

Mother Nature messing with Tahoe's economy



Mount Tallac is a reminder it really is winter in Lake Tahoe. Photo/LTN

By Kathryn Reed

The economy in the Lake Tahoe Basin is in the toilet from many, on par for some, and better than average for others.

The phone recording at Adventure Mountain Lake Tahoe is from Jan. 2. It says the sledding hill atop Echo Summit is “closed because of low snow conditions.” This is at 7,382 feet, while lake level is 6,200 feet.

The sledding hill in the lot next to MontBleu in Stateline has been able to keep making snow with the cold nights. The lines of people wanting to play in the white stuff is remarkable. It's easy, convenient and they don't care it is manmade.

While skiing and snowboarding dominate the reason to travel to Tahoe this time of year, plenty of people come just to play in the white stuff.

“It's surprising the number of people who have never seen snow or played in snow,” Jerry Bindel, who operates Lakeland

Village in South Lake Tahoe, said. "We have a significant number of guests here for snow playing more than going up the mountain. Some go up the mountain because that is where the snow is. During the holidays (Heavenly) saw sightseeing passes at the gondola selling out by noon every day."

Lodging numbers for this season on the North Shore are about what they were last year when all it did was snow – or so it seemed.

"Reports are that the holidays were strong and this period, early January, is usually slower, but the numbers look strong for this weekend's occupancy," Cindy Gustafson, CEO of North Lake Tahoe Resort Association, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "The most recent occupancy forecast numbers I have for the winter season based on reservations on the books as of Nov. 30 for the November to April period is just over 1 percent ahead as compared to the same period last year. So while not much of a total increase, the business activity based on room reservations looks pretty comparative to last year."

For the South Shore lodging community, advance bookings are saving the season.

"Due to last year's great snows, we have seen some good advance group bookings for the winter months, and currently most properties are reporting pacing ahead of last year," Bindel, who is on the South Lake Tahoe Lodging Association board, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Open roads are helping as well. Of course we all want some of the white stuff on the ground at lake level, just enough to allow for our guests to have some snow play while keeping the roads open and clear. The mountains can get all the big dumps of feet of snow – that would be the perfect mix."

But not everyone is full for the weekend. Local hoteliers were on social media Thursday touting room availability.

Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, which is responsible for

marketing the South Shore, is not changing its message because there are heads in beds.

“We haven’t changed our winter strategy at this point. The board may want to have that discussion, but we’re hopeful that this (weather) pattern changes and we see some accumulation, like (this week) at the higher elevations,” LTVA Executive Director Carol Chaplin told *Lake Tahoe News*.

No ski resort in the greater Lake Tahoe area is fully open – and we’re heading into what is usually one of the busier three-day weekends.

This is bad news for those who’ve been laid off or were never put on the payroll. It’s not good for the resorts’ bottom lines or the secondary businesses that rely on skiers/snowboarders rolling into town.

“We are adapting to the amount of snow that Mother Nature has given us,” Thea Hardy with Sierra-at-Tahoe told *Lake Tahoe News*. “We welcome the holiday crowds and want to be clear on our offering of limited terrain. We ask that all closure signs are obeyed in an effort of providing a safe sliding on snow experience for all.”

All of the resorts have been receiving snow while it’s been raining at the lake. Still, some of the lower slopes at some resorts were rained upon or it was wet, heavy snow – well beyond the typical Sierra cement.

Early season natural snow and snowmaking (plus grooming) have made for better conditions that one would expect from looking at lake level. At lake level it looks more like fall than winter.

However, as was mentioned in the **snow survey** last week, there is a lot of winter still to be had, with now through March when the most amount of snow usually falls.

One industry that does well when the slopes are more hardpack than powder is healthcare with so many people needing to go to the emergency room. And with more people crowded onto fewer runs, it means more opportunity to run into someone else.

Other businesses are also doing well. People are looking to do something besides play in the snow – like ride bikes, get on the lake, and eat out more.

For now, with temperatures supposed to be in the 50s through the weekend in Tahoe, winter seems more like what the calendar says and not what it's like stepping outside. When one can play tennis in Tahoe in January, you know the weather isn't normal.