

# Vacancy signs up and down Highway 50

By Kathryn Reed

Coming off the worst November on record, lodging properties on the South Shore are hoping the holiday season will resurrect their businesses.

Jerry Bindel said many properties have dropped their prices to lure tourists to Lake Tahoe. But he isn't sure this brings new people to town, but said instead it is more likely to get the people who are on the fence to make a decision.



Business owners hope more tourists fill hotel rooms.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

As general manager of Lakeland Village, president of the South Lake Tahoe Lodging Association, member of the Tourism Improvement District and board member of Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, Bindel has his pulse on what is going on in town.

But one only need look at all the vacancy signs and empty parking lots to know the crowds have yet to arrive. With this being the last day before winter break for many schools

throughout the country, the headlights are likely to be streaming toward Tahoe in the days to come.

The trend of last-minute bookings is continuing. Fortunately, the snow has the phones ringing. This time last year it was dry roads and dirt on the slopes.

Bindel said the number of bookings for the two-week holiday period is decent, as are holiday periods in 2010, but otherwise it's lean.

"If you are by the (Heavenly) gondola, the numbers are better (than this time last year). If you're not, you're lucky if you are doing the same as last year," Bindel said.

Marketing dollars are needed to drive business to Lake Tahoe. Starting today lodging guests in South Tahoe will pay a \$1 or \$1.50 more per night. The assessment by the Tourism Improvement District was OK'd by the City Council earlier this month.

It means hotel-motel guests will pay a \$3 assessment and time share-property management operators collect \$4.50 a night.

For the 2008-09 fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, the TID collected \$1.2 million. With the new rates, the TID expects to generate \$1.8 million in 2009-10.

South Lake Tahoe councilmembers a couple years ago stopped allocating funds for marketing, despite tourism being the primary business in town. This is why the lodging association decided it needed to take matters into its own hands.

When heads are not in beds, it affects nearly every other business in town " no one is in town to gamble, get a massage, eat out, buy products or ski.

The money is used for marketing. Ten percent of what is collected goes directly to events. Bindel has long been a proponent of bringing more events to town " ones locals and

tourists would be interested in and possibly midweek when things are slow.

The irony is the transient occupancy tax the city collects from hotels is one of the three main revenue sources for the general fund. Sales tax is another. Without tourists, those coffers are bare.

In years past the city has allocated more than \$300,000 a year to the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority. No more. Instead it spent about that much money in the last year fighting to get rid of two employees who won their right to stay employed.

One has to wonder if the money had been spent on marketing the town, if the economy would be better and unemployment not close to 20 percent.