Lack of snow slows Vail Resorts revenue stream

By Jason Blevins, Denver Post

Vail Resorts on Friday assigned numbers to the so-far-anecdotal evidence that the slow start to the season is pinching the resort industry.

The continent's largest ski resort operator showed steep declines in spending and visitation at its network of North American ski resorts. Ski-school revenue through the first week of January was down 4.5 percent compared to last season. Retail sales were down 11.5 percent. Skier visits to Vail Resorts' 11 destination ski areas in Colorado, California, Utah, Vermont and British Columbia were down 10.8 percent.

Still, thanks to skiers and snowboarders buying nearly 750,000 Epic Passes for 2017-18, the company's season-pass sales revenue was up 1.6 percent compared to the same period last season. In early December, the company reported that Epic Pass sales were up 14 percent in units and 20 percent in revenue compared to the previous season.

Read the whole story

Brown raises prospect of pension cuts in downturn

By Romy Varghese, Bloomberg

Gov. Jerry Brown said legal rulings may clear the way for

making cuts to public pension benefits, which would go against long-standing assumptions and potentially provide financial relief to the state and its local governments.

Brown said he has a “hunch” the courts would “modify” the so-called California rule, which holds that benefits promised to public employees can’t be rolled back. The state’s Supreme Court is set to hear a case in which lower courts ruled that reductions to pensions are permissible if the payments remain “reasonable” for workers.

“There is more flexibility than there is currently assumed by those who discuss the California rule,” Brown said during a briefing on the budget in Sacramento. He said that in the next recession, the governor “will have the option of considering pension cutbacks for the first time.”

Read the whole story

Nev. DMV partners with feds to fight human trafficking

By Briana Erickson, Las Vegas Review-Journal

About a decade ago, a Swedish woman traveling to Las Vegas met a man and fell in love. But he turned out to be a pimp, and he held her hostage for two years.

“That really opened my eyes,” said Lena Walther, a Swedish consul to Nevada who attended a National Human Trafficking Awareness Day event Thursday.

Walther, who runs an organization that helps human trafficking

victims, said she managed to get the woman and her baby out of their situation. But there are millions of others like her.

Read the whole story

Swarm of 90 earthquakes near Mt. Rose Highway

By Mike Wolterbeek

UNR's Seismological Laboratory reports an ongoing swarm of earthquakes near south Reno, in the area of the Mt. Rose Highway and I-580. Since Thursday night, more than 90 events have been located. The largest recorded are four magnitude 2 quakes.

There have been no reports of damage, and about 38 people have reported feeling the small earthquakes.

"The activity notably increased late last night and this morning," Ken Smith, seismic network manager and associate director of the seismological lab, said. "We're monitoring the swarm closely and updating local emergency management officials in case this sequence evolves to a larger, damaging earthquake."

Updated information for activity associated with this earthquake is available **online**.

The Nevada-Eastern California region has a history of large damaging earthquakes and citizens should always consider earthquake preparedness.

“When we feel these small earthquakes, it’s nature’s way of telling us that Nevada, and Washoe County, is earthquake country,” Washoe County Emergency Manager Aaron Kenneston said. “Today would be an ideal day to walk through your house, or place of work, and do a hazard hunt. Secure bookshelves, water heaters and items that can easily fall and hurt you.”

As a public safety reminder local and state agencies urge the public be prepared in the event an emergency causes you to be self-reliant for three days without utilities and electricity, water service, access to a supermarket or local services, or maybe even without response from police, fire or rescue.

The Nevada Seismological Laboratory, a public service department at UNR, is a member of the USGS Advanced National Seismic System and operates a network of about 150 real-time seismograph stations throughout the region providing earthquake information to Nevada citizens, the USGS, and local and state officials.

Mike Wolterbeek works for UNR.

Calif. wind speed record set at Alpine Meadows

By Amy Graff, San Francisco Chronicle

A 199-mph gust that blasted a mountaintop at the Alpine Meadows ski resort last February was the strongest wind ever recorded in California, federal scientists reported.

It was also the strongest non-tornado wind in the United States last year, according to the National Oceanic and

Atmospheric Administration.

By comparison, 140-mph winds have been known to pick up and hurl baseball-size rocks.

Read the whole story

Fresh Ketch restaurant closes its doors

By Kathryn Reed

Once one of the busiest restaurant and bars on the South Shore, the Fresh Ketch has closed.

As one of the few South Lake Tahoe eateries right on the water, its location was always one of its biggest selling points.

While the message on the voice recorder says it will reopen in mid-April, doing so in shoulder season could be problematic to be successful.

Business at the Ketch has been dwindling ever since it changed owners nearly five years ago. The food quality became inconsistent, the hours of operation cutback, a **water issue** closed it for a bit last summer.

There was a time when it was hard to get a seat – inside or out. Musicians regularly set up next to the fireplace. The pray for snow parties each fall were legendary.

Longtime owner **Bob Hassett in 2013** sold the restaurant to the majority owners of the Tahoe Keys Marina, Donna and Robert

Krilich. The El Dorado County Assessor's Office at the time listed the value of the property and business at $1,224,913.

The Krilichs bought the Tahoe Keys Marina in early 2009 for more than $20 million.

Donna Krilich had a separate business listed with the California Secretary of State as LT Food and Spirits, which reportedly operated the restaurant. The status is listed as suspended.

The Tahoe Keys Marina Management Inc., with Robert Krilich Sr. as the registrant, is also listed as suspended by the Franchise Tax Board.

According to the Sacramento Real Estate Lawyer Blog, "The FTB usually suspends a business either because the business failed to file one or more tax returns or the business failed to pay its balance. This balance can include the penalty incurred by not filing your Statement of Information in a timely manner."

The restaurant has been in operation since at least the 1980s, and was popular with locals and tourists.

Tahoe City Lodge's TAU issue a done deal

Some call it prudent economic strategy, others call it a gift of public funds.

On Jan. 9 the Placer County Board of Supervisors unanimously voted to approve the execution of a loan agreement with Kila Tahoe LLC to convey 60 tourist accommodation units for the Tahoe City Lodge.

The TAU transfer agreement structures the transfer as a forgivable loan, with a 15-year repayment term with an interest rate of 1.59 percent. The $879,000 loan value includes the cost of the TAUs as well as reimbursement of county staff time spent processing the project's permit application. It will be paid down by transient occupancy taxes generated by the project.

The Tahoe City Lodge is expected to generate nearly $1.2 million a year in tax revenue.

Not everyone believes this is the right project at the right location, nor do they believe the county should be so generous with its resources to a private developer. Public meetings throughout the process have had naysayers.

The hotel will be a 118-unit lodge, with three buildings consisting of a mix of hotel units; one-, two- and three-bedroom condo hotel suites; hotel amenities; a restaurant and rooftop bar; and parking.

Placer's transfer of 60 TAUs, along with 58 TAUs secured separately by Kila, complete the total 118 TAUs needed for the project.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Mother Nature messing with Tahoe's economy



Mount Tallac is a reminder it really is winter in Lake Tahoe. Photo/LTN

By Kathryn Reed

The economy in the Lake Tahoe Basin is in the toilet from many, on par for some, and better than average for others.

The phone recording at Adventure Mountain Lake Tahoe is from Jan. 2. It says the sledding hill atop Echo Summit is "closed because of low snow conditions." This is at 7,382 feet, while lake level is 6,200 feet.

The sledding hill in the lot next to MontBleu in Stateline has been able to keep making snow with the cold nights. The lines of people wanting to play in the white stuff is remarkable. It's easy, convenient and they don't care it is manmade.

While skiing and snowboarding dominate the reason to travel to Tahoe this time of year, plenty of people come just to play in the white stuff.

"It's surprising the number of people who have never seen snow or played in snow," Jerry Bindel, who operates Lakeland Village in South Lake Tahoe, said. "We have a significant number of guests here for snow playing more than going up the mountain. Some go up the mountain because that is where the snow is. During the holidays (Heavenly) saw sightseeing passes at the gondola selling out by noon every day."

Lodging numbers for this season on the North Shore are about what they were last year when all it did was snow – or so it seemed.

“Reports are that the holidays were strong and this period, early January, is usually slower, but the numbers look strong for this weekend’s occupancy,” Cindy Gustafson, CEO of North Lake Tahoe Resort Association, told *Lake Tahoe News.* “The most recent occupancy forecast numbers I have for the winter season based on reservations on the books as of Nov. 30 for the November to April period is just over 1 percent ahead as compared to the same period last year. So while not much of a total increase, the business activity based on room reservations looks pretty comparative to last year.”

For the South Shore lodging community, advance bookings are saving the season.

“Due to last year’s great snows, we have seen some good advance group bookings for the winter months, and currently most properties are reporting pacing ahead of last year,” Bindel, who is on the South Lake Tahoe Lodging Association board, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “Open roads are helping as well. Of course we all want some of the white stuff on the ground at lake level, just enough to allow for our guests to have some snow play while keeping the roads open and clear. The mountains can get all the big dumps of feet of snow – that would be the perfect mix.”

But not everyone is full for the weekend. Local hoteliers were on social media Thursday touting room availability.

Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, which is responsible for marketing the South Shore, is not changing its message because there are heads in beds.

“We haven’t changed our winter strategy at this point. The board may want to have that discussion, but we’re hopeful that this (weather) pattern changes and we see some accumulation,

like (this week) at the higher elevations," LTVA Executive Director Carol Chaplin told *Lake Tahoe News.*

No ski resort in the greater Lake Tahoe area is fully open – and we're heading into what is usually one of the busier three-day weekends.

This is bad news for those who've been laid off or were never put on the payroll. It's not good for the resorts' bottom lines or the secondary businesses that rely on skiers/snowboarders rolling into town.

"We are adapting to the amount of snow that Mother Nature has given us," Thea Hardy with Sierra-at-Tahoe told *Lake Tahoe News.* "We welcome the holiday crowds and want to be clear on our offering of limited terrain. We ask that all closure signs are obeyed in an effort of providing a safe sliding on snow experience for all."

All of the resorts have been receiving snow while it's been raining at the lake. Still, some of the lower slopes at some resorts were rained upon or it was wet, heavy snow – well beyond the typical Sierra cement.

Early season natural snow and snowmaking (plus grooming) have made for better conditions that one would expect from looking at lake level. At lake level it looks more like fall than winter.

However, as was mentioned in the **snow survey** last week, there is a lot of winter still to be had, with now through March when the most amount of snow usually falls.

One industry that does well when the slopes are more hardpack than powder is healthcare with so many people needing to go to the emergency room. And with more people crowded onto fewer runs, it means more opportunity to run into someone else.

Other businesses are also doing well. People are looking to do

something besides play in the snow – like ride bikes, get on the lake, and eat out more.

For now, with temperatures supposed to be in the 50s through the weekend in Tahoe, winter seems more like what the calendar says and not what it's like stepping outside. When one can play tennis in Tahoe in January, you know the weather isn't normal.

Placer County hires executive officer from Colorado

Placer County Board of Supervisors this week voted to hire Todd Leopold to be the next county executive officer.



Todd Leopold

Leopold has more than 20 years of public sector experience, with more than 17 years in county government organizations in Colorado. He was the county manager for Adams County, Colo., from 2013 until last April.

Since then he has been a vice president for Aon Hewitt, a global professional services firm in the Denver area. He has been interviewing for various county leadership positions for about a year.

Leopold has spent all but one year of his professional career in the Denver area. The other year was in New Mexico right after he earned his bachelor's degree in political science. The Colorado native has a master's in public administration from the University of Colorado, Denver.

Leopold's starting salary will be $241,259. He and his wife have two teenage daughters.

Placer's previous county executive officer, David Boesch, retired effective Jan. 5 after five years. Leopold is expected to start Jan. 22. Until then, County Counsel Gerald Carden will be interim CEO.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Californians ditching coastal cities, moving inland

By Michelle Robertson, San Francisco Chronicle

Researchers have uncovered a surprising trend in California migration: The populations of inland counties are growing faster than that of urban coastal counties.

Phuong Nguyen, a research specialist at the California Department of Finance, began noticing the influx of Californians to inland regions, like San Joaquin and Sacramento, around 2014.

"We were surprised at that," Nguyen said. California's coastal regions have historically drawn in-state migrants who leave their provincial hometowns in search of employment opportunity and urban environments.

Read the whole story