to concentrate on exactly what words they wanted to use and in what order to get the systems to follow their commands, creating a great deal of frustration.

For example, an infotainment system might recognize a command to change a radio station to "103.5 FM," but not "FM 103.5" or simply "103.5," he said.

Siri sometimes garbled text messages or selected wrong phone numbers from personal phonebooks, Strayer said. During one test, Siri called 911 instead of the phone number requested by the volunteer driver and the driver had to scramble to end the

call before it went through. Siri found the number in the driver's phonebook because the driver had called it once before.

"When these systems become more complex, like sending text messages or posting to Facebook, it pushes the workloads to pretty high levels and may be dangerous while driving," Strayer said.

The studies contradict claims by automakers, who have been pitching the voice systems to car buyers as a way they can safely enjoy social media and connectivity. Safety advocates say drivers assume that such systems are safe because they are incorporated into vehicles and are hands-free.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, which regulates vehicle safety, has issued guidelines to automakers for dashboard systems and is working on similar guidelines for cellphones and voice-activated systems, but the guidelines are voluntary.

"Infotainment systems are unregulated," said Deborah Hersman, president of the National Safety Council and former chairman of the National Transportation Safety Board. "It is like the Wild West, where the most critical safety feature in the vehicle – the driver – is being treated like a guinea pig in human trials with new technologies."

Two of the infotainment systems were rated relatively low for distraction. Toyota's Entune received a 1.7, the distraction equivalent of listening to an audiobook, and Hyundai's Blue Lin Telematic System received a 2.2.

"The good news is that really well-designed systems offer us the possibility to interact in ways that aren't so distracting," Strayer said.

Nev. expects population to keep growing

Given Nevada's current levels of employment and the potential for growth, the projections are for a statewide increase of 528,107 people in the next 20 years.

Broken out by region, Clark County could experience an increase of 328,379 people; Washoe County an increase of 147,422 people; and other northwest counties (Carson City, Churchill, Douglas, Lyon, and Storey Counties) could see population increase of 44,034. The counties along Interstate 80 (Elko, Eureka, Humboldt, Lander and Pershing Counties) could see an increase of 5,854 people and the balance of the state (Esmeralda, Lincoln, Mineral, Nye and White Pine Counties) could see an increase of 2,409 people.

The Nevada State Demographer's Office at UNR released its most recent population projections for Nevada this week.

"Nevada was hit by three major economic factors in the last decade: the housing bubble, the spike in fuel prices and the financial crisis; yet we grew by 35 percent from 2000 to 2010," Jeff Hardcastle, state demographer, said in a statement. "We are recovering and could end up growing by more than 290,000 from 2000 to 2020, which is roughly equal to the last year's estimated population of Boulder City and Henderson."

Models allows Hardcastle to consider the historic relationship between the Nevada economy and demographic composition of the state and how that relates to national changes as well as changes in counties throughout the state.

“In looking at Nevada compared to the rest of the country and surrounding states, Nevada continues to lag behind in job growth, but that is changing,” Hardcastle said. “Since the bottom of employment for Nevada in September 2010, we have regained 58.6 percent of the jobs that had been lost, almost half of that in the past year. Our annual job growth rate has been 2.5 percent since the bottom and is only exceeded by Utah for the states surrounding us. For the period between 2013 and 2020, we expect the annualized rate to be 1.8 percent with a recovery of the number of jobs lost by 2016. The growth in jobs will exceed the growth in the labor force so there may be more opportunity for people looking to reenter the labor force.”

“No matter how we look at it, gaming continues to be the biggest driver for employment in Nevada,” said Hardcastle. “But it is becoming more competitive across the country for the tourist dollar in general.”

Accommodation and food services and arts, entertainment and recreation currently make up more than 353,000 jobs. Hardcastle expects to see gains in manufacturing over the long term, but the other sectors with greater growth will be in construction, administrative and management services. The next two largest sectors, health care and retail combined, equal 279,000 jobs.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Candidates turn in financial

forms

Updated Oct. 9 7am:

Financial forms for candidates running for office in November were due this week.

Here are the forms for El Dorado County District 5 supervisor candidates Sue Novasel and Kenny Curtzwiler.

Michelle Sweeney has not turned in a Form 460 for Lake Tahoe Community College.

Only candidates who have formed committees must turn in forms.

Here are the forms for Duane Wallace and Jim Jones who are running for South Tahoe Public Utility District, though not against each other.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Inventory impacting Lake Tahoe housing market

By Mark Glover, Sacramento Bee

A lack of inventory has dragged down the Lake Tahoe real estate market through the first nine months of 2014, according to the Lake Tahoe, Nevada-based Chase International.

Through Sept. 30 this year, the sales volume of single-family homes around the lake was down 15 percent at \$727.4 million, compared with \$853.7 million in the year-ago period. Likewise, the number of units sold declined 19 percent in the same

period, from 1,087 last year to 877 in 2014.

Year over year, Chase said the median sales price of a Lake Tahoe home is down 19 percent to \$472,000, but the average price was up 6 percent to \$829,502. Sales of homes priced at more than \$1 million were down 16 percent; sales of those sold for less than \$1 million were down 20 percent.

Read the whole story

Animal shelter opening on West Slope

El Dorado County Animal Services expects to move animals and most items from the old facility in Placerville to Diamond Springs between Oct. 12-15.

The new facility, located at 6435 Capitol Ave., will officially open Oct. 16. Office hours are Monday through Friday from 8am-5pm; shelter services, including adoptions and kennel access, will be available Monday through Saturday from 9am-4:30pm.

The new facility will house lost, abandoned and abused animals, including cats, dogs, livestock and small animals. It will also include adoption areas, quarantine areas to safely house sick and injured animals, a barn, pasture areas for livestock and exercise runs for dogs. A public counter will be available for business services, such as obtaining and renewing permits and licenses.

During the move dates, Animal Services will only be open for essential services such as receiving stray animals and

allowing owners to reclaim their pets.

Funding for the \$5.7 million shelter came from the county's general fund and tobacco settlement dollars. Local animal welfare groups and citizens also helped raise funds to purchase some needed equipment and other enhancements for the project.

SAT scores drop in math for class of 2014

By Janet Lorin and Oliver Staley, Bloomberg

The high school class of 2014 turned in the lowest math scores on the SAT college-entrance exam since 2000, reinforcing concern that the U.S. is falling behind global rivals in science and math performance.

Math results dipped a point to 513 from last year and from a peak of 520 in 2005, while writing fell to 487, the lowest mark since that portion of the test was first given to the class of 2006. Reading scores rose by a point.

"Flat and stagnant would be the words that we would use," Cyndie Schmeiser, chief of assessment at the College Board, which administers the test, said on a call with reporters.

U.S. teenagers lag behind peers from Asia in international tests of math, reading and science, prompting calls for improvements to educational standards. Fewer than half, or 42.6 percent, of SAT takers met benchmarks to show they are prepared for college-level work, compared with 42.7 percent

last year.

Read the whole story

S. Tahoe council candidates' finance forms

Candidates on the Nov. 4 ballot were to have filed their first campaign finance forms on Oct. 6. *Lake Tahoe News* will post them as we receive them.

The first to be secured are from the South Lake Tahoe City Council candidates. Matt Palacio has not filed. Bruce Grego, according to City Clerk Suzie Alessi, will be providing an amendment Oct. 8.

Here are the documents for:

• Wendy David • Tom Davis • Brooke Laine • Austin Sass • Angela Swanson.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*