AAA forecasts more travelers on Memorial Day weekend

AAA Travel projects 36.1 million Americans will journey 50 miles or more from home during the Memorial Day holiday weekend, a 1.5 percent increase from the 35.5 million people who traveled last year.

More than eight in 10 travelers will be driving to their destinations.

The Memorial Day holiday travel period is defined as May 22-26.

“As we enter into the summer travel season with warmer temperatures and tulips in bloom, thoughts of historic cold are still fresh in the minds of Americans in many parts of the country,” Marshall L. Doney, AAA chief operating officer said in a press release. “The winter blues appear to have given Americans the travel bug and a case of cruise cabin fever as travel for the holiday is expected to hit a new post-recession high.”

In addition to seasonal rising temperatures, improvements in several key economic factors are driving the expectation for more holiday travelers this year. “As the economy continues to improve at a slow and steady pace consumer spending, disposable income, consumer confidence and the employment outlook are trending up which is welcomed news for the travel industry,” continued Doney.

AAA expects most drivers will pay lower gas prices by Memorial Day weekend due to rising supplies. AAA expects holiday gas prices to be relatively similar or even slightly less than last year’s national Memorial Day average of $3.63 per gallon.

According to AAA’s Leisure Travel Index, hotel rates for AAA three diamond lodgings are expected to increase 2 percent from one year ago with travelers spending an average of $169 per night compared to $166 last year. The average hotel rate for AAA two diamond hotels has risen 3 percent, with an average cost of $124 per night.

Siding a contentious issue for SLT, developer

Plywood on a back wall of the Chateau project is likely to be temporary. Photo/LTN

By Kathryn Reed

In a rare moment, the South Lake Tahoe City Council said "no" to a request by attorney Lew Feldman when it came to the Chateau project.

While the discussion May 20 was civil, in the end Feldman did not get everything he requested in the "major design review permit revision." He wanted part of the siding to be changed from cedar to plywood.

Mayor Hal Cole was the lead advocate to keep the cedar. For the time being the T-1-11 siding can stay.

The compromise is that if the pillars come out or future development is such that the 30-foot high siding would be visible, the cedar siding will have to be put on.

Feldman’s contention was, “If nothing happens and the columns remain, it would seem punitive.” Cedar is much more expensive than plywood.

The retail-nightclub project is costing $11 million.

Other changes allowed include increasing the window sizes along the highway, reducing the width of the Stateline Avenue sidewalk from 8½ feet to 6 feet, and modifying the door and window locations to appease retailers.

What retailers will occupy the more than 18,000-square-feet of space is still being withheld from the public. Stores should open this summer.

McP’s has served its last meal in its current location before it moves to the other side of the Chateau project in the round building at the corner of the highway and Stateline Avenue. Soon the old structure will be demolished.

Also to be taken down this summer is the Holiday Lodge.

Feldman said the entire site would be cleaned up this building season.

All of the parcels being built on now have been consolidated into one map. That is not the case for the properties that Owens Realty Mortgage bought early this year for $6 million from City National Bank. It does, however, make the 11-plus acreage site controlled by one owner for the first time.

Feldman said the owners have no intentions of selling off the parcels piecemeal.

“We now have site control, which is vital to advance future phases,” Feldman told the council.

While he would not promise future phases would be built next year, he said it is likely things will progress sooner rather than later.

When the project was first approved it was to include two hotels, a convention center, retail and open space. The city was going to be the operator of the center and take care of the common areas. Since the original developer filed for bankruptcy the city no longer has a financial stake other than collecting taxes.

Supervisors put Nutting’s future in judge’s hands

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

Amid a spectacle raw with anger and emotion, four El Dorado County supervisors voted Tuesday to ask a judge to decide whether their colleague, Ray Nutting, should be removed from office.

It was another searing chapter in the political saga of the embattled supervisor as fellow board members went into closed session without him to discuss whether to kick him out for his conviction on four misdemeanors last week.

But before they convened with the county attorney and outside legal counsel, they got an earful from Nutting’s wife, Jennifer, who took to a lectern to blast authorities who “maliciously prosecuted my husband.”

Nutting, 54, was acquitted of three felony malfeasance charges last week in connection with allegations that he failed to properly disclose more than $70,000 in state grant income for clearing brush on his family’s 340-acre ranch in Somerset.

However, jurors did find the four-term supervisor guilty of six misdemeanor government code violations.

Read the whole story

S. Tahoe loosens sex offender ordinance

By Kathryn Reed

Sex offenders in South Lake Tahoe will get to roam a little freer starting next month – including near parks, schools, arcades and other places children congregate.

This is all because the California Supreme Court refused to review a case from the Fourth Appellate District Court that ultimately made 40 local sex offender ordinances illegal.

“We as a city cannot regulate sex offenders in our community. That is pathetic,” City Attorney Tom Watson told the City Council on May 20.

The other choice was to be sued. The city had already been put on notice by the California Reform Sex Offender Laws group.

“The sex offender ordinance adopted by the city of South Lake Tahoe violates both the federal and state constitutions,” Janice Bellucci, president of that group, said in a statement last month. “The South Lake Tahoe ordinance is based upon two myths: (1) that registered citizens have a high rate of re-offense and (2) that strangers commit most sexual assaults.”

According to the Megan’s Law website there are 27 registered sex offenders in South Lake Tahoe. For a town that is 16.6 square miles, that equates to more than 1.5 sex offenders per square mile. But not every sex offender has to register.

The council agreed with Watson’s characterization of the need to amend the ordinance. They said it was with reluctance they were removing the part of the city’s ordinance that prohibited registered sex offenders from being within 300 feet of public parks and like areas or living within 2,000 feet of such an area.

Schools, via the state, have separate rules keep to sex offenders off school grounds.

One of the problems with the city’s ordinance is that a sex offender would be violating the law simply by driving past a school or even someplace like McDonald’s that has a play structure.

“We can’t regulate their free movement,” City Manager Nancy Kerry said.

Watson added, “We were in essence criminalizing their right to travel.”

The council and staff talked about the importance of educating parents and children to the threat of predators and that “when you see something, say something” should be the mantra.

El Dorado County in January revised its sex offender ordinance.

The council's vote was 3-1-1. Councilman Tom Davis voted no and JoAnn Conner abstained. Neither explained their vote. It will come back as a second reading and final vote in June.

S. Tahoe changing how it handles donations

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe is getting out of the GIFTing business.

GIFT – Great Ideas For Tahoe – was started in 2001 by the city's parks and recreation employees as a means to take donations and then spend them how the donor chose. In 2002, the council, acting as GIFT's board of directors, took over the job of running it so there would be more oversight. Now it is about to be dissolved.

On Tuesday, the council divvied up the remaining $37,282.59.

"The city can always receive donations and we'll set something up that is organized more appropriately," City Manager Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Funds will be spent according to their original purpose; we expect by years end."

Reasons to dissolve GIFT include much of the money has been sitting there for years, improvements will be made to city entities and staff time will be reduced by not needing to administer the accounts.

Some of the money is somewhat restricted in how it can be spent based on the giver's desires. Other dollars were given with broad interpretation – such as youth sports.

One category is for the children's memorial. The balance is $898.71. There was a time when money was used to place markers on the tree for people who could not afford to memorialize their child.

The staff's recommendation was to use the fund for a bench at the site. That is going to happen with a twist. Kenny Curtzwiler, who last summer was instrumental in getting the memorial tree refurbished, suggested the council come up with a total of $2,200 for two benches. He told the council that Tahoe Log Works could build two benches that would complement that tree and install them for that amount.

The council agreed this was a good idea. Permits and other things need to be secured before it is a done deal. The money will go directly to the builder.

Other money will go to the senior center, canine agility park, youth programs and equipment, and ice rink.

In other news from the May 20 meeting:

• On a 3-2 vote, the council decided to leave the sandwich board regulations as they are. Councilmembers JoAnn Conner and Tom Davis wanted to expand the allowable timeframe by 24 hours to start on Fridays at 8am.

• Tahoe Prosperity Center, on which Councilmember Angela Swanson sits, received a $167,000 grant from the California Public Utility Commission for broadband.

• Councilwoman Brooke Laine and fellow Utah-trekkers gave a lengthy overview on their trip to Park City where they learned about how that mountain town went from being reliant on one industry (mining) to being near bankrupt to being highly regarded. Free transit and politicians with backbones were two of the main takeaways.

Women guilty of tampering with Incline bear traps

By AP

A mother and her adult daughter have been convicted of tampering with a bear trap at Incline Village in an effort to thwart wildlife officials' efforts to capture the animals.

It's the first such case prosecuted in Nevada, the *Reno Gazette-Journal* reported today.

Cheryl Ann Morrison, 63, of Truckee and Season Morrison, 35, of Reno each face up to $3,000 in fines – $1,500 for each of two misdemeanors.

Incline Village Justice Court Judge E. Alan Tiras found them guilty of obstructing or interfering with a Nevada Department of Wildlife officer and tampering with a vehicle.

The two women admitted during a daylong trial last month they deliberately tripped a bear trap set to capture a black bear that was becoming a nuisance in October. They said they thought state wildlife officials had set the trap illegally but the judge disagreed.

In his six-page ruling issued Monday, Tiras concluded the law cited by the defense that makes it illegal to set steel traps within 200 feet of a public road was written to target leg traps used to catch small fur-bearing mammals.

Those traps are "very different" than the large culvert-style traps used to capture bears, the judge said.

Prosecutors say state wildlife biologist Carl Lackey placed a motion-activated camera near the trap outside Incline Village that captured the Morrisons and a third unidentified woman tampering with the trap.

Authorities were able to identify by the woman by, among other things, Facebook postings regarding the incident. Their sentencing date has not been set.

The incident occurred during a year of mounting conflicts between people and trash-raiding black bears.

Critics say the Department of Wildlife is killing too many bears. State officials counter they're having more and more trouble doing their job because people are interfering with efforts to capture problem bears, including tampering with traps.

Gas tax could be replaced with fee based on miles driven

By Patrick McGreevy, Los Angeles Times

With California's gas tax unable to keep up with road maintenance needs, one state lawmaker has proposed a study to determine the feasibility of instead taxing motorists based on the number of miles they drive.

A combination of inflation, cars getting better mileage and more hybrids and electric vehicles on the road mean the 18-cent-per-gallon gas tax approved by voters in 1990 is falling short of covering the costs of maintaining the state's transportation system.

Inflation has meant purchasing power of the state’s gas tax has steadily diminished over time, according to Sen. Mark DeSaulnier, D-Concord.

He has introduced SB1077, which would allow the California Transportation Agency to conduct a voluntary pilot program to study the feasibility of a mileage-based fee to replace existing gas taxes.

Read the whole story

Right to use medical pot in casino may go to court

By AP

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. – A New Jersey man is considering suing for the right to use medical marijuana in an Atlantic City casino.

Daniel Price’s lawyer, Michelle Douglass, says that Revel Casino Hotel failed to accommodate his disability when a security guard told him he could not take his marijuana into the casino last month.

The 23-year-old Atlantic City resident is a registered medical marijuana patient. He tells the *Press* of Atlantic City that he uses the drug to treat seizures and irritable bowel disease.

State guidelines encourage patients to smoke cannabis at home. But they are not barred by law from using it in private businesses.

Revel, like all Atlantic City casinos, has a smoking area.

Lisa Johnson, a Revel spokeswoman, declined to comment to the newspaper.

No lawsuit has been filed.

Pre-K availability varies by state

By AP

WASHINGTON — The availability of state-funded pre-kindergarten programs varies widely from one part of the country to another, says a report.

For example, more than 9 in 10 4-year-olds in the District of Columbia attended such a program during the 2012-13 school year, while 10 states have no such program.

A number of states had fairly high enrollments, according to the report released Tuesday, though slightly lower than the District. More than 7 out of 10 4-year-olds in Florida, Oklahoma and Vermont were in such programs, while about 6 in 10 in Iowa, Georgia, West Virginia and Wisconsin were enrolled.

In fact, even as lawmakers from both parties have embraced the idea of expanding early childhood programs, the number of children enrolled in state preschool programs saw a modest decline of about 9,200 children in the 2012-13 school year — the first such reduction since 2002, when researchers at Rutgers University started tracking pre-K trends. Even as funding increased from a year earlier, more than half of states with programs made cuts. California alone, for example, lost nearly 15,000 slots.

Overall, $5.4 billion was spent by states on pre-K funding for about 1.3 million preschoolers.

The report is from the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers in collaboration with the Education Department's National Center for Education Statistics.

Given announcements of support by politicians for preschool, Steven Barnett, the director of the institute at Rutgers, said he expected more growth to be reflected in the findings, and yet, "the numbers aren't there."

"We were very surprised," Barnett said.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan said the data is a "reminder of how much work we still have to do to ensure that every child gets a running start."

President Obama has advocated for universal preschool for America's 4-year-olds. He's found Democratic allies in the effort on Capitol Hill, but Republicans such as Rep. John Kline, R-Minn., the chairman of the House Education Committee, have said improving existing federally funded early childhood programs should be the priority.

Outside of Washington, governors from both parties have advocated for creating or expanding preschool. In Indiana, GOP Gov. Mike Pence, for example, signed into law in March a new pilot program for low-income children. In Connecticut, Gov. Dannel Malloy, a Democrat, recently successfully pushed through an expansion of about 1,000 preschool slots.

Those changes aren't reflected in the report's findings, nor are program expansions passed in New York that could have New York City alone add tens of thousands of children to state-funded preschool programs, possibly as soon as the fall.

Supporters say preschool programs help level the playing field for young children who enter kindergarten well behind their peers and never catch up, and members of the business community are among those advocates for preschool expansion. But the quality of such programs varies.

No states require preschoolers to attend school. Some states seek to offer it universally. Others base eligibility on family income. Under some setups, a community-based program receives public dollars. Other programs are within elementary schools.

While some states offer state-funded preschool to 3-year-olds, the programs are much more popular for 4-year-olds.

The District of Columbia serves about three-quarters of 3-year-olds. New Jersey and Vermont serve about 1 in 5 3-year-olds.

Public preschool programs can cost thousands of dollars per child annually. The District of Columbia — the highest spender — spent $14,690 per child in the 2012-13 school year, according to the report.

Barnett has said previously that about half of U.S. children attend any kind of preschool program at ages 3 and 4, and for about a third of these children it is a publicly supported program.

A separate study by the Education Commission of the States finds that in the current fiscal year, 30 states and the District of Columbia increased appropriations for state-funded preschools.

Fewer Calif. options for Tahoe cable customers

By Kathryn Reed

Charter Cable customers in Lake Tahoe have one less California network affiliate. That means KCRA is the lone California station accessible to viewers around the clock.

Last week the company stopped providing KTVU, the Fox affiliate out of Oakland, during the day and instead offers Reno's KRXI.

KTVU and KRXI representatives told *Lake Tahoe News* an agreement between the stations could not be reached. However, the 10pm news on KTVU can still be seen via the KRXI channel. KTVU is also available online.

This reporter placed an anonymous call to Charter inquiring about initiating service in South Lake Tahoe. At first the cable company salesman didn't know if the network affiliates are in California or Nevada. Then after some research he came back and said all the channels are in California.

This just isn't true.

The only California network channel that people in the Lake Tahoe Basin can get throughout the day and night is NBC affiliate KCRA.

The troubling aspect for California viewers is that during an election season all the news and advertising is from Nevada.

In summer 2004 Meyers got KCRA after not having the California channel for a year. At that time the problem was blamed on the need to put in fiber optic lines on the power poles in the Upper Truckee area, which of course required Tahoe Regional Planning Agency approval.

“The last time they dropped the ABC San Francisco station, the City Council asked the Charter regional manager to come in and explain why that had happened. The discussion led to the leaving of KTVU and KCRA. They wanted to be rid of KCRA at the time because of what they explained to us were transmission problems. The KCRA station managers also came up and said that they had the capability to provide the signal,” a *Lake Tahoe News* reader said in an email.