

Placer County spending money on Tahoe projects

Placer County Board of Supervisors this month approved a slew of funding proposals that impact Lake Tahoe.

Money comes from the hotel tax the county collects on the North Shore.

Here are the projects:

North Tahoe Public Art: The funding will be for initial construction costs as part of the Kings Beach Commercial Core Improvement Project. Part of the funding will be for footings and utilities in the two roundabouts and part will be used with private donations for the first public art installation, which is expected in 2014. The remaining funding will be used for installation of a second piece of art.

Regional Transit System Branding: Currently there are multiple transit agencies that provide service in the region, which has created brand clutter and confusion among riders. The branding project will devise a single, coordinated brand for the North Lake Tahoe-Truckee region transit systems, creating a clear and identifiable brand that ties all systems together.

An identifiable logo will be created.

North Lake Tahoe Water Shuttle: This three-year pilot project will enter its third year next summer. The funding will assist with the operation of the shuttle which links four points on the Lake Tahoe North Shore, including Homewood, Tahoe City, Carnelian Bay and Tahoe Vista. It is envisioned that this short-trip water shuttle system will ultimately link into the larger North Shore-South Shore ferry system, which is currently being planned, but is not expected to be implemented for several years.

Performing Arts Center Feasibility Studies: This funding is for an initial feasibility study and business plan for cultural arts facilities in the region. Vail Resorts is talking about a regional performing arts hall and amphitheater at Northstar.

Dollar Creek Shared Use Trail/SR 89 Community Revitalization/Fanny Bridge Project: The funding will provide a portion of the local match needed to access more than \$25 million in federal grant dollars. Funding would go to design and construction of the Dollar Creek Shared Use Trail and the Fanny Bridge Replacement Project.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Time ticking to sign up for health care

By Tracy Seipel, San Jose Mercury News

Lynn Engelman still has no idea whether her doctors in Contra Costa County will be on her new health care plan – and neither, she says, do her doctors.

Capitola resident Kathryn Johnson has already paid the first month's bill for her new policy through the state's new health insurance exchange, but she just received a letter telling her she hasn't signed up for a plan.

And in San Leandro, Linda Entrikin is one of 900,000 Californians suffering from whiplash after the Obama administration's surprise announcement Thursday that people whose insurance plans have been canceled can replace them with

cheap, bare-bones plans after all.

For tens of thousands of Californians still without health insurance, Monday's deadline to enroll under the president's new health law feels like an exercise of hurry up and wait. And across the country, government health exchanges are bracing for an avalanche of applications from people who must sign up by end of day Monday if they want coverage to begin Jan. 1.

Read the whole story

Buffet officially owns NV Energy

By Eli Segall, Las Vegas Sun

Billionaire Warren Buffett has completed his purchase of NV Energy, whose chief executive is retiring and being replaced by a Buffett underling.

MidAmerican Energy Holdings Co., owned by Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway conglomerate, closed its acquisition of Nevada's main electric utility Dec. 19, at least a few weeks ahead of schedule.

Read the whole story

El Dorado, Placer homeowners to receive millions in settlement

By Hudson Sangree and Mary Lynne Vellinga, Sacramento Bee

California borrowers, including those in El Dorado and Placer counties, could receive as much as \$268 million from Ocwen Financial Corp., the nation's fourth largest mortgage servicer, which specializes in subprime and delinquent loans.

A \$2.1 billion settlement was announced Thursday between the mortgage servicing giant, the federal government and 49 states.

"This settlement will help homeowners who've been misled while trying to modify their Ocwen mortgages," California Attorney General Kamala Harris said in a press release.

The AG's office said Sacramento County borrowers could receive an estimated \$13.5 million under the agreement. Placer County borrowers are slated to get \$3.5 million; El Dorado borrowers, \$1.8 million, and Yolo borrowers, \$1.1 million, it said.

Read the whole story

Positive signs for '14 housing market

By Michele Lerner, Realtor.com

The U.S. real estate market made a robust comeback in 2013, surpassing expectations of many economists, as the combination of low inventories and historically low interest rates caused home prices to rise and even helped fuel bidding wars in some markets, surpassing the expectations of many economists.

While positive trends, such as increasing home values, are expected to continue into 2014, mortgage rates are also expected to rise in the coming year and could put a damper on home buyers' abilities to afford new homes.

Looking back at some 2013 data can give us a hint of the year ahead:

1. Inventory should gradually stabilize

The beginning of 2013 could be characterized as the "year of low inventory" as buyer demand ramped up and homeowners waited for further price increases and evidence of a solid economic recovery before putting their homes on the market. The year began with a significant shortage of inventory and then as early as February the level of shortages started to decline slowly. As 2013 comes to a close, inventory is approximately the same as a year ago. However, homes are selling faster than in 2012, with the median age of the inventory down by 11 percent.

2. A return to positive equity

Rising prices helped 2.5 million homeowners who were previously underwater regain positive equity status during the second quarter of 2013. However, approximately 7.1 million homes were still in negative equity at that time and an estimated 10 million homeowners, or about 21.1 percent of all homeowners with a mortgage, remained "under-equitied," with less than 20 percent in home equity. The good news is that prices are expected to continue rising in 2014, which will lift more homeowners into positive territory. Median list prices for homes in October rose 7.57 percent above the same

month of 2012.

3. Mortgage rates expected to rise

Mortgage rates increased approximately 100 basis points in 2013 and are likely to rise in 2014. The new chairman-designate of the Federal Reserve, Janet Yellen, is expected to continue the policies of Chairman Ben Bernanke, including keeping mortgage rates low by buying blocks of mortgage-backed securities. However, the Fed has considered tapering its bond-buying activity as the economy improves, which could lead to a slight increase in interest rates.

Read the whole story

Artificial sweeteners found in rivers

By Bettina Boxall, Los Angeles Times

Canadian researchers think they have found a great way to trace the travels of treated sewage after it is discharged into rivers: Follow the artificial sweeteners.

The scientists found elevated concentrations of four sweeteners – cyclamate, saccharin, sucralose, and acesulfame – in water samples collected along the length of the Grand River in Ontario, Canada.

Commonly used in diet drinks, the sweeteners got into the Grand by way of the 30 sewage treatment plants that empty into the river and its tributaries.

Read the whole story

Bill doubles USFS air tanker fleet

By Curtis Tate, Sacramento Bee

After a lengthy and destructive wildfire season in California, Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., inserted language into a defense bill that will double the size of the U.S. Forest Service fleet of large air tankers.

Feinstein said that the amendment, which she cosponsored with Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., would transfer seven surplus HC-130H Hercules aircraft from the Coast Guard to the Forest Service. The planes can carry a combined 21,000 gallons of water or fire retardant, she said.

Feinstein and McCain included the language into the National Defense Authorization Act. The Senate approved the bill late Thursday on a vote of 84-15.

[Read the whole story](#)

Liberty: Without new lines, blackouts possible

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – While the president of Liberty Utilities said he didn't want to be an alarmist, he did say if power lines are

not upgraded, brown outs or black outs in the Lake Tahoe-Truckee areas are possible.

“Even without any new growth I’m at the limit with 650,” Mike Smart, president of the utility company, on Dec. 18 told the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board.

Line 650 runs from Truckee to Kings Beach. The line is 60 kilovolts and a new one would be 120 kilovolts.

CalPeco, the parent company of Liberty Utilities, is proposing a three-phase upgrade to its loop of power lines that incorporate Truckee, Kings Beach, Tahoe City, Squaw Valley and points in between.

Line 625 from Kings Beach to Tahoe City would also become 120KV. Line 650 was originally built in 1959 and 625 in 1971.

Smart said electric use peaked Dec. 30, 2012, at 7pm at 144 megawatts. The previous peak was 124 megawatts on Jan. 9, 2011, at 5pm.

“It was alarming to have that load scenario last winter. We were on the edge and we could be again in the next few weeks,” Smart said.

Working with NV Energy and using the diesel facilities at the Kings Beach substation allowed Liberty to avoid a system failure. Liberty buys its energy from NV, the former owner of the system. Liberty has about 49,000 customers on the California side of the basin, in Truckee and Alpine County.

An increase in electronic devices, bigger houses, growth outside the basin and resorts making more snow are contributing to the overload. The Christmas to New Year’s time period is Liberty’s highest demand for the entire year.

Some people who spoke Wednesday questioned why people in the Lake Tahoe Basin should be paying for the residential and commercial expansion in the Truckee area.

The estimated cost of the project is close to \$50 million. It could start next summer, with the first phase taking two years, and completion of the project in 2019.

Liberty per the California Public Utilities Commission is allowed to ask that agency for a rate increase to cover its expenses once the project or a phase of it is completed. The last rate increase was January 2012. Rate increases can occur every three years.

Dave McClure with the North Lake Tahoe Citizens Action Alliance called the electrical lines “a resort loop” because it allows Northstar and Squaw Valley to keep growing.

Laurel Ames with the Tahoe Area Sierra Club believes the upgrades will spur more growth.

Jim Bengochea, lead project engineer, told *Lake Tahoe News* the 120KV lines would provide enough power for what Northstar, Squaw Valley and Homewood would like to do in the future. He said these upgrades could be sufficient for the next 20 or 30 years.

But he stressed that the problem is the electric company doesn't have the capacity to carry the number of volts required to service customers today without a threat to the system at peak times, adding that the project has nothing to do with proposed future needs.

A concern brought up Wednesday is that the Tahoe City substation relocation is not part of the environmental documents. This issue dominated discussion at the TRPA's Advisory Planning Commission this month, too.

Tahoe City is working on its area plan, which includes the relocation. Placer County documents also call for moving the substation from the 64-acre tract. It is feared that approval of the Liberty Utilities project could hamper efforts to move the substation in the future.

While this was not an action item for the board, members talked about possibly moving the lines farther into the forest for scenic reasons. However, 47,000 trees are already slated to be removed to put in the larger poles and bigger cables.

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Notes:

- Comments on the draft environmental documents are being taken until Jan. 7. The TRPA, CPUC and U.S. Forest Service are agencies putting out the documents. Wendy Jepson with TRPA is the point person – (775) 589.5269 or wjepson@trpa.org. More info is online.

Tablets, smartphones dominate gift giving

By Adam Satariano, Bloomberg

Diana Dawson has over the years bought her twin children digital cameras, e-book readers and media players as Christmas presents. This holiday season, she's covering those bases with one device: a tablet computer.

"They do it all," Dawson said outside an Apple Inc. store in Walnut Creek after buying iPads for her now 27-year-old daughters.

Dawson's purchasing underscores the changes roiling the consumer-electronics market. While the industry once benefited from year-end sales in categories from cameras to printers to desktop personal computers, this holiday period brings the clearest signs yet that shoppers are focusing on fewer

gadgets. Tablets and smartphones are now the Swiss Army knives of technology, tackling an array of tasks once performed by multiple gizmos.

Read the whole story

String of Incline burglaries remain unsolved

By K0LO-TV

INCLINE VILLAGE – The Washoe County sheriff's deputies are investigating a series of residential and vehicle burglaries that have occurred during the last month in the Incline Village area.

According to investigators, there have been at least a dozen vehicle burglaries and eight residential burglaries in various areas of Incline Village since the beginning of November. The residences all appear to have been unoccupied at the time of the burglaries.

Investigators believe there is more than one burglar, or group of burglars, committing these crimes.

Read the whole story