

Luther Pass improvements a boon for cyclists

By Kathryn Reed



Four-foot wide shoulders “at a minimum” is what will be installed along Highway 89 starting at the intersection of Highway 50 in El Dorado County and extending to the Alpine County line.

“It will provide safety for cyclists. It will give them more room. Part of this project is to encourage cycling,” said Rochelle Jenkins, Caltrans spokeswoman.

The \$25 million undertaking is the only Caltrans project in the Lake Tahoe Basin to receive federal stimulus money.

Preliminary work started this month. The bulk of the construction will be between April 2010 and fall 2011.

It is considered an environmental improvement project – meaning reducing the amount of sediment and runoff from the highway that reaches tributaries of Lake Tahoe. Caltrans did not have projections for how much sediment is likely to be contained.

Curb and gutter systems will be installed throughout the roadway to help divert the runoff.

“We are going to rehabilitate and construct a new drainage facility. We are going to put in traps and drains. Those are cleaned every year,” Jenkins explained.

Rock energy dissipaters, which help to prevent ruts in the road from developing, are part of the equation, too.

The other project in El Dorado County to garner federal dollars is Highway 49 improvements. The \$7.5 million project that is under way should be completed next fall. It goes from Highway 50 in Placerville toward Amador County.

Clarity lacking in why council wants to ax city attorney

By Kathryn Reed

It was a 3-2 vote in closed session earlier this month by the South Lake Tahoe City Council that put City Attorney Jacqueline Mittelstadt on non-disciplinary paid leave.

“You inquired about the hearing. All I can really say at this point is that I don’t feel my job in Tahoe will be complete until the truth is told,” Mittelstadt said Thursday.

Sources have told Lake Tahoe News that Mittelstadt has requested a formal hearing before the council. Mittelstadt did not elaborate about the hearing in her voicemail.

To this day none of the councilmembers is saying why he or she is dissatisfied with Mittelstadt. Mittelstadt and Assistant (now interim) City Attorney Patrick Enright came on board in June.

Councilman Hal Cole doesn’t return calls. Councilman Bruce Grego does, but connections were not made in time for

publication. Councilwoman Kathay Lovell won't talk about things that happen in closed session.

Mayor Jerry Birdwell sought legal opinion about disclosing information about the vote.

"My understanding is anytime a vote is made in closed session, it should be made public. I think to err on the side of good government, that anytime a vote is made in closed session it should be made public," Birdwell said.

He said he voted against beginning the process to terminate Mittelstadt. Councilman Bill Crawford said he was the other vote against the proposal.

Sources tied to the city tell Lake Tahoe News that a number of city employees have filed complaints with the Employer's Resource Management Association – known as ERMA complaints.

If an employee has filed an ERMA complaint, it must be resolved before that employee could be fired.

It has not been decided if the council does fire Mittelstadt, if a second attorney would be hired.

For now, Mittelstadt is being paid more than \$10,000 a month with taxpayer money to do nothing per the council's request – the same council which hired her on a 5-0 vote – and the same council that won't tell the public why this is happening.

The next City Council meeting is Oct. 6, so it's too soon to know what might be on that closed session agenda.

Thirst for liquor licenses in Placer County

Mark Anderson, Sacramento Business Journal

The imbalance in supply and demand for liquor licenses in Placer County continues leaning toward the demand side " but it's getting better.

California Alcohol Beverage Control recently held its 2009 lottery for new licenses. There are still more people seeking them than there are new licenses available in Placer County.

The state gets \$12,000 for a newly minted liquor license. If a restaurant or store wants to get one from an existing business, the price is quite a bit more.

Read the whole story

Quarterly loss widens at Heavenly's parent company

Publisher's Note: *Vail Resorts owns Heavenly Mountain Resort on the South Shore of Lake Tahoe.*

Mark Harden, Denver Business Journal

Vail Resorts Inc. Thursday posted a loss of \$38.7 million for the most recent quarter, deeper than the \$11.1 million loss for the same quarter a year earlier, as real estate revenue sharply declined.

It posted a profit of \$48.95 million for the fiscal year, down

from \$102.9 million the previous year, also with real estate a big factor.

Read the whole story

State forcing Kindertown to close



Maria Barrows-Crist, right, receives one of many hugs of support Wednesday night.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

Tears were flowing and words of anger uttered as more than a 100 parents stood in the play yard at Kindertown on Wednesday night to hear owner-director Maria Barrows-Crist explain that the state plans to close the facility Oct. 15.

It means 130 children who attend the South Lake Tahoe day-care

center will be displaced and the 20 employees will be without a job.

None of the parents at the 30-minute meeting said anything negative about the center. Most looked dumbstruck.

“I am sorry this slander has hit your employees too,” Ian Baker told Barrows-Crist afterward. “I think it’s all fabrication. I come here all the time and everyone is coherent.”

Baker was referencing the state’s charges that employees have been at work under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

Rebecca Westmore, administrative law judge, handed down her decision Aug. 17 in a 28-page document. However, it was just last week that Barrows-Crist found out her state license was going to be revoked. It came in the form of a condolence letter from Choices from Children about the impending closure.

The directive also says Barrows-Crist, who has run the 36-year-old facility since 1978, must not work with children for two years.

Two of the key witnesses for the state are former Kindertown employees who had been fired by Barrows-Crist.

Barrows-Crist’s attorney on Monday applied for a stay and reconsideration of the decision.

“The judge said I didn’t show remorse. Both of the girls who complained cried,” Barrows-Crist, 57, said of the May 14-15 and July 20 hearings in Sacramento.

Judge’s ruling

In Westmore’s decision she cites Kindertown giving a peanut product to a child who is allergic to substance. The judge ruled Barrows-Crist tried to “minimize the gravity of the situation.”

To the charge of removing a child without parental consent, Barrows-Crist said the child was taken to her daughter's home – who at the time was an employee of Kindertown – because no one picked the child up, nor were they reachable and the center was closed. The judge said that showed poor judgment.

Accusations against Dee Dee Crist, the owner's daughter, relate to her allegedly being under the influence of alcohol or other drugs while working. The judge ruled Crist should never be permitted to work with children again.

In an incident from 2003, the judge believed Diane Brown, a licensing program analyst, over Barrows-Crist when it came to whether a child was burned by hot soup.

"I find the testimony of LPA Whitmire to be credible. Respondent Barrows-Crist's testimony was an obvious attempt to minimize the misconduct, and reflects a continued pattern of denial related to her management and operation of the Kindertown facilities," Judge Westmore wrote.

Lake Tahoe News can only surmise the judge got the LPA's name wrong. LPA Whitmire is referenced in other testimony, but not this particular item.

Part of Kindertown's license revocation includes 2.5 pages about Miss Marcia, aka Marcia Sarosik, not being fingerprinted, but teaching a class at the preschool-day care-infant center.

The fence has been 3-feet high for 30 years. Suddenly, Barrows-Crist was reprimanded for it not being 4-feet high.

The judge's decision goes on to say Barrows-Crist retaliated against former employees. The judge sided with the former employees.

Parents react

After Barrows-Crist read a one-page letter last night to

parents, many of whom had little ones with them, one after another said they'd do everything they could to keep Kindertown open. Some talked of staging a protest march in the coming days.

"You can't find anything like this in Tahoe," Stephanie Yuzbick said as she held one of her two daughters who attend Kindertown. "I know what she has done for this community. This needs to stay open."

One person shouted, "If we wanted to be somewhere else, we probably would be."

Other parents worried it might mean needing one spouse to quit their job to be able to care for a toddler.

"I've noticed Ryan is ahead of kids who don't come here," John Cocores said of his son who is about to turn 3.

Tiffany Reid said her 2-year-old daughter is thriving at Kindertown, and that Barrows-Crist and the staff are incredible.

Laura Barber with the South Lake Tahoe Women's Center said Barrows-Crist has always allowed their clients access to her facilities at a reduced rate.

Future for kids

If Kindertown is not able to stay open under Barrows-Crist's leadership or possibly by an employee, it means losing the \$386,000 the state Department of Education gives the center to pay for low-income families to have child care.

The El Dorado County Office of Education has said it will open a center at the old Al Tahoe Elementary School if Kindertown closes. It would be eligible to receive those state dollars.

More than 6,000 kids have attended Kindertown. The center cares for those ages 6 weeks to 10 years.

Barton initiates furlough weeks

By Kathryn Reed



Barton Health employees are being told this week they must take three weeks off — one in October, one in November and one in December.

The 25 percent cut in pay comes on the heels of 43 employees being laid off earlier this year. At that time it left the medical conglomerate with 946 employees.

Reached late Wednesday night, Barton public relations head Monica Sciuto did not have the number of full-time employees who will be affected by the latest cutbacks. She did say it does not affect people who administer patient care.

Doctors are not employees of Barton, so therefore were never going to be part of the latest round of cuts. Some nurses will, however, be taking three weeks of furlough for the last quarter of 2009.

Sciuto said the numbers are still being crunched as to what the exact savings will be. She found out about the forced leave on Wednesday morning.

She said a number of the employees have accrued paid time off so they can use those hours to offset the forced leave. This

would essentially mean no reduction in pay for some, but no paid vacation or sick time down the road either.

It will be newer employees and those without accrued time off who will feel the financial hit the most, as well as couples who work for Barton.

The furlough hits CEO John Williams and the administrative team, the PR department â€” anyone who doesnâ€™t work directly with patients.

Some employees and community members question why Williams, who makes close to a half million dollars a year, has not taken a pay cut. More than a dozen Barton workers make more than \$100,000 a year (not including benefits or bonuses) â€” but salaries have not been tweaked.

With the next fiscal year beginning Jan. 1, itâ€™s not known if the 25 percent reduction in work will be enough to keep the hospital financially healthy.

Besides the number of patients continuing to decline, the number of uninsured seeking medical care keeps escalating. Sciuto said in August the patient census was down 13 percent from a year ago and September is expected to be that bad or worse.

This time last year the hospital had accrued \$1.8 million in charity care â€” people who donâ€™t pay their bill. In 2009, that figure is \$3.6 million.

Sciuto said people accessing Barton services should not notice a difference. In fact the community clinic has added Saturday hours to accommodate the number of people needing it.

Asked if the health care system regretted buying all the medical practices in the last couple of years, Sciuto said, â€œThat is a question better answered by John (Williams), but I have not heard any regrets.â€

As for consolidating services like the multiple physical therapy practices, Sciuto could see the subject being broached in the future, but has not heard talk of it.

It will be up to department managers to schedule the days off so it runs smoothly “ meaning employees might work half days, take Fridays off or some other creative way to account for working one less week a month for three months.

LTUSD, LTCC candidates share their vision



LTUSD, LTCC
candidates'
forum
Wednesday.

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – About 70 people listened Wednesday to the seven education candidates share their views about why they should be elected Nov. 3.

Even though all are running for California seats, the meeting was at Harveys in Nevada.

Nothing earth shattering was shared by the candidates. Each had 2 minutes for an opening statement and concluded with a 1-minute wrap-up. The incumbents touted experience and continuity, while the newcomers professed to bring change and new ideas to the respective boards.

Seated in the order they will appear on the ballot were Lake Tahoe Community College board of trustee candidates Kerry David, Molly Blann, Mary Jane Sanchez and Roberta Mason. (Sanchez is the challenger.) For Lake Tahoe Unified School District board of education the candidates are Judy Cefalu (challenger), Duane Wallace and Wendy David.

All were asked: If the state were to return half of the money it has taken away, what would they do with it?

Wendy David would spend it on restoring programs, which in turn would mean being able to hire people.

Wallace would ensure class-size reduction kept going, hire teachers and aides, and have programs brought back.

Cefalu would make sure help is available in the classroom for teachers, and expand the bus routes.

Mason would add back services like tutoring, and restore the Wilderness Program to be a signature program like originally intended.

Sanchez would like to create A Young at Heart program. She (repeatedly) pointed people to her website for information about her desires on most issues.

Blann would use the money to restore classes that have been cut and continue with international outreach.

Kerry David would like to rehire people whose jobs have been cut and maintain adequate salaries.

The challengers were asked how many meetings they've

attended. Cefalu said all since declaring her candidacy. Sanchez said several.

When asked what the role of a board member is, all said to make policy and then each added a bit more.

The event was sponsored by Soroptimist International of South Lake Tahoe.

To vote in the Nov. 3 election, El Dorado County residents must be registered by Oct. 19. To register, go to http://www.sos.ca.gov/elections/elections_vr.htm.

LTCC internship program growing

By Kathryn Reed



Looking at the big picture is what Tracy Owen Chapman does when it comes to placing Lake Tahoe Community College interns.

It's all about asking them where they think they'll be in five or 10 years. It's keeping track of industry trends. It's about creating matches that are relevant and not creating busy work.

Chapman is in her second year of being the internship and work experience coordinator at the South Lake Tahoe two-year college.

On Tuesday she updated the board of trustees about her program.

Her goal is to create a seamless transition from school to career for students.

Chapman's research shows communication skills the No. 1 attribute employers are looking for, followed by the ability to edit video and be adept at technology.

About half of the interns are eventually offered paid positions with the company. She pointed to the U.S. Forest Service being willing to take students on as unpaid interns, and then hiring them down the road if it works out and the need is there.

Internships are all over the board. One person went to Lakeland Village. Instead of spending 12 weeks at one job, the person had six two-week intervals to get a feel for that aspect of the hospitality industry.

Casinos have said yes. The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and Tahoe Daily Tribune are other entities to embrace interns.

"I think the whole community is out there waiting for me to knock on their door," Chapman said.

Marketing is her background; and marketing this program is her goal.

For those interested in having an LTCC intern, contact Chapman at (530) 541.4660, ext. 294 or owenchapman@ltcc.edu.

Angora embezzler sentenced

By Kathryn Reed

Sixteen months — that’s the amount of time John Hellman will spend behind bars for embezzling \$16,574 from the Red Cross that had been donated to assist the 2007 Angora Fire survivors.

Hellman, 49, pleaded no contest to the multiple charges. He was sentenced in El Dorado County Superior Court in Placerville on Wednesday.

“What he did was awful, but I feel that was a fair sentence,” said Keith Cooney, one of the Angora survivors who was affected by Hellman’s criminal activity.

All of the clients Hellman stole from were given their just due by the Red Cross.

Part of Hellman’s sentence is that he must pay back what he stole. The judge also granted the Red Cross’s request to have Hellman pay the \$4,266 the agency has incurred in investigating the case.

The Red Cross was at Wednesday’s hearing, where representatives talked about the three significant impacts Hellman had on their operation.

“He committed a crime against the Tahoe Angora Fire victims, assistance that was diverted away from their needs and into John’s pocket,” Dawn Lindblom, Red Cross CEO in Sacramento, reiterated after the hearing. “The second impact was to the donor’s who gave to the Red Cross and trusted us. And the third crime was against the American Red Cross by impacting the reputation and mission of the Red Cross.”

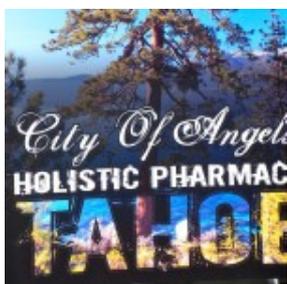
Lindblom said her agency believes justice was served.

Hellman worked out of the Community Disaster Resource Center that was established after the fire of June 24, 2007, destroyed 254 houses on the outskirts of South Lake Tahoe.

In court documents, Hellman stole the money between Sept. 16, 2008, and Dec. 20, 2008, in increments ranging from \$840 to \$2,682.

It was through a routine audit after the Red Cross left Tahoe that the financial wrongdoing was discovered.

Ordinance for pot clubs extinguished



Ordinance for pot clubs goes up in smoke.

By Kathryn Reed

A meeting set for yesterday at 10am never occurred. Apparently South Lake Tahoe Police Chief Terry Daniels took it upon himself to schedule the meeting with the three pot dispensaries in town without the knowledge or consent of the City Council.

Daniels said the meeting was like any other when an ordinance or revision to one is being drafted “ get the people who will be affected by the rules involved early on.

The problem is higher ups never gave him the direction to draft such legislation.

The police department has oversight over a few types of businesses in town. Massage is one of them. Every therapist working in the city must be fingerprinted and carry a SLTPD issued card. But no one has said medicinal marijuana should come under the department’s prevue.

Most occupations don’t have this added layer of oversight.

When City Manager Dave Jinkens was asked by LTN about the pot club meeting, he knew nothing of it. Jinkens and Finance Director Christine Vuletich were copied on the letter from Daniels to the pot clubs.

Jinkens had been out of town on city business when the letter was written.

“When the chief of police realized that no direction to proceed with an ordinance had been given by the City Council, he decided to cancel the meeting,” Jinkens said in an email to Lake Tahoe News after getting up-to-speed on the matter. “The decision not to move forward with the meeting and discussion is prudent and proper under these circumstances. No further action will be taken on this matter until specific direction to do so is given by the City Council and the matter is not on the calendar to be brought back.”

The meeting was canceled less than 24 hours before it was set to begin.

The council last took up the legal cannabis issue on July 7. No action was taken, though a slew of supporters of the medicinal pot clubs spoke that day.

Several issues remain unresolved because federal and state laws contradict each other regarding medicinal marijuana. The city has opted to not issue business licenses to the dispensaries in town. This means they are not paying their share of taxes.

“The federal and state governments need to get their act together to make our job easier on these sensitive matters at the local level,” Jinkens said.