

Tahoe agencies close to failing in their job to implement change post-Angora Fire

By Kathryn Reed

Five years later and people are still wondering how they will evacuate safely from the Lake Tahoe Basin in an emergency, if a reverse 911 system has been installed, and how to get their neighbors to get rid of that shake roof.

While a panel of agency officials sat on the stage of the theater at South Tahoe High School on Monday talking about what they have done in the five years since the Angora Fire, it was more personal information the audience sought.

But answers for them were few or limited.

The June 25 forum was hosted by state Sen. Ted Gaines, R-Roseville. Speakers were Gareth Harris of Lake Valley Fire Protection District, Kelly Keenan with CalFire, Patty Kouyoumdjian of Lahontan water board, Joanne Marchetta-TRPA, and Mike LeFevre-USFS.

North Shore real estate agent Sue Daniels asked why the Caltrans signs can't alert people about red flag warning days and what the state's \$150 rural fire tax will be spent on.

Gaines said he would look into the sign question. As for the tax, he calls it double dipping. The money collected from homeowners won't help CalFire or any firefighting efforts.

Keenan explained the tax means \$89 million for CalFire, but in reality the department's budget from the state has been

reduced by that same amount so the tax is not a net gain to the state fire agency. What people are paying for is unknown. The tax really goes to the general fund to be spent however the governor and Legislature want.

A resident in the Lake Valley area asked what to do about a neighbor who believes doing nothing to their fire prone-shake roof is fine.

Harris said his district received a \$5 million grant from FEMA to deal with just that issue. The money is available to assist homeowners in Lake Valley, Meek's Bay and Fallen Leaf Lake fire districts.

But Harris also encouraged residents to call their local fire department about any defensible space issue and have the firefighters be the bad guys and the court be the enforcer if it were to get to that point.

Angora burn area resident Susan Ward told the audience of more than 100 how she never received a reverse 911 call five years ago. No one told her Monday night the reason there was no call is because the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department thought the governor had to make that decision. Not so. The county has the capability to use this system without Sacramento's OK – so do other jurisdictions.

While El Dorado County Sheriff John D'Agostini and South Lake Tahoe Police-Fire Chief Brian Uhler attended the forum, neither spoke and neither stayed until the end. They would be the ones to answer how the 911 system works.

The other issue Uhler and D'Agostini could have addressed is the evacuation plan because that is the job of law enforcement. None of the speakers could give any details about how people will be evacuated in the event of an emergency.

It was total chaos five years ago that proved whatever system might have been in place did not work. This proved true the

Sunday the fire started and then the Tuesday when the Tahoe Keys area was evacuated when the fire jumped Highway 89.

Grading the work done post-Angora



State Sen. Ted Gaines reveals the agencies in the Lake Tahoe Basin barely received a passing grade based on the lack of implementation of recommendations post-Angora.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

Gaines had asked the non-partisan Senate Office of Research to examine how the 90 recommendations issued by the bi-state Blue Ribbon Fire Commission that was convened by then Govs. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jim Gibbons had been implemented.

Sixty have been completed and 10 are in the process. To this, Gaines gave the effort a C-minus grade – barely passing by most standards.

One recommendation of the bi-state commission was to, “Adopt the priority of life, property, and the environment, in that order, with respect to fire safety and fire prevention.” The action taken, according to the report released Monday, was, “Implemented.”

Firefighters have those priorities, but those who control the basin have a different agenda. Water quality is one. Spending grant money to keep their jobs is another. Planning and more planning without implementation appear to be other priorities.

"It's not an important issue, it's an urgent issue," Gaines said of needing to make Lake Tahoe fire safe.

He doesn't understand when people talk about the importance of Lake Tahoe how protecting it from a devastating fire isn't at the top of the list. He pointed to the Democrats in the state Legislature not wanting to fund projects that would help Tahoe.

One of the recommendations was to create an 800 number for people to call for information about defensible space guidelines. But the number provided in the report went to a personal residence when *Lake Tahoe News* called it Monday night.

An "undetermined" was the action for the recommendation, "To avoid continued confusion regarding interagency communications during wildland fire occurrences, all dispatch centers and responding resources in the Tahoe basin will adhere to the existing agreements."

Considered "implemented" was the recommendation to, "Work with their respective congressional delegation to establish an annual sustainable fund for forest health for the Lake Tahoe Basin."

But the people speaking on the stage Monday said money is an issue and there is no "sustainable fund" for fuel reduction or firefighting. Congress has not reauthorized the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act that supplied the initial money for environmental projects that included fire related activities. SNPLMA funds are about exhausted. And some entities in the basin would like the remaining Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act dollars be spent on a loop road on the South

Shore instead of fire related issues.

One of the recommendations that was found to be “undermined” was, “Find more stable, long-term funding to replace the stopgap funding provided by the states, likely through the collection of a parcel fee or similar special assessments on property owners.”

Everyone in at the forum would likely have categorized that as “not implemented”.

Going into the burn

Before the evening meeting, Gaines went on a tour of the Angora burn, witnessing the forest as it looks today, talking to homeowners who have rebuilt and seeing a community garden that has sprouted from the ashes.

“We all move to Tahoe because it’s beautiful. We stay because of the people,” Marsha Hudson told Gaines. She said having an evacuation to-do list on the inside of a cupboard helped her family retrieve more belongings than they would have otherwise remembered in such a stressful situation.

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South Lake Tahoe: A link between the people and the action

By Kathay Lovell

I will never be able to get out of my mind the sights and smells of the Angora Fire. I was at ground zero on the morning of June 25, 2007. I never want anyone to experience that again – the loss of their mementos, personal belongings and their beloved pets. All things lost during the fire that can never be replaced.



Angora Fire --
5 years later

In my opinion, South Lake Tahoe forever changed at 2:15pm, June 24, 2007. I was mayor at the time of what would be later known as the Angora Fire. The events over the course of the next week following the fire were the most difficult times for our community. Others will recount the details of the cause and circumstances of the fire.

For me, the most vivid details started shortly after the fire started. From my house I had a clear view of the initial plume. I knew it was trouble just by the heat, wind, and a very dry previous winter. I snapped a few pictures from my Blackberry and sent them to the city manager who was working that Sunday at the airport. We spoke briefly and he said that this was a significant event. According to the city's fire chief, the fire at that time was within the jurisdiction of the county but on track to move toward the city. Details were sketchy, but the conditions and location of the fire caused great concern. The city manager and I decided it was imperative to open the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) located at the airport in the City Council chambers just in case the fire escalated.

I left my home for the EOC never imagining how aggressive the fire had become or was about to be. We (the city manager, police chief, city clerk, city attorney, and a few senior staff members and myself) were briefed. The fire wind gusts were up to 50 miles per hour and the fire area was heavily timbered with a dense canopy in the path of hundreds of homes. People were being evacuated. Federal, state, and local fire agencies responded on the initial attack and it quickly became evident that home protection and evacuations were the priorities.

The appropriate staff and other local agencies were notified the EOC was being opened. It seemed like within minutes the room was full. There wasn't a lot of talking at first, everyone was setting up tables, computers, and phones lines were being drug across the floor. The city's information technology staff was laying additional lines and setting up fax machines and televisions. Different public safety agencies were flowing in. Staff was soon making arrangements at the Parks and Recreation Center for evacuees. The pre-existing disaster recovery plan was in full swing.

Everyone was very professional and operated in a unified

environment. The mission we were tasked with was to gather information as it was coming in and disseminate out to the public as quickly as we could. It was very fluid. I called the El Dorado County sheriff and undersheriff to tell them how serious this fire was and how quickly it was spreading. The sheriff immediately dispatched this county EOC staff. The fire chiefs and U.S. Forest Service had immediately made all the necessary requests for other additional assistance.



Kathay Lovell speaks about the Angora Fire while the governors of Nevada and California, Lake Tahoe Basin fire chiefs and Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., listen. Photo/Kevin Chandler

There was an almost immediate intense media presence and their numbers were growing at a rapid rate. The media overwhelmed us. The city had no public information officer, so the city manager and I were the point of contact. The city clerk and the city attorney would gather updated information from our briefing and the city clerk would provide to us, almost every 10 minutes, with updates so we could inform the media and public as rapidly as possible. Every time we got an update we were relieved there were no reported human casualties, but the number of lost homes was unclear. Lives of residents and first responders were constantly a worry.

In the meantime, my son called me while I was at the EOC. He told me he and his wife were evacuating. I told them just go to my house with whatever they could take and safely get out. It was a long night with information coming in quickly.

We had every type of media truck in the parking lot at the airport. The city manager and I did constant interviews with the media most of the night as information was coming in to us. I went home sometime around 3am to return at 6am Monday. As I arrived, I was being updated. The sheriff was on his way up from Placerville. The fire chief was making arrangements to take the sheriff, the police chief, and me to the burn area.

As we drove into ground zero of the burn area, the thick stench of burnt timber and building materials hung in the air. The blue sky Tahoe is famous for was gone and a gray haze of smoke surrounded us. Suddenly we could see the total devastation of homes and forest. Everyone was silent as if to pay reverence to the loss. Cars were reduced to metal hulls. Homes burned to the foundation. Smoldering ashes surrounded us of what was no more.

We stopped the car as the fire chief began to explain the course and intensity of the fire. A few feet from where we stopped there was a child's bicycle, completely charred. The bike was in front of what used to be someone's home. I could only think it was a miracle no one died.

That same Monday night was the first of three public meetings. I attended every public and community meeting regarding the Angora Fire during that summer. Not all locally elected attended those public or community meetings. They should have and this bothered me. The community needed all of us, even if to vent or have a shoulder to lean on. I wanted to be there for my community. This first meeting was in the gym at the middle school. The estimated attendance was 1,500. I think all the Angora Fire victims and their families were there; rightfully so, I sensed a lot of fear, anger, and questions.

The Forest Service firefighters, sheriff, CalFire, fire chiefs and others were there to answer questions and provide current information. TRPA Executive Director John Singlaub took questions but was quickly verbally attacked by the audience. It was a pivotal moment. Many in the audience believed that the fire was made worse by regulations forbidding homeowners from clearing adequate "defensible space" from around their properties. Every agency realized there had to be a collaborate effort to deal with defensible space in the future. It was an emotional night and we needed to provide comfort and answers.

Tuesday, I was again at the EOC, and we were briefed about the containment. It was of grave concern because the same conditions as Sunday, with high heat and dry winds, were expected. I went home for an hour to take care of my dogs. While outside with them, I saw a plume of smoke. I took pictures and immediately sent them to the city manager and the fire chief. I was told the fire had rekindled and spread quickly. Due to the conditions, it had broken containment and was heading toward South Tahoe High School, the Gardner Mountain housing tract and Tahoe Keys. A few moments later, while still in my back yard with the dogs, I began to see huge red glowing embers of wood blowing onto my roof and yard. I soon found out I was going to have to evacuate. Now I was experiencing what many others in the path of the fire had already been through.

My husband had been in Alaska since Friday on a fishing trip. He was at a remote lodge with no phones or cell service. I couldn't contact him during the first few days of the fire. He was of no help. My son, who was able to return to his home that he had previously evacuated, came to get my things and my dogs. I was not organized and ran in a bit of a circle as to what to take and what to leave. My son said, "You have 2 minutes or I will carry you out." I grabbed my dogs, dog food, leashes, my laptop, a few pieces of jewelry, some jeans and

tops, and my son said I was done. As we departed, he grabbed a collage I had with pictures of the family.

We were trying to leave the Tahoe Keys area along with everyone else. We went to 15th Street first only to find it was blocked. After a long wait on Tahoe Keys Boulevard we made it out along with everyone else. Yes, it was a disaster and very frightening. To add to my concern, as my son was driving on Tahoe Keys Boulevard, I realized I had forgotten my pet bird. He would not turn around – it was bumper to bumper. My daughter also resided in the same area and I frantically called her. She left work and gathered her two dogs and a few possessions before evacuating.

My son dropped me off at the EOC. He took my things and dogs to his house. I needed to regain my composure; I needed to do my job. It was another night of horrible fires and valiant efforts to successfully save our high school and surrounding residences. I made my way home around 2 or 3am. I laid my head on the pillow fearing for my community. I could see Gardner Mountain was aglow with flames; we were still under siege. I got a few hours of sleep and then returned to the EOC. The following days brought more containment and resources until finally the fire was out. So many had fought this fire in order to save lives and homes; some that fought the fire lost their own homes in the process.

In the days, weeks, months following the devastation of the Angora Fire, it was clear we had to do everything possible to help our community. For those who lost everything, we had to be there to comfort and help them. We had city employees and we all had friends who lost homes. One of the councilmembers suggested we give up a month's salary and contribute to employee victims, three of us did. Additionally, the City Council took action on July 12, 2007, to put in place city code changes and purchased supportive firefighting equipment including a wildland fire engine and new programmable radios. These changes along with defensible space clearing around city

owned properties were positive steps toward future fire prevention.

In retrospect, the healing process for the community was both grief and joy. The losses were incredible, but so was the community support for the victims. So much so, the victims refused to be labeled anything other than “survivors”. The fire was an emergency. Nothing works perfect in an emergency, but from my viewpoint at the EOC and in the time following all agencies went above and beyond. While personal belongings, pets, and keepsakes were lost during the fire and can never be replaced, not one human life was lost nor was anyone seriously injured as a direct result of the fire. The devastation of homes and the fire damage is insurmountable and still scars our lives.

Kathay Lovell was mayor of South Lake Tahoe during the Angora Fire.

Lahontan: Water issues a concern now, during and after fires

By Lauri Kemper

June 24, 2007, began strangely. My niece and her family were spending their last day of their vacation with us. We set out

to hike around Echo Lakes early that morning. The hot, dry winds were so fierce that sand from the trail was blowing into my grandniece's eyes. It was no fun, so we returned to my home off North Upper Truckee Road to take a walk to Osgood Swamp, instead, because it is more protected behind Flagpole Peak.



Angora Fire --
5 years later

On our way back, we saw a puff of smoke that I first thought was a lone thundercloud. But quickly the puff became a tower of billowing smoke.

To get back to the subdivision, we had to move toward this tower of smoke before turning away from it. We started running, as if our lives depended on it. My niece and her family had already packed their car, so they jumped in and left the basin, probably reaching Echo Summit before the first fire truck got there.

From my house, we watched the smoke grow in size and density. We watered our yard and hosed down the house, but luckily for our neighborhood, the winds kept the smoke and fire away. Still, we were evacuated, because a change in wind direction would have brought the fire to us.

Two of my water board colleagues lost their homes in the Angora Fire, and several employees were evacuated.

The Lahontan Water Board was not directly involved in the fire suppression efforts. During a fire emergency, the water board is not a first responder. Over the years, the water boards and

the USEPA have advised fire suppression agencies to take steps, where possible, not to adversely affect streams and lakes during fire suppression activities. For example, fire retardants contain phosphorus that, if dumped directly into a lake or stream, could cause fish kills and large increases of algal growths. So, fire agencies avoid applying fire retardants directly to streams and lakes.

On Monday, Lahontan water board staff members joined the state's Emergency Management System, including a multi-agency response team. Lahontan water board staff brought their knowledge and expertise in communication, water quality, science, engineering, and public funding to assist in the effort.

A local assistance office with phone banks was set up to answer the public's questions and concerns. Lahontan water board loaned a staff person to the office to answer calls and provide information to the public. We were fortunate to have a student intern working for us that summer who was a South Lake Tahoe native, a great communicator and forestry major. As our key staff person at the assistance center, he was instrumental in effectively handling inquiries and linking individuals to the specific resources they needed. Our technical and communications staff participated in regular updates to the multi-agency team so that all current information was shared and collective responses could be prepared to address new information or concerns.



The types of fuel reduction allowed in Angora Creek has been debated. This is the area in May 2012. Photo/LTN

The Lahontan water board's primary role following the fire was to protect water quality. Water board staff participated on several teams addressing debris removal (from the burned homes), erosion and runoff controls, and water quality monitoring.

We served on the Debris Removal Multi-Agency Committee ensuring that plans were designed and implemented to address the risks to water quality and public health from the debris remaining at the burned home sites. When a home burns, all contents are burned with it, including appliances, carpets, paints, pesticides, cleaning products, automobiles and building materials. The ash and debris remaining may contain toxic levels of chemicals and pollutants that pose risks to public health and safety, and to aquatic life and wildlife. Additionally, the debris itself constitutes a nuisance.

This group of dedicated local and state agency staff persons was instrumental in successfully removing all the debris

before the fall rains hit. Many logistics involving property owner approvals, insurance company involvement, health and safety concerns from debris and dead trees, disposal methods, and erosion control/site restoration were resolved by the committee members, including Lahontan Water Board staff. Debris and contaminated soil and ash associated with the burned home sites were removed, and building sites were protected from erosion by a single contractor overseen by El Dorado County and the state's Integrated Waste Management Agency staff.

Water board staff requested and received approval for \$380,000 from the state water board's Cleanup and Abatement Account funds. This money was used for water quality monitoring of Angora Creek and supported increased county and city road and drainage structure maintenance efforts, and an emergency water treatment system at Angora Creek proposed by El Dorado County. Staff coordinated with the California Tahoe Conservancy, U.S. Forest Service, El Dorado County, and U.S. Geological Survey to plan and coordinate water quality sampling in several locations to assess the impacts on Angora Creek. The Water Board contributed \$90,000 to an approximately \$350,000 interagency water quality monitoring program.

The U.S. Forest Service implemented its Burned Area Emergency Response Team (BAER) to evaluate the risks to water quality, soils and vegetation resources from the Angora Fire, which was primarily on lands it manages. The U.S. Natural Resource Conservation Service assessed erosion risks on private and county lands. Water board staff advised these teams, providing input to the field reports, risk ratings and corrective action plans. The BAER Team found that 76 percent of the soils within the burn area were hydrophobic (meaning that the soils may resist infiltrating or percolating rain water). If the burn area were not treated, stormwater runoff would carry ash and sediment to nearby streams and to Lake Tahoe. With Lahontan water board's support and assistance, Forest Service, El

Dorado County and city of South Lake Tahoe received resources from state and federal agencies to install runoff control measures such as basins, channels and sand bags, and to control erosion using mulches, seeding and other measures.

“The water board is committed to working with land managers and landowners in the Tahoe basin to facilitate fuel reduction activities while encouraging the restoration and improvement of watershed functions.”

– Lauri Kemper



We believe these efforts to control erosion and manage increased stormwater runoff prevented substantial amounts of sediment and ash from reaching streams and lakes. Additionally, the weather cooperated and delivered below normal precipitation following the fire, reducing the amount of runoff that would carry sediment and debris to streams. Data collected showed some minor increases in

sediment, nitrogen and phosphorus to Angora Creek, but the

impacts to water quality could have been much worse. The Water Board had provided El Dorado County funds to rent an emergency water filtration system that was stationed at the junction of Angora Creek and Lake Tahoe Boulevard to be operated during runoff periods, where the creek was anticipated to be highly turbid from runoff carrying ash, debris, and sediment. The treatment system was set up and ready to operate, but was not used because the turbidity didn't increase to the levels anticipated or to the point where treatment would be beneficial.

Following fire response and recovery, water board staff participated in the Bi-state Tahoe Basin Fire Commission. A water board member served on the commission and staff members participated in working groups to identify constraints to fuel reduction projects and to craft creative solutions and improvements to hasten the implementation of fuel reduction projects.

In May 2008, the governor of California issued a proclamation encouraging the water board to take expedited action to implement the recommendations of the Fire Commission or develop findings why any recommendation should not be implemented. Ten recommendations of the commission applied to the Lahontan water board. By March 2009, these recommendations had been implemented or otherwise addressed.

The water board adopted a revised regional waiver of waste discharge requirements for vegetation management activities, including fuel reduction projects. This waiver simplified or eliminated permitting application and reporting requirements for many "low threat to water quality" fuel reduction projects. For defensible space projects and for projects involving hand crews, no application, fee, or water board review is required. Other fuel reduction projects receive expedited review.

The 2009 waiver provides a table listing several types of fuel

reduction activities, including the use of mechanized equipment and burning that can be conducted in stream environment zones without separate authorizations from the water board. The water board must separately review and authorize other activities involving soil disturbance in stream environment zones. This review and authorization involves a 10-day public notice and can be approved by the executive officer. The 2009 waiver has been instrumental in protecting communities and hastening fuel reduction efforts throughout the Lahontan region.

The fire commission encouraged all public agencies and private property owners "to work together more effectively to implement fuel reduction projects designed and prioritized to minimize the risk of wildfires." Water board staff continues to participate in the Tahoe Basin Tahoe Fire Fuels Team meetings, coordinating and cooperating with fire districts, and state and federal agencies to ensure rapid implementation of the highest priority fuel reduction projects. Water board staff also provides input on the design of research projects to address areas of uncertainty related to potential impacts to water quality from more aggressive forest treatments, such as burning piles of slash in stream environment zones, using heavy equipment or innovative low ground pressure equipment on steep slopes and in stream zones.

In 2012, water board staff intends to bring a Basin Plan Amendment to the water board for its consideration to further clarify exemptions allowed for soil disturbance work within stream environment zones to facilitate tree and vegetation thinning. This year, water board staff will also be providing input into TRPA's Regional Plan updated to ensure agency consistency in the rules and regulations concerning fuel reduction and vegetation management activities.

The water board is committed to working with land managers and landowners in the Tahoe basin to facilitate fuel reduction activities while encouraging the restoration and improvement

of watershed functions.

The Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board is a California agency established to protect and restore water quality, including restoration of Lake Tahoe's transparency. The water board regulates discharges of pollutants to water quality.

Lauri Kemper is assistant executive officer of the California Regional Water Quality Control Board, Lahontan Region.

Pets continue to have final resting spot in forest

Where do Tahoe's animals go when they die?

For some, their remains are in the Angora burn area.

For decades before the 2007 fire, people had been burying their animals not far from the Gardner Mountain neighborhood. Although dogs are the primary pet of choice for those who live on the South Shore, other animals are buried in the forest.



Pet cemetery continues on in
Angora burn area.
Photos/Kathryn Reed

While this burial site on U.S. Forest Service land is technically illegal, the feds for now continue to allow this expression of grief, remembrance and closure to continue.

How long this pet cemetery has existed is not known. But the fire did not curtail the desire for humans to bury their four legged family members in the forest.

Some markers are new, while others are charred. Some are more elaborate than others. All are a symbol that life is fragile and that the dash is never long enough.

– *Kathryn Reed*

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Building with 'green' technology pays off for Angora residents

By Steve Rypins

On June 24, 2007, along with 253 other homes, our little one at the end of Iron Mountain Circle burned in the Angora Fire. I had been working on it steadily since fall 1999 when I bought it with my wife, Michelle. Things slowed down when our son, Clyde, was born in 2002. The house was my big project, and, though I did a few small construction projects (and a little knife sharpening) for others, I was really just a stay-at-home dad.



Angora Fire --
5 years later

I don't want to dwell on the story of the fire itself or the immediate aftermath. Suffice it to say that we got out, should have grabbed a few more things, and hoped for the best. As I left, I said the quickest of goodbyes to the house, but I hoped it would be OK. I wasn't really prepared to see the destruction of what we had created.

It didn't survive, of course. Though, amazingly, our area remained relatively intact. Along with a few other homes on the street, the large spec house under construction across the street was fine. In fact, the crew there was back at work,

painting drywall with a smoke-covering primer, while we were still sifting through our ashes. Luckily, however, many things survived. Our front landscape was more or less intact, as were the large Jeffery pines on three sides of us. Our back shed survived, and the firefighters had rolled my old work truck, a beat up 1973 Datsun, across the street after throwing many of my tools and our bikes into or toward it. On the side of the truck, a firefighter had penciled, "Tried to save it [meaning the house]. Saved your tools for work."



Steve and Michelle Rypins' rebuilt home in the Angora burn. Photo/Provided

Our house, in fact, represented the southeast corner of burned structures in the fire. With the nearby trees still standing, the fact that we knew the site and loved its sunny south-facing aspect and location at the end of a cul-de-sac) and given my small (perhaps dangerously so) bit of construction knowledge and experience, we really never considered not rebuilding.

One of our earliest meetings was with Bret Alexander and Leslie Ames of Tahoe Solar Designs whom we knew through the backcountry and telemark ski community. Sitting with them near the ruins of our old sunroom, we knew that solar would be a principal element of the design of the new house. Passive was the way to go, while maybe augmenting with a solar hot water system. The large trees that remained across the street meant that solar electric was unlikely to be cost-effective, as

those panels require continuous direct sunlight to justify their high initial price.

Less than a month after the fire, SiGBA – Sierra Green Building Association – had a symposium for fire victims at Lake Tahoe Community College on rebuilding green. At the Phoenix Sustainable Re-building Expo we met our architect, David Goldman of Environmental Architecture. Goldman had lived in South Lake for more than a decade (in the 1980s and '90s) but had moved away to further his education and experience in sustainable-energy efficient building. By what I can only call a stroke of fate, he had moved back to Tahoe a week before the fire.



Natural light fills the house.

Photo/Sunny

Awazuhara-Reed

Early consultation with our insurance company suggested the base rate on the house was very low, but luckily (and through no fault of our own) we had many elements of our coverage that would double in case of a total loss. We were still underinsured, but when the company decided to give us the full cash value of our personal possessions coverage with no

required inventory, it seemed that this was a sign that we should proceed and get our project going. Additionally, the county was doing what it could to help get fire victims building quickly. Expedited debris removal (somewhat controversial, I know) and allowing for plans to be submitted in phases ("foundation only" then full plans) also encouraged us to try and get a roof on before the big winter snows.

A plan was taking shape. The big thought was that running the project as an owner-builder (and being on site daily and helping in the construction where I could) would allow us to do something special at the site. And maybe, by creating a network of local builders (and architect Goldman), our project could show that building in a progressive, energy-efficient manner was a viable alternative to traditional construction.

It should be noted that I've hesitated thus far to use the term "green building". It must be recognized that the fire occurred very near the peak of the real estate bubble, when contractors (and homeowners) were promoting all sorts of ways of adding value to real estate. Here in South Lake, the common practice was to buy lots (like the one across from us), ideally with a building allocation, and then build for maximum size and luxury. In other areas (notably the Bay Area), more environmentally sensitive projects were getting popular. An emphasis on energy efficiency and sustainably derived building materials and (sometimes) smaller, more efficiently designed spaces, was promoted under the rubric of "green building". Of course, plenty of people (especially more traditional builders) noted the other connotation of "green building", suggesting that you'd better have plenty of it (i.e., money) if that was your goal and you chose to work with "green builders".

And, indeed, "green builders" do run the gamut. Some we worked with (whom I've mentioned) were fantastic. I cannot say enough about David Goldman. The collaborative process and the knowledge and experience he brought to the design were simply

outstanding. My hope is that by signing on with Goldman quickly, we helped others make the same choice and that they were equally pleased with his work. Thus far, he has designed four other (completed and occupied) buildings in the burn and is the process of designing a fifth. They may not be to everyone's taste, but I am sure that they are the most energy efficient structures in the area.



Rebuilding with green design features is paying off.
Photo/Sunny Awazuhara-Reed

The hallmarks of his design are beautiful passive solar homes with an appreciation of simple and clean modern design. Most of the homes have wall systems that employ polystyrene (Styrofoam) insulation with cementitious materials (concrete or stucco and plaster) used for structure and/or finishes. One of his biggest innovations was elongating homes along their east-west axis for maximum solar performance. In several cases (not ours), the houses are actually offset from the normal street orientation to maximize this idea. With shallow north-south dimensions and lots of windows along the south-facing sides, these homes (in our very sunny climate) more or less heat up by themselves. And in summer, when overheating is a huge problem, correct sizing of roof eaves for shading is an equally simple solution.

In our house, we have additional energy saving elements, such as a centrally placed laundry and mechanical room with masonry

walls to harvest the heat given off by our boiler and our domestic water tank (and the washer-dryer). Moreover, we have an architecturally impressive home with lots of glass out front (including two Trombe walls) and open ceilings and living spaces while still managing to keep the square footage down (1,900 total for the living space). The layout of the house is user-friendly, and, on sunny days at least, it heats (or cools) itself, depending on the season. We will never be able to fully repay Goldman for his great work here, but we did allow him to enter the design in the annual *Tahoe Quarterly* magazine's architectural contest, winning for Green Design in 2010.

Likewise, Alexander and Ames of Tahoe Solar Designs were fantastic. I installed our radiant floor heat (as I had in the previous house) and even though there is (currently) no direct connection between that system and our solar hot water system, they provided consultation and direct assistance when I needed it. In the end, we decided on three solar hot water panels that are installed on our garage roof (specifically designed at an ideal angle determined by Alexander, Ames and Goldman) with heat exchange loops to our domestic hot water and our hot tub. The initial cost of the installation was quite modest while the savings are continuous. In particular, I don't know if I could justify the expense of maintaining a huge pot of hot water (our hot tub) without the knowledge that it is reheated (or nearly so) on a daily basis for much of the year at zero cost.

These were not the only wonderful builders-suppliers and building professionals we worked with on the project. A couple of others, whom I consider more traditional builders (carpenters really) and with whom I particularly enjoyed working, side by side, deserve mention: Lenny Pratt and Eric Arnold.

On the other hand, however, we were extremely disappointed with several builders, building material providers and

building consultants, some of who used "green building" as part of their marketing efforts. Many, I believe, had their own pre-existing financial difficulties that "forced" them to charge large amounts of money for poor quality work. In the end, I think it was more a sign of the (desperate) times and the fact that the burn represented a chance (sometimes, perhaps a final one) at a decent payday. Others, I think, were just inexperienced and believed that construction work, particularly if it were "green" or otherwise innovative, deserved (very) high pay for (very) average or even shoddy output. Luckily, by being as involved as I was with the project, we were able to keep these relationships short and the costs of working with these characters relatively low.

One of my biggest disappointments was repeated delays caused by our original engineer. (In the end, we needed three engineers to complete the project, with a special commendation to the final one, Randy Vogelgesang, for negotiating on our behalf with county building to allow us to receive our certificate of occupancy.) Despite all the good work of the county in helping expedite the project, the original engineer (recommended by the company that provided our insulated concrete forms, our primary wall materials) blew off deadline after deadline and delayed our project by seven crucial weeks that first fall. Despite relatively late snows we failed to get the roof on the building until spring. Perhaps if we had been able to roof before the winter, our project might have convinced even more people rebuilding in the burn to try a "greener" approach. (Not to mention saving us a lot of time, money, and snow removal.)

In the end, our building experience, like so many others, was (and continues to be) as big and dramatic an experience as the fire itself. The one event changed our world in a single moment (or day) while the other shaped our views on the community and, of course, the place we now call home: our house. Neither is perfect, of course, but both offer a lot to

appreciate.

S. Tahoe dispatch sends units within seconds to Angora

CHP won't talk about Truckee dispatch investigation

By Kathryn Reed

Within 13 seconds of the first call that came into the South Lake Tahoe dispatch center at 2:09:13pm on June 24, 2007, fire units were alerted.



Angora Fire --
5 years later

Leona Allen doesn't know how many calls she received that first day. Working alone in the dispatch center on what was supposed to be a day off, what she does remember is the first call, her husband saying her 90-year-old dad was safely evacuated (his house later burned to the ground), the call not

on Day 1 from Barton Skilled Nursing asking her to help move her mom because they were evacuating and having to say she could not leave work – which she didn't leave for five days.

It wasn't long into that Sunday five years ago that Allen learned her house was also one of the 254 that was consumed by flames.

Much controversy has centered on whether the flames could have been doused faster had the California Highway Patrol dispatch in Truckee not told callers it was a control burn, which meant those dispatchers didn't dispatch resources.

An investigation followed, but the results are not known. Allen, who was involved with the investigation, doesn't even know the outcome. She said a Truckee dispatcher called her asking if there was a control burn, to which Allen said, "No."

Lake Tahoe News submitted a public records request to CHP seeking the report on the investigation. This is the state agency's written response, "The department is unable [to] provide you with the requested 'report from the investigation.' The investigative reports are personnel documents, prepared as inquiries into the performance of department dispatch personnel. Pursuant to the Public Records Act, disclosure is not required of records that are 'personnel, medical, or similar files, the disclosure of which would constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.' (Government Code Section 6254(c)). The mandatory, rather than voluntary, contribution of involved personnel creates a privacy interest in the information that courts will recognize; see, e.g., *California First Amendment Coalition v. Superior Court* (1998) 67 Cal.App.4th 159."

No one in Truckee or at the Sacramento headquarters would say if anyone was disciplined or if any policies were changed. Nor would anyone say why the dispatchers thought there was a control burn on the South Shore at that time.

All agencies on the South Shore that would have had the authority to ignite a prescribed fire say there were no controlled burns on June 24, 2007.

Every 911 call is logged into the computer aided dispatch system.



Residents to this day are still thanking firefighters for their efforts. Photo/LTN

Lake Tahoe News also sought the transcripts of the 911 calls from the Truckee office on June 24, 2007. CHP late last week said a recording could be provided. But FedEx was not able to get the disc to Tahoe by Saturday. When *LTN* receives it and if the audio is of publishable quality, we will release them.

Where a 911 call goes depends on the phone carrier and if the caller is on a cell or landline. In the past five years, more cell calls go to the area the caller is in instead of the nearest CHP dispatch.

El Dorado County Sheriff's Office is dispatched out of Placerville.

"They monitor us, so the deputies knew immediately and took on the evacuations. They just reacted. I didn't even have to call. It's why we all listen to each other," Allen told *Lake Tahoe News*. (Allen eventually left her dispatch job and now

works for Lake Valley Fire Protection District as the communications specialist.)

The South Tahoe office dispatches South Lake Tahoe police and fire, Lake Valley fire, and Fallen Leaf Lake fire.

The California Highway Patrol, Tahoe Douglas fire, Nevada Highway Patrol – they all came without being asked.

Allen's co-workers started showing up without being called in.

In addition to the mounting calls from people reporting what became known as the Angora Fire, during that first hour there were 10 emergency medical calls, including a structure fire that had nothing to do with Angora.



No confusing this plume of smoke with a control burn.

Photo/Lake Valley Fire

Two dispatchers had to evacuate, but immediately returned to work. Twelve-hour shifts were the norm for five days. Cots were set up. Food brought in.

“I remember going to the first briefing with the Forest Service on Day 2 and I was still in the same clothes as when I started,” Allen said.

It wasn't long before the fire was of such a magnitude that it

was no longer considered a local event.

“When a fire gets so large that the local dispatch center cannot handle it, it is turned over to an emergency communication center in Camino, Gardnerville or Minden,” Allen explained.

When the feds get involved – which was the case because most of the land belonged to the U.S. Forest Service – and emergency aid agreements are triggered, a dispatch center for that specific fire is created. This happened on that first day of Angora.

Still, the local calls were coming in to the South Lake Tahoe center. All sorts of calls came in – one man said he knew how to fly a helicopter better and that the guys in the air were doing it all wrong. People called wanting to know if they should evacuate.

A big flip chart was set up in the center so the dispatchers could record what callers were offering (things like hotel rooms, a place for horses) and who to contact. Red Cross was provided all this info.

The little details that are huge to people in the middle of a tragedy were being coordinated by these men and women, like finding a home for 12 displaced bunnies.

Firefighters would call in with addresses of houses gone. The dispatchers had to keep working knowing the homes of family and friends were nothing but ash.

Allen says the only thing she would have done differently regarding the fire was to have commended her dispatchers sooner.

“The quality of a good dispatcher is maintaining your composure and quality of work when you know the vortex of fire is just down the road,” Allen said.

Final installment of Angora Fire series coming Sunday

The fourth and final day of *Lake Tahoe News'* four-part series on Angora Fire – 5 years later will run June 24.



Angora Fire --
5 years later

Sunday's stories will be about life in dispatch that fateful day, words from Lahontan water board, former South Lake Tahoe Mayor Kathay Lovell's perspective and the pet cemetery.

If you missed the June 17 installment, here are links to those stories:

Snippets about Angora.

University study explores Tahoe's devastating fire.

South Tahoe PUD keeps water flowing.

Personal and professional angst at TRPA.

Landscape a challenge for survivors.

If you missed the June 10 installment, here are links to those stories:

Dealing with insurance companies.

Annual garden show focuses on Angora properties.

Cutbacks would challenge future wildland firefighting resources.

Importance of defensible space.

Supervisor Norma Santiago talks about El Dorado County.

If you missed the June 3 installment, here are links to those stories:

Susan Wood was the first reporter on the scene.

Forest Supervisor Nancy Gibson looks forward.

A garden grows from the ashes.

No arrests made.

State senator to host Angora forum.

Opinion: Lessons from Angora not forgotten, more work to

do

By Ted Gaines

Five years ago Sunday, the terrible Angora Fire swept through the Lake Tahoe Basin, destroying 254 homes, buildings, and changing lives and landscapes forever. While we will never be able to tame nature completely, public safety is government's highest priority and government leaders must always be improving their response to emergencies and natural disasters.

As a result of the fire, the governors of California and Nevada convened a Blue Ribbon Fire Commission to analyze the efforts to fight the Angora Fire and issued a set of recommendations to strengthen the region's ability to prevent and respond to these catastrophes.



Ted Gaines

It does not take a cynic to assume that many blue ribbon reports and commissions come to life as a result of politicians needing to “do something” in response to a crisis and then accomplish very little. As the event fades from public consciousness, the reports gather dust and the recommendations quietly fade away.

That absolutely cannot be the case when it comes to the Lake Tahoe region and fire safety. Tahoe's conditions – steep canyons, ample fuel, dry years such as in 2007, when the area received only 29 percent of normal precipitation, high winds – are a recipe for forest fire disaster. This year's conditions

are similar and the community, rightfully, is nervous heading into fire season.

For all these reasons, I initiated a non-partisan Senate Office of Research review of the Blue Ribbon Fire Commission recommendations to check their status. I am disappointed to issue a C-minus grade, but inspired to keep working for greater safety for the region.

Things are better than they were five years ago. Thanks to the successful implementation of report recommendations by the governors of California and Nevada, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board, U.S. Forest Service Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, CalFire and other stakeholders, we now have more effective forest management, better education, and better cooperation and communication among regional fire protection agencies, all of which should lessen the chance of catastrophic forest fires.

But there is still work to do and the area is still a tinderbox. Many of the recommendations have not been implemented or their status is unclear. We cannot leave them undone, and must continue to effectively implement the recommendations in progress, both for public safety and for the continued health of the Tahoe regional economy.

Lake Tahoe is Northern California's crown jewel and its economy is heavily dependent on tourism. The barren moonscape left behind after the fire is no match for the rich forest lands destroyed in the fire. Charred trees and driveways leading to empty lots where homes have not been rebuilt still dot the landscape. Changes in erosion threaten the Lake's legendary clarity that draws people from around the world. Tahoe has to be safe and beautiful to remain a first-class destination.

While we are all thankful for the protection firefighters provide, each of us must also take personal responsibility for

fire safety. It is critical that we exercise extreme caution with cigarettes, campfires, tools, engines or anything else that could possibly spark or otherwise cause a fire – which is how the Angora Fire began. When fires inevitably start, homeowners will always be the first line of defense. There is no substitute for defensible space around a home. Be vigilant and clear out brush at least 100 feet around your house, if possible. It is my hope that effective execution of the recommendations and smart individual actions mean we can observe an anniversary this year, and not a reenactment.

On this fifth anniversary, I also want to recognize the fantastic performance of the firefighters who ultimately controlled the Angora Fire. They are a battle tested group whose bravery and excellence is unmatched around the country. By implementing the recommendations of the Blue Ribbon Fire Commission, governments are helping to ensure that their lives are not needlessly put at risk.

Ted Gaines represents the 1st Senate District, which includes all or parts of El Dorado, Placer, Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Lassen, Modoc, Mono, Nevada, Plumas, Sacramento and Sierra counties.

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Note: State Sen. Ted Gaines is hosting a forum about the Angora Fire on June 25, 6-8pm at South Tahoe High School.

Report: Replanting in Angora

on CTC property a success

By Kathryn Reed

With some areas of the Angora burn having lost 100 percent of its trees, human assistance was needed to restore what a human was ultimately responsible for destroying.

Replanting of mostly Jeffery pines was what the California Tahoe Conservancy chose. The state agency owns about 90 acres of the nearly 3,100 acres that burned in the June 2007 fire. Of those, 40 acres had nothing left.



Mastication of trees like what the USFS did is also the approach the CTC took on some of its land in the Angora burn area. Photo/LTN file

Susie Kocher with the UC Cooperative Extension gave an update June 20 to the California Tahoe Conservancy board about the 40 acres that endured the high intensity fire.

Kocher explained how the loss was much greater than what a natural fire would have left behind. The Angora Fire whipped through the North Upper Truckee area on June 24 five years ago after an illegal campfire was not properly extinguished at Seneca Pond. Ultimately, it destroyed 254 houses.

While the forest is showing resiliency, Kocher informed the board that it would be 60 years before the forest returns to what the average person would call a forest. For now, the seedlings that were planted are just a few inches tall.

About 130 trees have been planted per acre. In addition to the Jeffery, sugar pines are the other primary species. Some incense cedar has been planted, but they are not thriving. This is because they prefer shade and right now it's direct sunlight in the burn.

Kocher has been studying the recovery process on the CTC acreage since the first analysis of the burn was conducted in July 2007. A report was released this year about the restoration, with Wednesday's meeting at Inn by the Lake being the first time the board heard the information.

"Where there has not been planting, there are very (few) trees coming back," Kocher told the board.

Larry Sevison, chairman of the CTC board and Placer County supervisor, questioned whether the 86 tons of fuel load per acre was going to create a fire hazard.

Kocher said even though mulch from the masticated trees along with limbs are on the forest floor, the alternative would be leave the charred trees standing. Those would eventually fall, be in larger pieces and create more of a fire threat.

"Though the fire risk cannot be calculated at this time as computer models do not accurately predict wildfire behavior in masticated fuels, it is generally accepted that masticated fuels burn with lower flame lengths than natural fuels and are more difficult to ignite because compaction impedes the fire's access to oxygen," according to the preliminary assessment report of restoring CTC lands post-Angora that was prepared by Kocher and Daylin Wade of the CTC.

Kocher told the board when it comes to leaving the mulch,

“It’s a trade off between erosion control and fire risk, but I can’t tell you how much.”

Norma Santiago, CTC board member and El Dorado County supervisor, questioned the threat of the white thorn growing in the burn area.

While Kocher called it a “fire adaptive species”, she said there is less of the prickly bush in the treated areas.

Overall, Kocher said the treatments applied to the Conservancy land have been effective. She said the ultimate goal of creating a healthy forest is on track five years after the flames whipped through the area.

TRPA: Angora creates personal and professional challenges

By Joanne Marchetta

I was working at the kitchen table in the middle of a languid Sunday afternoon in June when I heard Nancy call to me, “Hey, come look at this.” We climbed to our second floor and both took a look from our upper deck. We could see a small white wisp of smoke far off in the distance toward Angora Ridge, and remarked to one another, “Hmm, that looks like a fire.” I

recall the memory fleeting across my consciousness of the eerie experience of the Oakland Hills fire from years back when I lived in the Bay Area. And I immediately came back to the present and became aware of the day's weather in Tahoe – unusually high winds and hot.



Angora Fire --
5 years later

“Not good,” I thought to myself. I felt my stomach pinch with uneasiness, but I went back inside hoping for the best despite an edge of disquiet. Only five minutes later, just as I settled back into my task, I again heard Nancy call, “You really need to come outside and look at this.”

This time I heard the concern and emphasis in her voice and it left me a little startled. I hurried outside.

As we climbed up on the boulders across the street from our house, that white wisp in the distance we saw only minutes ago had transformed into a now pervasive, ominous black cloud hanging low over distant neighborhoods and Angora Creek drainage. As we stood there, other neighbors too began to gather at the top of the boulders to gain a vantage point. We looked at one another and chattered nervously.

One remarked, “I’ve lived here 20 years; this is serious.”

Another climbed down hurriedly off the boulders and jogged toward the fire station only three doors down on the corner. Minutes later, she returned saying, “Yes, it’s been reported and they’re on it. It’s under control.” We could take no real

comfort from the report because of the dissonance of the scene we were living.

Now as we watched, we could make out bright red flames through the black smoke. It was clearly a fire and it was spreading fast. It was obviously in the tree canopy and the wind was whipping the speed of the spread. The neighbors looked at one another a last time and agreed, "We need to get out of here now."



One of Joanne Marchetta's first priorities was to make sure her dog Zin got out of the fire safely. Photo/Joy Strotz

As we scrambled off the boulders, I took one last look that said it all. From that high vantage, we could no longer see through the wall of black smoke, but we could see the orange red flames of the crown fire on Clear View Circle only a block and a half away. The fire was headed straight toward us and was nearly on us.

It had been less than 20 minutes since we first saw the small white wisp in the distance.

We scrambled off the boulders and sprinted to the house. Now my heart was racing. We threw open the door, looked at one another with that twinge of adrenaline charged panic and succinctly agreed, "Get the dog and the fire box." Beyond that, I recall grabbing one arm-full of clothes out of the downstairs bedroom closet, another arm-full from the chest of drawers and scrambled into the garage. I threw what I had grabbed into the back seat of the car. As I had passed by the kitchen window, I could see that the roof of the house behind ours had caught fire and recall yelling, "We need to get out now, the house behind us is burning!"

Nancy made sure the dog was safely secured in the car. Then we each stood for a brief moment in the garage with one car parked behind the other. Nancy said, "Should we take one car." I said "No, we need to take both; I think it will be all that we have left after this."

We quickly arranged to meet at the Raley's parking lot to regroup. And as we pulled away from the house, we joined a procession of cars headed toward the Y, moving slowly but moving steadily away.

Only minutes later we rendezvoused at the Y shopping center, feeling bewildered and anxious. Noticeable were the burning and charred embers floating on the winds of that afternoon, and the smoke stinging our eyes and airways. We spoke briefly to neighbors again to trade cell phone numbers to make sure we could reach one another.

I said, "We need to get out of the basin, it's still spreading."

Not sure exactly where we could go, we knew we couldn't stay stationary and again headed east on 50 trying to put distance between us and the fire. We stopped briefly at a point familiar at least to me, the TRPA parking lot, and regrouped again. Even at that distance, embers swirled in the air around

us, carried miles from where we had last seen the fire. From there, we called friends in Gardnerville, asking if we could head their way. "Of course," they said. "We are in Placerville and headed home now."

They knew nothing at that point of the day's event except they could see smoke even in Placerville, so they knew there was fire somewhere. We hung up the phone and dropped down Kingsbury out of the basin.

That evening, looking from the valley back toward the 10,000 foot mountains of the Lake Tahoe Basin, black smoke poured relentlessly out above the peaks into the upper atmosphere. We talked with our friends, but I don't really recall anything we discussed. We were glued to local TV news reports. All I recall is the image of a certain TV clip replaying again and again that showed our back yard on fire, the dead and down logs in the back of the lot were burning. We couldn't see the house in the blackness of the background of the video footage, but every time it played, I kept straining to try to see through to the image of the house. It lent no answers.

I haven't owned or watched TV in 20 years for exactly this reason – it disassociates truth from experience. I didn't know what to think, and ended up thinking the worst based on the TV clips, but honestly I could barely think a lucid thought at all. I felt numb and appreciative that we had good friends to be with in that moment.

I spoke briefly at about 9pm with Norma Santiago, El Dorado County supervisor and one of my TRPA board members. She knew I lived in the county, and was kind enough to call to find out my house number and location. She said she would let me know if she found out anything definite. In the middle of the night, my cell phone rang.

"Your house is standing."

I made her repeat it, both the house number and the result.

Again she said, "The best information we have is that your house is standing."

I thanked her and cried just to release pure anxiety.

We stayed at MontBleu for 10 days afterward: with the dog in our hotel room, living out of the trunk of the car where we had flung the random belongings we grabbed without even a moment to think, and wearing the eclectic mix of clothes we had grabbed in the flurry to flee.

We were lucky. We were among those able to return to a house intact. We had defensible space, and that may have helped to save us from devastation. Even so, the fire seemed capricious. The winds had been so fierce and squirrely and the fire moved so fast, it was hard to say why one and not another house burned. The house with the cedar shake roof just across Lake Tahoe Boulevard withstood the siege while almost all of the houses farther up Boulder Mountain burned. It turned out that the fire claimed only two houses on our street – both on the corner and directly across from the Lake Valley Fire Station – nothing but cinders left of them. The fire melted the siding off a third house and then moved on.

The experience left me with an indelible truth. We are blessed to live in a forest and to call it home. With that privilege comes a special responsibility to live lightly, responsibly, and as special stewards of this magical and spectacularly beautiful place we are so fortunate to call home and haven.

I thank the firefighters for risking their lives to protect us and I thank the community for coming together afterward to help those who lost so much. I am proud to call Tahoe my home and my reverence for the place and the people has only grown since the humbling experience of nature's indomitable force that we were so powerless to reckon on that night of June 24, 2007.

Joanne Marchetta is executive director of the Tahoe Regional

Planning Agency and was chief counsel for TRPA at the time of the Angora Fire.