Fire survival may depend on building's construction

By Kathryn Reed

Houses have holes in them that owners don't always think about, but which fire seems to know exist. That is one of the conundrums when it comes to fire prevention.

Building codes continually change to help suppress fire. Vegetation through defensible space has been a help for years.

Windows and vents are likely the next areas where fire prevention is headed.

"The next iteration is the shuttering concept," South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Jeff Meston told *Lake Tahoe News*. "I think this is where we are going. It will take a while. Then we will have a fire-proof house."

Shutters over windows have existed for decades in Europe. They were instituted a century ago to protect buildings during the wars because of the fire bombings.



"We can't legislate Mother Nature. She wins every time."

— South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Jeff Meston

Most are made of aluminum or steel. They can drop automatically based on temperature, then gravity brings them down.

Murray Milne, a research professor of architecture at UCLA in a paper about designing a home to survive a wildfire, wrote, “Windows are the weakest link in defending your building, but there are clever ways to protect them. Radiant heat alone from the fire can shatter glass or ignite combustibles inside your living room, without the flames actually reaching your house. Single glazing is particularly vulnerable; a better choice is double glazing with tempered glass on the exterior. However, the safest solutions are roll-down metal fire doors built into the roof overhangs or side recesses, and released automatically by fusible links.”

Meston also recommends using tempered glass instead of plate glass because it can withstand higher temperatures.

Other holes, so to speak, are the outside vents on a building. If an ember enters this way, it’s easy to ignite insulation or some other combustible source. It could smolder for a while, without anyone knowing what is going on until the flames erupt in the attic or crawl space.

“Continuous roof ridge and soffit vents are very effective as attic ventilators, which makes them extremely difficult to protect from wind-driven sparks and embers,” Milne wrote in his paper.

While the vents are necessary to prevent wood decay, Meston suggests screens that prevent objects larger than one-quarter

inch from entering.

With devastating fires becoming more the norm, especially in the West, people are looking at ways to keep structures standing.

Money will always be an issue. The more rules, the more expensive construction becomes. Retrofitting might not even be possible depending on what the regulations are.

Then there are those who would argue not everything is supposed to be saved. And firefighters know that not everything can be saved.

“When the wind blows hard there is not much we can do,” Meston said. “We can’t legislate Mother Nature. She wins every time.”

He pointed to how even when everything is done correctly, there are no guarantees a building will still be standing after the fire is suppressed. A Kmart in Santa Rosa that had sprinklers was reduced to ashes last fall.

That’s one of the conundrums — best practices aren’t always enough.

But what Meston, who is the president-elect of the California Fire Chief’s Association, and his peers are talking about is how to keep the fire from entering a house.



Ultimately 254 houses burned in the Angora Fire in 2007. Photo/LVFPD

South Lake Tahoe prepares

Meston is in the process of putting together a study called the Standards of Cover. The 18-month project is expected to culminate this summer. It is an in depth look at all the safety issues in the city. Every dwelling in the city is being recorded – including the type of siding, construction materials and vegetation.

Firefighters go into as many buildings as they can to see what they would encounter in an emergency. It’s called pre-incident planning.

Socio-economics play a role in all of this. Squalor is one way to describe some of the hotel rooms in town, even traditional residences. A match could torch these places; it wouldn’t need

to be a horrific fire like those that ravaged the Wine Country and Southern California last year.

“Usually in a wildland fire you decide which you can save and which you can’t,” Meston said. Firefighters know which roads to bring rigs onto based on how easily they can exit.

When smoke is thick it’s hard to see obstacles, like trees in the middle of the road – which exist in the Al Tahoe area. And if firefighters are coming from out of town to provide aid, detailed data will help them be safe as they work to control whatever disaster is unfolding.

Once the report is complete it will be presented to the City Council and to the public.

Majority of National Park Service board resigns

By Scott Neuman and Colin Dwyer, NPR

Nearly all of the seats on the U.S. National Park Service advisory board are vacant following a mass resignation Monday night, with ex-members citing Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke’s unwillingness to meet with them.

Former Alaska Gov. Tony Knowles said that he and eight other members of the panel handed in their resignations. In a separate letter Wednesday, another board member, Carolyn Hessler Radelet, also quit.

The advisory board, which normally has up to 12 members and describes itself as comprising “citizen advisors chartered by Congress to help the National Park Service,” has been an

institution since 1935.

Read the whole story

STHS student posts threat on social media

By Kathryn Reed

A South Tahoe High School sophomore posted pictures of himself with guns and threatening song lyrics that prompted police officers to search his home in Meyers.

The threats showed up on Snapchat on Jan. 15. And while they disappear quickly, it is possible to take screenshots of messages.

Students when they received the message on Monday contacted a staff member at school – even though this was a holiday – and that person then called the police department. Other students on Tuesday shared the screenshots with Andy Eissenger, the school resource officer.

Officers went to the student's house Monday night and found two BB guns, but no other weapons. One was a 1911 style handgun, and the other an AR-15 style assault rifle.

"The threat was from the song lyrics," Lt. Shannon Laney told *Lake Tahoe News.*

"One afternoon he brought his gun to lunch; An started capin off mfkrs one bye one," are the lyrics in the song "Fake I.D." by Speed Gang.

“We determined it was not an actual threat to the school and turned it over to the school district,” Laney said.

Lake Tahoe Unified School District Superintendent Jim Tarwater and South Tahoe High School Principal Carline Sinkler did not return calls.

However, spokeswoman Shannon Chandler told *Lake Tahoe News* the student is no longer at the school. The type of help he is receiving and disciplinary action have not been released.

“I’m not able to say what type of help he is getting,” Chandler said.

She said the principal on Tuesday sent an email to parents letting them know about the incident, and that the district on Jan. 18 followed up with a phone call.

The motive behind the student’s actions has not been released. Because of his age his name is not being used.

At Tuesday’s school board meeting nothing about the incident was mentioned.

Caltrans now a huge fan of roundabouts

By Tony Bizjak, Sacramento Bee

In the tiny town of Plymouth, gateway to Amador County’s growing wine tourism area, road crews recently ripped out the four-way stop on a busy section of Highway 49 to replace it with a traffic approach that literally will have drivers going in circles.

Plopped in the middle of the intersection where Main Street crosses the highway, the big oval forces drivers to slow to 15 mph but doesn't require them to stop. Instead, traffic from four directions merges and flows in a choreographed, counterclockwise direction.

Roundabouts have suddenly become one of the state's trendiest traffic calming devices. After shying away from them for years, the state Department of Transportation is on a roundabout building spree, constructing 37, most in the last few years, with 100 more on the drawing boards.

Read the whole story

Former EDC resident admits stealing dead aunt's benefits

Former El Dorado Hills resident Julia A. Wilbert, 53, pleaded guilty Jan. 17 to theft of government benefits.

According to court documents, from June 2007 through March 2015, Wilbert stole approximately $112,275 in federal government benefit payments intended for her aunt, who died in June 2007. Wilbert's aunt was an eligible recipient of Dependency and Indemnity Compensation benefits paid by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs. Wilbert had exclusive access to her deceased aunt's bank account, was the individual who reported her aunt's death, and proceeded to perform periodic transfers of thousands of dollars of VA benefit money from that account to her own bank account.

When confronted, Wilbert admitted that she had been acting out of "personal greed." Wilbert has agreed to pay back the full

amount to the government as a part of her plea agreement.

Wilbert is scheduled to be sentenced April 18. She faces a maximum of 10 years in prison and a $250,000 fine.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

SLT adds confusion to shared use rental business

By Kathryn Reed

Policy is now being made by the part-time city attorney instead of the South Lake Tahoe City Council.

A letter was sent Jan. 11 to owners of shared rentals from the city's revenue division at the direction of Nira Doherty. Doherty is an attorney with Burke, Williams & Sorensen out of Oakland. The city contracted with the law firm to have Doherty represent South Lake Tahoe after Tom Watson left last fall.

(The firm is contracted to provide 80 hours of legal work a month at a rate of $19,500/month or $234,000/annually. They bill every six minutes. Doherty's review will be on the Jan. 23 council agenda, at which time the council is expected to discuss if it wants to continue with this type of representation or return to having a staff attorney.)

It is the City Council that is tasked with setting policy, and then staff doing the work to carry out the policy.

According to Mayor Wendy David, "(Doherty) was asked to interpret or clarify the code by the Finance Department. This is a one of the city attorney's jobs, to assist staff in

applying the policies of the council, including codes and ordinances."

However, the council at no time gave direction for contents of the letter to become policy. The letter states that those using their property as a shared rental – meaning they allow short-term renters while they stay on the property – must have a business license and pay transient occupancy tax.

"My understanding of the council's intention was that we wanted to bring back a separate shared rental ordinance," Councilwoman Brooke Laine told *Lake Tahoe News*. "I am not aware of any direction that provides for the requirement of a business license."

The letter explicitly says, "This new VHR ordinance does not regulate shared rentals."

Doherty and the Finance Department appear to be deciding the regulations for shared rentals, not the council.

Council members were not aware the letter existed until *Lake Tahoe News* told them about it last weekend.

Councilman Tom Davis said he would answer *LTN*'s questions by Tuesday. He didn't. Councilman Jason Collin, per his MO, never acknowledged the questions.

David told *Lake Tahoe News*, "As you know, the council stated that we would bring back shared rentals at a later date. The date has not been agendized yet. My understanding is that TOT is a part of the shared rental owner expectation."

However, that is not what this reporter was told after the council took action last fall when it revamped the vacation rental ordinance. *LTN* was told that shared rentals would not be regulated in any manner until a separate ordinance was written sometime in 2018.

The city's policy related to shared rentals has been

inconsistent at best. It’s been an on and off again situation when it comes to the requirement to pay transient occupancy tax, or to even have a vacation home rental permit that was different from those renting out their entire house.

At one time in 2017 there was a one-time shared use rental permit that cost $114. This fee was good forever, or so city staff said at the time. However, the permittee never actually got a physical document. This differs from full house rentals which do have a paper document to show they are permitted.

Transient occupancy tax requirements have come and gone at various times. City employees give different information to different people, making it difficult to know what rules to play by. Paying TOT would put these properties on a level playing field with traditional hotels. It would also provide the city added income.

The city’s Finance Department did not respond to questions about who got the letter. It’s unknown if only people in the system already were notified or someone ferreted out the shared rental owners on the various platforms.

This city department has also not clarified why shared rentals need a business permit when owners renting out their dwelling year round or others subletting in the same manner do not have to have such a license.

Brown proposes making it easier to track funding for

needy kids

By Jessica Calefati, CalMatters

Gov. Jerry Brown's landmark school funding formula would not only win more money under the state budget blueprint he released last week, but also be subjected to the sort of transparency and accountability lawmakers and advocates for needy kids have been seeking since its adoption almost five years ago.

The formula directs significant sums of extra cash toward districts with foster youth, kids learning English and students from low-income families, acknowledging that it costs more to educate them. It also gives districts power to decide how to spend their extra money to shrink the academic achievement gap between those groups of students and their peers.

But as I reported in a June investigation for CALmatters, the funding is almost impossible to track and the results so far have been underwhelming.

In a summary outlining his spending priorities, Brown acknowledged a few of his well-intentioned policy's shortcomings and proposed some fixes that he thinks will help boost the state's sagging academic achievement. He conceded for the first time that valid "concerns have been raised" about the policy's effectiveness. It's a stunning departure. Previously, the governor had been resistant to changing the formula.

"While many districts have seized the opportunities offered under the formula to better serve their students, others have been slower to make changes," Brown wrote.

To "improve student achievement and transparency," Brown proposes requiring districts to demonstrate a connection

between their priorities and the way they spend the extra cash generated by their disadvantaged students. He also wants the state to start calculating and reporting the amount of extra funding each district receives.

An open report I wrote last March explained how tough it is to follow the money without any of that information.

But even as he called for state-level policy changes aimed at boosting achievement, Brown emphasized his belief in local control and struck a defiant tone when asked at a Capitol news conference about California's lackluster standardized test scores.

"Kids learn at home or in the classroom. When that door shuts, there's no legislator, there's no governor," Brown said. "So people who really want to help a school that's not performing, go to that school, go talk to that principal. That's the philosophy I want to promote."

"We're looking in the wrong place when we're looking at Sacramento," he added.

Democratic Assemblywoman Shirley Weber of San Diego has been fighting for fiscal transparency alongside other lawmakers and advocates for disadvantaged kids since Brown signed the formula into law in 2013.

In an interview, she said she doesn't want to "declare victory" until she's had a chance to review the proposals' details more closely, but that she's hopeful the policy might finally get fixed.

"A year ago, I told the governor that he needs to solve this transparency problem before he leaves office," Weber said. "At least now I know I wasn't hollering into the wilderness for 40 years like Moses or something. He was listening. I think this was his way of saying, 'I heard you, Shirley.'"

Carrie Hahnel, the deputy director of research and policy at Education Trust-West, a nonprofit advocacy organization committed to closing the achievement gap, shares Weber's cautious optimism.

On one hand, she said, it's exciting to see the administration recognize the concerns that advocates, researchers and journalists have expressed about the lack of budget transparency. But she called the language in the budget summary "weak," noting that it doesn't explicitly demonstrate any new commitments.

Hahnel's organization and others will learn more about the proposal later this month when Brown's Department of Finance releases detailed budget bill language. This spring, the proposal will be vetted by members of the state Legislature's fiscal committees.

Many questions about the scope of the plan remain unanswered, but even still, Hahnel said the shift in tone is something to celebrate: "He's finally acknowledging that something needs to be done."

Nevada makes move to approve home pot deliveries

By Chris Kudialis, Las Vegas Sun

Just over six months after sales of recreational marijuana began in Nevada, the state's Tax Commission on Tuesday approved permanent regulations to govern the industry.

The eight-member commission voted 8-0 in favor of adopting 258

pages of pot regulations, which replace temporary “early start” regulations put in place to govern the Nevada marijuana industry from July through the end of 2017.

Additions to the permanent regulations adopted this week include guidance for the state’s selection of recipients for 66 new pot licenses and allowance of home delivery.

Read the whole story

Future of Kings Beach center to be studied

North Tahoe Public Utility District’s board of directors is trying to figure out how to keep the North Tahoe Event Center in Kings Beach solvent since the deal with **Laulima fell through** last month.

A task group consisting of members of the Recreation and Park Commission, district residents and up to two directors will be formed to provide suggestions for the continued operation of the center. The process to apply to participate in this group will be announced in coming weeks.

The task group will review current uses, operational costs, and revenue funding, as well as discuss possible future uses and funding sources.

The goal is for the task group to work no more than one year to reach consensus and a recommendation on providing financial solvency to the NTEC and the Recreation and Park Department.

In the meantime, the North Tahoe Event Center is operating as usual and accepting bookings.

Suspect in Lake Tahoe deputy-involved shooting could face charges

By KRNV

The motive for an attack that led a deputy to shoot and injure a 47-year-old man early Sunday in North Lake Tahoe is still not clear, according to the Placer County Sheriff’s Office.

In a statement released Tuesday, the sheriff’s office said deputies responded just after 4am Jan. 14, to a rental home in Carnelian Bay on a report that a family member was acting strangely.

Two people were standing outside the house when the first deputy arrived, according to the sheriff’s office, and they all went inside the house, citing the cold weather.

Criminal charges are pending against the suspect.

Read the whole story