

S. Tahoe crews contain fire to chimney

A quick thinking Good Samaritan helped ensure a chimney fire in South Lake Tahoe didn't turn into a full-blown structure fire Thursday.

Keith Cooney was driving down Highway 50 at about 4:45pm Dec. 5 when he saw smoke that he knew could not be a controlled burn. He turned on to Barton Avenue and saw the fire.



South Tahoe firefighters extinguish a chimney fire Dec. 5. Photo/LTN

"Flames were shooting out of the chimney. I banged on the door," Cooney told *Lake Tahoe News*. He was able to alert the male resident about the fire and then dialed 911.

Firefighters were able to keep the fire to the chimney, which was full of creosote. Because it had a metal pipe water could be used to douse the flames. Water isn't used on concrete because it destroys the chimney.

Crews were still at the 2286 Barton Ave. residence at 5:15pm where they were checking for hot spots and clearing the house of smoke.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Salary perks to be eliminated for some El Dorado officials

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

Seven of the region's highest-paid elected officials stand to see significant reductions in their six-figure paychecks after El Dorado County supervisors moved to eliminate perks that inflated their salaries.

Beginning with their next term in 2015, El Dorado officials – including the sheriff, auditor-controller, treasurer-tax collector and four other elected department heads – will lose pay boosts for longevity, professional certificates or unused leave time.

Should Sheriff John D'Agostino seek and win re-election, he would see his salary fall from \$226,411 to \$177,986. County Auditor-Controller Joe Harn and Treasurer-Tax Collector C.L. Rafferty would see respective pay cuts from 2012 earnings of \$196,366 and \$179,332 to \$148,699 and \$145,538 – the average total salaries for similar regional officials – in 2015.

El Dorado leaders say the salary add-ons began more than a dozen years ago in better economic times when El Dorado County took steps to retain valued employees for fear of losing them to other government agencies or private employers.

The perks, tied to contracts the county had offered its public employee unions, wound up paying the El Dorado officeholders well more than the average for elected officials in other Sacramento regional counties.

Read the whole story

Detroit pension ruling could reverberate to Calif.

By Mary Williams Walsh, New York Times

The ruling by Judge Steven W. Rhodes, who is presiding in Detroit's bankruptcy case, that public pensions are not protected from cuts could alter the course of bankrupt cities like Stockton and San Bernardino, that had been operating under the assumption that pensions were untouchable.

Stockton's bankruptcy case, for instance, is further along than Detroit's, and until Tuesday it seemed likely to leave public pensions fully intact. Stockton sought bankruptcy protection last year and has already filed a plan of debt adjustment with the bankruptcy court in Sacramento. Its plan, which is subject to court approval, would leave city workers' pensions unchanged: They would continue to accrue benefits at the same rate as they did before the bankruptcy. (A new state law does permit Stockton to provide smaller pensions to workers hired after Jan. 1.)

That is a better deal than workers at bankrupt companies often receive. City leaders based it on the thinking that public workers had already sacrificed enough, given that the plan of adjustment already calls for them to give up contractual pay increases and valuable retiree health benefits.

Opponents of that plan have raised concerns that it would not save enough money. They point to the city of Vallejo, which spent three years in bankruptcy, emerged in 2011 without

touching its workers' pensions, and is again having trouble balancing its budget. Many cities in California are struggling with pension costs because of a big benefit increase in 1999 that has been much more expensive than anticipated.

Read the whole story

Ferry service on Lake Tahoe getting closer

By Kathryn Reed

Twenty-five minutes to get from the South Shore to the North Shore? Yes, by ferry.

That is the goal of the Tahoe Transportation District, the lead agency trying to bring ferry service to Lake Tahoe. By summer 2016 two 120-passenger ferries could be traveling year-round between South Lake Tahoe and Tahoe City.

It is being called an environmental asset as well as a transportation tool.

"It would be equivalent to a light rail corridor for Tahoe," Alfred Knotts, project manager, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "This is part of the long-term vision and how each piece creates a regional transit system."



A ferry like this might one day ply the waters of Lake Tahoe. Photo/Provided

Comments are being taken until Jan. 3 on the notice of intent/notice of preparation for the project. Comments will be incorporated into the draft environmental impact report and draft environmental impact statement. Those are expected to be released in a year. The final EIR/EIS could come out in summer 2015, with permitting that fall, and upgrades to the piers and other land improvements done in the 2016 building season, and service starting when that is completed.

Knotts gave a presentation Dec. 4 to the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's Advisory Planning Commission. He will do the same Dec. 13 at the TTD board meeting.

Parking concerns at both ends of the lake were brought at the meeting, as were greenhouse gases, scenic impacts, dredging and fisheries.

The goal is to not have everyone drive to one of the marinas, but instead take another form of transportation – bus, bike or foot power.

"We don't want parking spilling over to business or residential areas that could be adversely impacted," Knotts said. It may mean increasing the bus service to make this happen.

According to TRPA, piers are a scenic concern. That is one

reason the Grove Street Pier is being looked at instead of the Tahoe City Marina. It's possible piers at both ends of the lake will need to be extended and possibly widened to accommodate the boat, people and existing services.

Marina owners have been consulted and are privy to what is being contemplated.

Ski Run Marina has a dredging permit. Dredging might be required in low water years or to cope with the seasonality of the lake level. Officials are looking into what might be required in Tahoe City.

It's estimated that during peak summer travel the boats would make eight trips a day, carrying 120-passengers. It could be a tool for commuters, skiers, people wanting to dine at the other end of the lake, or tourists looking for something fun to do.

Preliminary plans are for 10 spots for bikes, but people who spoke Wednesday said that number should be increased. Ensuring skis and snowboards can be secure will also be worked into the design, and maybe golf clubs.

Transit officials have been looking at Washington state ferry service to come up with a vessel that could handle the needs and conditions of Lake Tahoe. Ideally, the boat will be able to weather the high seas that during storms have the lake looking like the ocean. However, the contingency plan would be to bus people back to the originating marina if need be.

TTD would hire an operator much like it has done for the South Shore bus service BlueGo.

Cost of the boats and marina upgrades are estimated to be \$33 million. Annual operating costs come to \$3.3 million. Federal transportation subsidies would help pay the operating costs. State and federal money are likely to pay for the capital expenses. Until the environmental documents are completed

funding cannot be secured.

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Notes:

- More information is available online.
- TTD board meeting is Dec. 13 at 9:30am at Granlibakken in Tahoe City.
- Future workshops and meetings about the ferry will in part be determined based on the comments received so they can be addressed.

Underhill died of accidental drug overdose

Lake Valley firefighter Brandon Underhill died from an “accidental multiple drug overdose,” according to El Dorado County sheriff’s Lt. Pete Van Arnum.

The exact drugs are not being released, but Van Arnum said, “It was all basically prescription drugs.”

Underhill had been on leave from the department at the time of his Sept. 29 death because of a back injury. He had worked for Lake Valley since 2005.

Based on the amount of drugs in his system and speaking to family and friends, it was determined the overdose was accidental. He was 34.

Cell phones not perfect in emergencies

By Frank Knutson, Wall Street Journal

Amid all the privacy concerns about cellphone tracking, one important group is arguing that location data isn't precise enough: emergency responders.

Police and others say 911 dispatchers are having trouble sending help to callers who use cellphones. The reason: unlike a landline, cellphones provide just a rough estimate – with a possible radius of a few hundred yards – of the caller's location.

Data released this summer renewed attention to the problem and set off a debate over the adequacy of the tracking data that cellphone carriers share with emergency dispatchers.

"The location of the caller is the most important thing," said Eric Parry, who oversees 911 calling technology used in Utah. "If I have a 'what,' that helps me know what I need to send. If I don't have a 'where,' then the 'what' doesn't help me in the least."

The proliferation of cellphones has been both a blessing and a headache for law enforcement officers and other emergency responders. More people with cellphones means it is easier than ever to make a quick call for help.

Read the whole story

Heavenly agrees to settle zipline death case

By Andy Furillo, Sacramento Bee

After a honeymoon hike at Heavenly Mountain Resort, Mark and Rebecca Dickson were riding the chairlift down the hill, laughing and talking about their lunch plans, when the newlyweds saw a blue rope flutter ahead of them in the stiff afternoon.

“And then I heard my husband say, ‘This is not good,’” Rebecca Dickson recalled in an interview Tuesday.

The rope had broken off from Lake Tahoe’s Heavenly Flyer ZipRider line that ran parallel to the lift about 100 yards away. The fluttering rope wrapped around the couple’s chair, which swung back and forth so violently in the entanglement that Mark Dickson, who was 51, fell out of his seat and to his death in the rocks about 40 feet below.

Rebecca Dickson and Mark Dickson’s two sons from a previous marriage sued, and in September they settled the wrongful death case in El Dorado County Superior Court.

A confidentiality agreement has kept the financial terms of the settlement under wraps. The plaintiffs had asked for \$15 million in a settlement conference in June, according to documents they filed ahead of a court hearing.

But, while the payout has been kept secret, the settlement does allow the Dicksons’ attorneys to reveal a list of Heavenly’s acknowledgments about the facts surrounding the Aug. 31, 2009, accident.

Under terms of the deal, Heavenly's owners agreed to make a number of safety-related changes, including ones that call for strengthened drug and alcohol testing of the people who run the Heavenly Flyer, regular equipment inspections and shutting down the ride in high winds.

Read the whole story

City attorney hampers efforts to have South Lake Tahoe voters decide pot initiative

Updated Dec. 4, 4:15pm: City Attorney Tom Watson has given the title and summary to Steve Kubby.

By Kathryn Reed

While hundreds of hours, including multiple public meetings, were spent devising South Lake Tahoe's medical marijuana ordinance, there is an effort under way to tweak the law that is on the books.

Steve Kubby, a local medical marijuana advocate, wants the voters in the city to have the opportunity to revise the ordinance. This is the second time he has started the ballot process. The first time was aborted in early 2012 when he planned to move to Canada. Those plans changed and he has resumed his quest to alter the language of the law.

But it has hit a few roadblocks on the way to the June ballot. City Attorney Tom Watson last week said he would not write the title and summary for the initiative, which is required before signatures can be sought.

A flurry of emails was exchanged during the weekend and through Monday between Kubby, Watson, City Manager Nancy Kerry and Mayor Tom Davis. Kubby told *Lake Tahoe News* he received a call from a city official Dec. 3 saying in all likelihood Watson would issue the title and summary some time today. This would still allow time for the question to be posed to voters in June.

If this happens, it will be the second time this week Watson has done a 180 regarding title and summaries. Late last month he said "no" to writing the documents for the group wanting a paid parking question on the ballot. At the time he told *Lake Tahoe News* he could not be an advocate for that group. However, on Dec. 3 he summoned Tahoe4Tahoe members to his office.

"The topic of discussion was refining the petition request to be resubmitted for the title and summary that the city attorney is required by law to provide the petitioners. The meeting was productive and the committee remains focused on getting this issue in front of the voters for the June ballot," Peggy Bourland of Tahoe4Tahoe told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Watson did not return a call to *LTN*. *Lake Tahoe News* sent Watson a series of questions on Dec. 1 to which he has not responded. These are the questions:

- Can you tell me if you have had to deal with Title and Summary issues before you came to South Lake Tahoe? If so, did you ever write one? If yes, what was different about those compared to the two that just came before you?
- If you have not dealt with Title and Summary issues before, was your decision for the two recent decisions made on your own or did you consult others? If you consulted others, who did you consult?
- What would the two SLT petitioners need to do to get you to write a Title and Summary? What is stopping you from

helping them get the verbiage correct for you to write the Title and Summary?

- On the marijuana issue, how can one city attorney say yes one year and another say no to almost the identical wording nearly two years later?

The law states that the city attorney “shall” write the title and summary. In other words, he must. If passed by the voters, it can always be challenged in court if someone believes it violates the law.

“We are presenting an alternative to the current policy which we believe is illegal and unconstitutional and overly oppressive for patients,” Kubby said of his initiative.

His initiative would allow the market to determine the number of dispensaries and delivery services that could operate in the city, reduce fines, not mandate people disclose they are growing marijuana, increase rules regarding odor and limit local law enforcement working with federal agents.

The last item could be where a legal challenge would arise.

The exact wording is, “Elected, appointed, hired employees, officers, and officials of the city of South Lake Tahoe shall not directly or indirectly cooperate with or assist federal, state, or county officers or officials, volunteers, or employees who eradicate marijuana, act for seizure or forfeiture, or demand entry without a warrant or to defeat any liberally construed purpose of this act, nor may any state or local agency contract to eradicate marijuana that is being grown, manufactured or stored under the provisions of this act. Knock and talk shall be the first act taken by the above officers/employees. Violation of this clause shall be a misdemeanor, punishable by fine and up to one year in prison.”

While Kubby worked on the ordinance that is on the books along with the three operators of the collectives that were open at

the time and the former city attorney and manager, he was under the impression certain items would be removed. They weren't.

Kubby said he believes the current ordinance has negative health and safety consequences for people who use and grow marijuana for medicinal purposes.

Here is a copy of the revised ordinance Kubby is proposing.

U.S. teens not as smart as their peers

By Motoko Rich, New York Times

Fifteen-year-olds in the United States score in the middle of the developed world in reading and science while lagging in math, according to international standardized test results being released on Tuesday.

While the performance of American students who took the exams last year differed little from the performance of those tested in 2009, the last time the exams were administered, several comparable countries – including Ireland and Poland – pulled ahead this time.

As in previous years, the scores of students in Shanghai, Hong Kong, Singapore, Japan and South Korea put those school systems at the top of the rankings for math, science and reading. Finland, a darling of educators, slid in all subjects but continued to outperform the averages, and the United States.

The Program for International Student Assessment, commonly

known as PISA, was administered to 15-year-olds in 65 countries and school systems by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, a Paris-based group that includes the world's wealthiest nations. Just over 6,100 American students took the exams.

Read the whole story

No injuries in DCSD bus accident

A Douglas County school bus was involved in an accident late Tuesday afternoon in Stateline.

"I was told the driver was allowed to continue on and take the children home," Douglas County School District Superintendent Lisa Noonan told *Lake Tahoe News*. "I have had no word of injuries or damage to the bus requiring children to be transferred to another bus."

Noonan did not know how many Zephyr Cove Elementary students would have been on the bus at the time of the Nov. 3 accident. Buses can hold a little more than 50 students.

A school official was calling the parents of the students, who could be in grades K-6, to let them know what happened.

The accident occurred on Lower Kingsbury Grade. A Nevada Highway Patrol trooper said his agency assisted with the accident, but is not the lead agency and had no details. Douglas County sheriff's dispatch said NHP is the lead agency.

Snow has been falling on the South Shore for much of the afternoon. Roads are slick because it was raining earlier in

the day.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*