

Storm downs trees, power lines; shelter open in S. Tahoe

Updated 6:45pm: In anticipation of the low temperatures this evening and people still without power, South Lake Tahoe officials in conjunction with the American Red Cross has opened a warming shelter at the South Lake Tahoe Recreation Center located at 1180 Rufus Allen Blvd.

Power is still off in the Al Tahoe neighborhood of South Lake Tahoe, with the power company not saying when lights will be on. Sierra Pacific Power said they are still looking for the cause as of 6:06pm. Between 2,500-3,000 customers on the South Shore are still without power. Traffic lights are flashing red and some are completely out in that area. Power is back on in Meyers and on the North Shore. Left turn lanes are the big issue on Highway 50 tonight through South Tahoe because they are not plowed and it's causing a back up in travel lanes. Spooner Summit is slow going, but navigable.

By Kathryn Reed

Chain saws were buzzing in the predawn hours of this normally quiet South Shore neighborhood. A tree had gone through a house.

The wet, heavy snow that fell overnight is wreaking havoc with power lines and tree branches throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin.

South Lake Tahoe firefighters ran more than 20 calls between 2-8am. Battalion Chief Ray Zachau said four trees went through houses in that time. A secondary power line was across five driveways on South Shore Drive.



Keith Cooney looks at the tree leaning on and in his South Lake Tahoe home. Photo/Kathryn Reed

“Then the primary came down right after that. It’s a mess with power lines,” Zachau said. “The wet snow is breaking trees.”

Keith Cooney, who lives in the Tahoe Island area of South Lake Tahoe, was abruptly awoken at 3:45am by a loud crash that shook the entire house.

“I knew what it was when it happened,” Cooney said looking at the tree branch coming through the ceiling of his garage.

The entire Jeffery pine in his back yard is uprooted and leaning against the house, taking out part of the chimney, creating a 9-foot gash in the kitchen ceiling and holes in the garage.

Firefighters cleared his driveway of the debris in the dark of the early morning so he could get his vehicle out.

Cooney and his black Lab were not hurt in the ordeal – just shaken up a bit. Cooney is a survivor – his house burned in the 2007 Angora Fire, he was laid off from his job and is still out of work, and his family barely survived Hurricane Katrina.

"I'm just very grateful to have a guardian angel," Cooney said of surviving the latest trauma without a scratch.

He had planned to go to his friend's restaurant in Meyers, but the power is out.

Sierra Pacific Power crews came up Tuesday night to start working on getting power back on. Three lines remained out at the Meyers substation, affecting close to 10,000 customers. The company does not have an estimate when the power will be back on.

Power started going out at 11pm Dec. 28 in the Stateline and Ski Run areas. That was back online quickly.

On the North Shore, initially three lines were down between Kings Beach and Tahoe City. Half of the 3,300 customers had power back by 8am, with the rest expected later this morning.

There is no estimated time when the power for the 1,500 customers in the dark on the West Shore south of Tahoe City will have lights again.

The roads are a mess. Zachau said a five-car crash on Lake Tahoe Boulevard at Park Avenue this morning sent one person to the hospital.

"The roads are in horrible shape. They are really slippery," Zachau said.

The Nevada Highway Patrol cleared a two-vehicle accident at the Bourne Curve on the South Shore this morning that resulted in minor injuries. A non-injury accident was being worked on the Mount Rose Highway as well.

"Slow down and don't go out if you don't have to," is the recommendation of Trooper Chuck Allen.

The ride into Carson City from South Tahoe was a bit treacherous this morning.

“A few people couldn’t get out of connecting streets and are stuck in snow banks,” commuter Sue Wood said. “It’s pretty bad. It is the blowing wind that makes it bad.”

About a foot of snow on the South Shore at lake level fell overnight, with 2 feet being reported on Tahoe Mountain with no plows in sight at 9:30am.

The National Weather Service in Reno has reports of 2 to 3 feet in the higher elevations.

Most of the day will be sunny, but snow showers are expected to return this afternoon.

“The air is dropping down from Alaska so that will keep the high temperature for Thursday and Friday below freezing, probably in the 20s for a high,” meteorologist Brian Brong with the Weather Service said.

Overnight lows may be below zero. Brong doesn’t anticipate any records to break, but it may come close the record of 5 below for South Lake Tahoe.

For the entire Lake Tahoe Basin, Brong said the snowpack is 220 percent of normal for this time of year.

The next chance of significant snow for Lake Tahoe may come New Year’s Day.

All El Dorado County offices South Lake Tahoe opened late – 10 today. For additional information, call the snow closure hotline at (530) 573.3050.

The Tahoe Queen and M.S. Dixie II cruises are canceled today. Zephyr Cove snowmobiling is sold out.

South Lake Tahoe Parks and Recreation Department suggests people think about using the pool and gym as things to do once the shoveling is done.

The ice rink is closed because it doesn't have power. In the Al Tahoe area of South Tahoe the senior center is also without power, flashlights were used at the main post office to sort mail, and visiting hours at the jail were canceled because it is being run on by generators.