

State forcing South Tahoe drug task force to disband

By Kathryn Reed

Drug dealers and users may have something to celebrate with the New Year. For everyone else it might not be such good news that the South Lake El Dorado Narcotics Enforcement Team is disbanding.



SLEDNET is one of the 34 drug task forces being forced to shutdown because of state budget cuts. The remaining 18 operations in the state rely solely on federal money.

While the local agency has been around since 1988, the joint task forces of federal, state and local law enforcement have been part of the Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement since 1976. This is the oldest state narcotics bureau in the country, having started in 1927.

On Dec. 31, 170 agents employed by California will work their last day. This is part of Gov. Jerry Brown's quest to cut \$71 million from the Department of Justice budget over the next two years.

"If you take away the threat of being caught in this community, it is going to be disastrous," Jeff Catchings, SLEDNET commander, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

"It would not be good. I cannot say that enough," he said of eliminating the narcotics task force.

Catchings works for the state, but is one of the agents with enough longevity to be spared receiving a pink slip. Between

now and the end of the year he is working with local law enforcement and the state to keep SLEDNET functioning in some manner.

In addition to Catchings, officers from South Lake Tahoe Police Department, El Dorado County Sheriff's Department and California Highway Patrol are part of SLEDNET.

What the state brings to the table are resources and money. The state has a greater ability to gather intelligence, especially with drug trafficking, than local jurisdictions have.

"We are trying hard and looking at every avenue we can to keep this task force intact," Sheriff John D'Agostini told *Lake Tahoe News*. "All the typical results you see in a drug ridden community, you would see that increase in the basin (without SLEDNET)."

All the local players are looking at operating SLEDNET – just without the state's oversight. No money comes out of the local agencies' general funds for the drug team – it's grants and drug forfeiture money that pays for things. What the state picked up was Catchings' salary and equipment.

Police Chief Brian Uhler said he and D'Agostini are trying to meet with Attorney General Kamala Harris to keep the asset forfeiture money in town to go solely for SLEDNET. That meeting, though, has not been arranged.

It might not matter if the meeting happens because Harris has been outspoken in not agreeing with the governor's decision, saying she wants more control in how to make the cuts to her department. But she is not getting her way.

If the state doesn't help resolve the issue, Uhler wants the police and sheriff's departments to pick up the commander's salary. But that will take an act of the City Council and Board of Supervisors to reallocate funds.

Uhler said the drug problem on the South Shore is huge, and that it would be worse without SLEDNET. He points to the heroin busts in town in the last year as examples of why SLEDNET must stay intact.

Catchings said marijuana is another significant problem here.

Highway 50 and the airport are conduits for drug traffickers.

“The FAA is constantly tracking tail numbers. A lot of things happen behind the scenes that people don’t realize,” Catchings said.