

S. Tahoe DUI checkpoint keeps drivers in line



A DUI checkpoint March 17 in South Lake Tahoe snared people driving on a suspended license. Photos/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

Lights were swirling and signs were posted about what was going on up ahead. There was even an opportunity to bail and take another route. But no one ever said those breaking the law are the smartest individuals.

During the St. Patrick's Day DUI checkpoint in South Lake Tahoe thousands of vehicles rolled by. No one was intoxicated and most had valid driver's licenses.

Officers arrested three people on charges of driving on a suspended license.

"We can see drunk drivers before they are through the

checkpoint,” South Lake Tahoe police Sgt. Travis Cabral told *Lake Tahoe News* as he watched the stream of vehicles inch by. “They get fixated on the lights and tend to swerve. They are trying to miss anything on the road.”



Officer Chris Mahoney asks to see the driver's license.

Twice a year local officers conduct a driving under the influence and driver's license checkpoint – usually at Fourth of July and St. Patrick's Day because they are big drinking days. The money to do these comes from the Office of Traffic Safety. The grant covers overtime and little things like the new lights that sit atop the safety cones. No longer are flares needed; which is better for the environment, plus batteries for the lights last longer and the lights can be programmed to flash in different patterns.

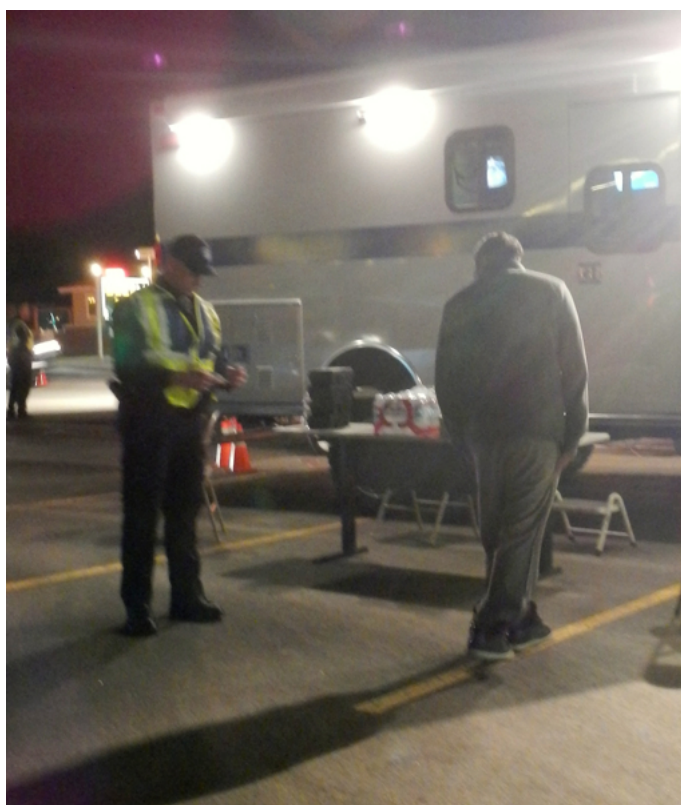
“It shows people they need to be safe. It's a deterrent,” Cabral said of the purpose of the checkpoint.

Thursday's checkpoint was near the Bijou Center from 7pm-2am.

The majority of people were friendly, even thanking the officers for being out there and telling them to be safe.

Officers in turn were giving residents and visitors a chance to see they aren't such bad guys. And while the job at hand is serious, a detective joked with drivers to lighten the mood, asking if any bodies were in the vehicle.

One visitor from Florida asked what there is to do in town since they don't ski. One talks about being here for March Madness and how his bets are paying off so far. Plenty of people from out of town drove through – from Mississippi, Oklahoma, Alabama, Hawaii, New York and Wisconsin.



Officer Chris Mahoney leads a man through a series of sobriety tests.

No one got special treatment. A Tahoe Transportation District bus driver was questioned, people in other work vehicles had licenses examined, all ages, genders and races were part of the checkpoint.

When people were detained their license was checked by the dispatchers in the mobile command post. Those with suspended licenses had their vehicles towed and now face even more charges than what led them to be in that state.

A local guy had beer on his breath and was told to pull into the parking lot. Officer Chris Mahoney pocketed the man's keys, had him get out of the car and then started asking him a string of questions – medical issues, where he's been, what he had to drink. Two 24-ounce Buds about 3:30pm and a cheeseburger and chicken soup at noon. He and a friend were on their way to get tacos.

He's asked to follow a pen horizontally and vertically. His eyes don't jerk – good news for him.

Then he has to walk heel to toe with his hands at his side, counting to nine. With his feet together, he is told to lift one straight ahead and count out loud until Mahoney says stop.

Sgt. Shannon Laney explained to *LTN* these tasks are all about testing the ability to multitask just like drivers do on the road – drive, change the radio station, talk to whoever is in the car, know what other drivers are doing. They are called “divided attention tests”.

While there is no pass or fail to these tests per se, the man does them as though he consumed no alcohol.

At the end he voluntarily agrees to a breath test. It's not one that could be used as evidence – those are administered at booking. He blew a zero.

He and his friend were able to go have those tacos.



Not everyone drove home.

“The checkpoint was a success. The amount of people we were able to screen who were not intoxicated shows they are aware of what they are doing, they had watched their alcohol intake,” Cabral said.

He also pointed out how a number of cabs as well as Uber drivers came through; which demonstrated people had found a designated driver.

While the checkpoint did not lead to any DUI arrests, there were three DUI related accidents March 17 that led to two arrests. One person struck a vehicle near Ski Run Liquor, fled on foot and is still wanted. Another accident was on Pine Hill Road and the other by Raley’s at Stateline, which resulted in the drivers being arrested.