

# New Year's Eve not an easy task for cops



New Year's Eve revelers take over Highway 50 near the state line. Photos/Kathryn Reed

**By Kathryn Reed**

STATELINE – For those who came to the South Shore to party in the streets, the experience may have been a bit anticlimactic on New Year's Eve.

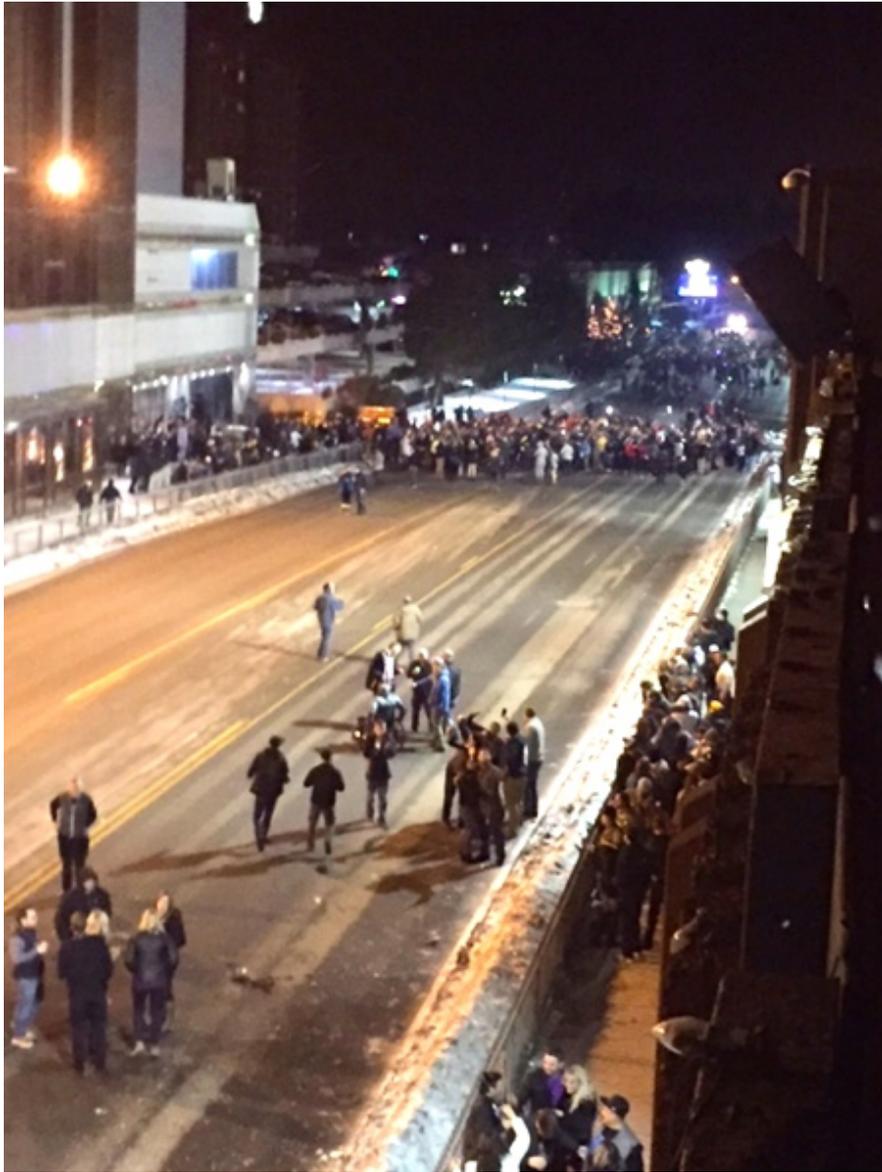
It took coaxing from less than a handful of instigators to get the crowds that had been pouring out of the Stateline casinos into the sidewalks to actually celebrate in the middle of Highway 50. This was three minutes before midnight. Law enforcement officers were joking among themselves whether this was going to be the first year since 1976 that the highway

wasn't closed.

That didn't come to be. But it was one of the shortest closures. The single-digit temperatures undoubtedly had people seeking shelter moments after ringing in the New Year. Plus, there weren't that many people. The whole street wasn't even full. A few people chanted "USA" and then a few counted down from 10 to the New Year.

Douglas County Sheriff Ron Pierini said only a handful of deputies were working on that first New Year's Eve when the highway was closed by people – not an official act by deputies. The loop road as it is today didn't exist. People were trying to overturn the cars that got stuck in the sea of humans.

"It really turned into crap," is how Pierini described 1977.



Crowds are minimal in Stateline for New Year's Eve 2015.

A year later the loop road was built. That allowed officers to deliberately shutdown Highway 50 and still have traffic flow.

"In 1978 there were 2,000 people and we thought that was a lot of people. And we closed the road," Pierini told *Lake Tahoe News* from the command post on Dec. 31.

The post isn't in the same place each year. The non-descript location includes a table with men in uniform. Radios are their lifeline to knowing what is going on outside.

Briefings started earlier in the day and were conducted on the hour as more manpower came on board. New Year's Eve is one of

those all-hands-on-deck events.

The approach to New Year's Eve has evolved to where it is a coordinated effort between DCSO, South Lake Tahoe Police, El Dorado County Sheriff's Office, California Highway Patrol, Nevada Highway Patrol, South Lake Tahoe Fire Department, Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District, and Alcohol and Beverage Control.

"We prepare for the worst case scenario," South Lake Tahoe Police Chief Brian Uhler told *Lake Tahoe News*. That includes mass casualties. "We want to be prepared for anything."

He said it's normal after a major incident anywhere in the world that the No. 1 problem was lack of communication. The guys in Tahoe aren't going to let that be true here.

New this year is Lake Tahoe Hard Rock had music out front. A disc jockey was spinning tunes from the balcony as a small crowd danced and others stayed warm by the fire pits.

Officers knew with this being the first year for McP's Pub to be open at its new, larger location it might become a gathering place for revelers. This year, though, the crowds didn't materialize there.

Driving through Stateline before midnight Uhler noticed the berms on the Nevada side. Those chunks of snow would feel like being pelted by rocks if someone starts to throw them. This was one reason some of the officers were in riot gear – it's all about being prepared for the unexpected.

Officers were out on foot patrol in groups. Others were in plain clothes mixing in with the masses.

"It's good to have eyes and ears among the crowd," Uhler said.

A coordinated tactical approach is taken to ensure the safety of celebrants, innocent bystanders and officers.

There's a place for officers on each side of the state line to get warm, grab some coffee and food.



Officers stand guard before Highway 50 is reopened shortly after the New Year.

The rowdiness, even on warmer nights, has subsided through the years. A zero tolerance of glass on the street has helped. Casinos serve drinks in plastic containers. Setting up multiple locations to book people saves on manpower being taken away from ground zero.

“The last couple of years the crowds as the casino do their thing and then go back in. It’s an older group of people,” Uhler said. “They are not causing us near the trouble as the past.”

In the 1990s the crowds peaked at 80,000. Last year Pierini estimates it was closer to 30,000. If there were that many in town last night, most stayed inside the casinos. Only a few

thousand braved the cold this year.

SnowGlobe is given a ton of credit with helping take people away from the casino corridor.

But SnowGlobe is still a major issue, especially for South Lake Tahoe officers. The three-day event at the community ball field at Lake Tahoe Community College culminates New Year's Eve. This was the first year people crashed the music festival by knocking down temporary fencing. The main stage ended sooner than the two smaller ones – another first – to allow for a staggered exit. More buses and more security this year helped law enforcement not have to deal with as much.

As the concertgoers are bused back to the transit center most then walk to their hotels in the Stateline area. Law enforcement calls this the “zombie walk” because all aren't in great shape.

But the night isn't over for officers after the road closure and SnowGlobe are done with. People tend to keep partying. Officers keep dealing with issues long into the morning of New Year's Day.