

Snippets about Lake Tahoe



- Royal Gorge cross country ski area is closed because of flooding.
 - Rediscovering Gershwin takes place Feb. 21 and Feb. 23 at the Pioneer Center for Performing Arts in Reno.
 - Here at this week's roadwork schedules for El Dorado-Tahoe and Sierra from Caltrans.
 - Sierra Snowkite Center at Soda Springs is back in business after two winters of no snow.
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Lawsuit over CalFire fee progressing

The challenge to California's fire fee is moving forward.

Sacramento Superior Court Judge Shelleyanne W.L. Chang last month granted the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers' Association's motion to notice a class of litigants who want to abolish the fee being assessed on people living in state responsibility areas. Those in Meyers are paying the annual CalFire fee.

Everyone in these areas where the fee is mandated will be part of the class-action lawsuit unless they opt out by March 7.

The plaintiffs also want the fees paid to date to be refunded.

The state believes the fee is constitutional.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

All schools open, expect slippery roads

Douglas County School District is on a one-hour delay today because of the snow.

Washoe County schools are on a two-hour delay.

Roads are slick. For chain requirements and other details about the highways, click on the state icons on the Home page of *Lake Tahoe News*.

For those going into the backcountry on Feb. 1, the danger level is moderate, according to the Sierra Avalanche Center.

High temperatures for the next two days are not expected to reach freezing. There is a slight chance of snow in the basin on Tuesday and Wednesday.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Tahoe Tails – Adoptable Pets in South Lake Tahoe



Chester

Chester is a mastiff mix puppy who is 6 months old.

He has been at the shelter for two months. He is the only dog in the shelter right now who is quiet even when all the other dogs are barking. He just sits silently at the door waiting for his walk.

Chester loves other dogs, but we would prefer to adopt him to a home without children under 12, as he is a mouthy puppy. In addition, Chester is going to be a very large adult, and will require the commitment of an experienced owner, plus extensive training and socialization to be a well-behaved pet.

Chester is neutered, microchipped, tested for heart worm, and vaccinated. He is at the El Dorado County Animal Services shelter in Meyers, along with many other dogs and cats who are waiting for their new homes. Go to the Tahoe animal shelter's Facebook page to see photos and descriptions of all pets at the shelter.

Call 530.573.7925 for directions, hours, and other information on adopting a pet. For spay-neuter assistance for South Tahoe residents, go **online**.

Scientist reveals Mars' secrets to Tahoe crowd



Dawn Sumner talks Jan. 28 about Curiosity's mission on Mars. Photo/Denise Haerr

By Kathryn Reed

INCLINE VILLAGE – Looking a bit like the desert of southern Utah, the landscape seems familiar. But this is another world.

Curiosity, a six-wheeled robot about the size of a car, is

providing scientists with new insight about the composition of Mars as well as photographs of Earth's neighbor.

"There are layers of rock that are a lot like the Grand Canyon. We can read it like a history book of the environment," Dawn Sumner explained during a talk at Sierra Nevada College on Jan. 28.

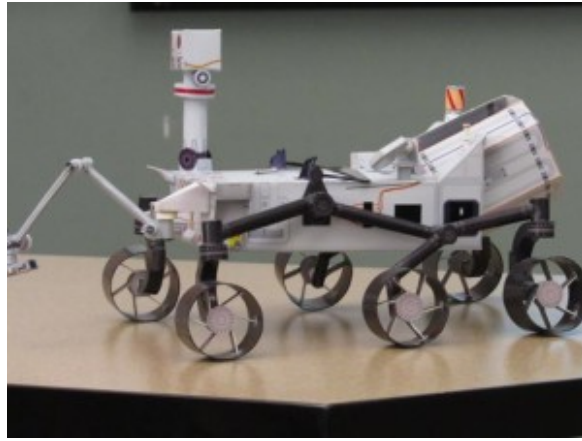
Sumner is a professor at UC Davis and a member of NASA's Mars Science Laboratory. Her team is handling the rover named Curiosity that landed on Mars on Aug. 5, 2012, after being launched Nov. 26, 2011. It is estimated there is enough power to last another six years. The robot is 10-feet long, 9-feet wide and 7-feet tall. It weighs 1,982 pounds.

It is equipped with a ton of software that allows scientists to program various tests as new data is acquired. The robot is able to drill into rocks, vaporize them, siphon dirt, use a laser and travel across rugged terrain. The mineral composition, chemistry and isotopes are part of the data collection.

The main mission is to see if the planet can support small life forms and potentially humans.

Gale Crater near Mount Sharp is where Curiosity is spending its time.

A challenge for those on Earth – it is an international group working on Curiosity – is the time difference. Days on Mars are 39 minutes longer than on Earth, so that is a consideration for when work is done and data is transmitted.



A replica of the rover Curiosity. Photo/Denise Haerr

For now, scientists have seen no evidence of carbon.

Organics have been located in samples that Curiosity has collected. Round pebbles like what are found in a stream are a new discovery.

“The only way to get rounding is in a stream or waves washing on a beach,” Sumner explained. This is how scientists know there was once water on this planet.

An alluvial fan has been mapped, which also suggests water flowed there.

“It flowed from the rim of the crater to just east of our landing site,” Sumner said.

Identifying the various rocks is a goal of the mission. Gypsum is one identifiable mineral. Measuring the force that it takes to drill into the rocks is one way to tell how hard or soft the rock is.

Mars, which is known as the red planet, gets this coloring because of oxidation. Where there is oxidation organic compounds are not likely to be found. However, Curiosity has been able to brush away some of the dirt on rocks. A gray color is unveiled. This, according to Sumner, means it is not

oxidized.

“There are some rocks that we think are part of a delta system,” Sumner said.

Right now Curiosity is on the edge of black sand dunes that are actively moving. Sumner described them as pristine.

This week the goal is to sample the mud next to the sand dunes.

Plenty of questions remain to be answered. Being able to study the matter in labs on Earth instead of having the rover run tests and send back data would be more ideal and precise.

More missions are planned for Mars, with a launch date set for 2018 for another rover to study earthquakes on this planet. In 2020 a rover will launch that is designed to bring back samples. The first trip to Mars was the Viking in 1976.

Opinion: EDC CAO contract may be illegal

By Larry Weitzman

Some habits are hard to change as El Dorado County government has the habit of appearing to violate the law. One of the most recent transgressions was what appears to be the illegal hiring of interim CAO Larry T. Combs.

Combs is a CalPERS annuitant, meaning he has retired from a government job which has its pension system run by CalPERS and from whom Combs receives 93 percent of his retirement pay which approaches \$196,000 annually just from CalPERS. Combs

also receives \$14,000 annually from a non-CalPERS source related to a two-year stint as Merced County CAO.



Larry Weitzman

As a result of a recent campaign against double dipping, a practice where a government employee would retire, collect his/her generous pension and then hire on to another high paying government job, collecting a \$150K from their retirement and then another \$200K from their new salary. If that were still allowed, a CAO like Combs would be making \$400K.

Over the last several years the Legislature and governor have modified and passed new legislation to prevent double dipping by making the hiring of retired CalPERS “annuitants” into new jobs while collecting their pensions a no-no by making such a move a “reinstatement” which stops their current pension and requires a repayment from the annuitant and also requires their new employer make CalPERS retirement contributions on their new job. However, the legislation made a few exceptions, where annuitants such as Combs could work for a public agency and still collect his pensions under very strict conditions and rules mostly set forth in two Government Code sections, 21221 (h) and 21224. And this is where it gets sticky, mostly for Combs, but for the county as well.

It appears the county and Combs failed to follow the law and regulations in hiring Combs. Perhaps they didn’t know the law, but in my research of this matter, I found legal memos, published papers and articles by law firm after law firm

explaining the rules, including a law firm that the county has hired many times in employment issues and has paid tens of thousands of dollars, Liebert Cassidy Whitmore. All of these firms specialize in government matters and would be considered experts as our county believes of Liebert Cassidy and Whitmore.

There are at least two significant legal violations regarding the Combs contract, either of which would require Combs to return to CalPERS all pension money paid to Combs which by this month will amount to about \$120,000 because CalPERS would cause Combs to be reinstated as of the date of the contract which in this case is June 29, 2015. Additionally, EDC would be required to make pension contributions as a result of Combs' employment.

Government Code Section 21221 (h) sub paragraph 2) says that before EDC can hire an interim CAO who is a CalPERS annuitant (retired, collecting a CalPERS pension), an open recruitment for a permanent replacement must have been initiated prior to hiring the interim employee (Combs). CalPERS even provides sample resolutions for use by CalPERS members (EDC) to use when hiring CalPERS annuitants containing the following language "Whereas, an appointment under Government Code section 21221 (h) requires an active, publically posted recruitment for a permanent replacement:" It's a requirement to prevent double dipping. And this is where it gets disgusting.

EDC did not have such of a recruitment going on at the time Combs' contract became effective. In fact, it wasn't until Dec. 15, 2015, nearly six months after Combs started working for EDC, that the BOS authorized Combs to enter into a contract with a recruitment firm for a permanent CAO. (Item 49, Legistar No. 15-1450). The legistar number reflects this was the first attempt at a recruitment for a permanent CAO.

Code section 21221(h) also requires the contract to be on an

interim basis and must have an end date. CalPERS in its Circular Letter 200-002-14 writes as to the mandated limited duration appointment (such as Combs): "A retiree can be appointed only once to the position, thus the employment terms must specify an end date and cannot be amended to extend the appointment term." In the Legislative Counsel's Digest for these legislative bills it was deemed such appointments were "to be of a limited duration." Unfortunately for the county and Combs the executed contract does not have an end date. While it claims to be terminable at will, there is no end date, therefore making the contract indefinite and not even close to a limited duration contract as required by the code. A second clear violation.

Pursuant to the code sections designed to prevent double dipping, Combs should be reinstated and a demand should be made by CalPERS for the return of all pension dollars paid by CalPERS to Combs from Combs. On top of that CalPERS should and most likely will demand from our county a CalPERS contribution because of the salary paid to Combs.

Our former county counsel demonstrated time and again her incompetence with this contract. The specific terms and conditions of what's required for an employment contract with a CalPERS annuitant to not be considered double dipping is well known. There are over a half a dozen public law firms that have recently published papers on this subject. Furthermore, Combs after being in government for 30 years or more, mostly at high levels, should have known the rules like he knows his birth date.

A CalPERS investigation has been commenced.

"In a government of laws, the existence of the government will be imperiled if it fails to observe the law scrupulously. Our government is the potent, the omnipresent teacher. For good or for ill, it teaches the whole people by example. Crime is contagious. If the government becomes a lawbreaker, it breeds

contempt for the law; it invites every man to become a law unto himself; it invites anarchy.” – Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis, 1916-39.

Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.

Doc: We're lucky if we get to be old

By Tara Bahrapour, Washington Post

“I have a confession to make,” Bill Thomas announced several months ago at a conference on aging in Oregon. “I am an old man.”

“No, you're not!” an audience member called out. It was meant, no doubt, as a compliment: Despite his gray-streaked beard and crow's feet, the 56-year-old geriatrician-cum-thespian crackles with high-octane energy. And isn't that what we all want to hear as we age? That we don't look old? That we seem younger than we are?

It's not what Thomas wants to hear. After more than 20 years of trying to make life better for old people, he believes the correct message is the opposite: That we are lucky if we get to grow old. That there is a “third” phase of life beyond adulthood that can be as rich as either of the phases that came before.

The Harvard Medical School-trained physician and professor at the University of Maryland Baltimore County's Erickson School of Aging is known for sparking explosive new ideas in elder care. He is particularly well-known for pioneering “The Eden

Alternative” – a radical system of humanizing nursing homes by introducing live animals and plants.

Read the whole story

Unraveling the ties of altitude, oxygen and lung cancer

By George Johnson, New York Times

Epidemiologists have long been puzzled by a strange pattern in their data: People living at higher altitudes appear less likely to get lung cancer.

Associations like these can be notoriously misleading. Slice and dice the profusion of data, and there is no end to the coincidences that can arise.

A paper published last year in the journal PeerJ plumbed the question to new depths and arrived at an intriguing explanation. The higher you live, the thinner the air, so maybe oxygen is a cause of lung cancer.

Oxygen cannot compete with cigarettes, of course, but the study suggests that if everyone in the United States moved to the alpine heights of San Juan County, Colo. (population: 700), there would be 65,496 fewer cases of lung cancer each year.

Read the whole story

Nostalgia-craving baby boomers driving tourism

By Jon Marcus, Boston Globe

ALBUQUERQUE – If there's a place that symbolizes pre-interstate America, it's Route 66, built to connect Chicago with Los Angeles, which John Steinbeck dubbed "the mother road."

From Depression-era migrants to returning GIs to family vacationers, motorists on Route 66 rolled past Vegas-style neon hovering over low-rise diners, motor courts, and gas stations in designs so distinctive they gave rise to the term "roadside architecture." They're also known as pueblo-deco, art nouveau lite, and, simply, kitsch.

Now these structures – many of them long vacant – are reopening as trendy hotels, restaurants, microbreweries, and bars along a part of Route 66 through Albuquerque called EDo, or East Downtown, that fill with patrons far too young to remember the onetime allure of the highway as a frontier of the freedom of the open road.

It's a small but significant example of the way nostalgia increasingly is driving travel, as visitors seek to recapture their own childhoods – or at least a world they recall as, or assume to have been, simpler, safer, and an escape from the conformity of modern-day chain hotels and restaurants.

Read the whole story

Police: Botched drug deal led to killing

South Lake Tahoe police detectives believe a drug deal gone wrong led to Saturday night's shooting death of Dennis Michael Wright Jr.

The 40-year-old from Amador County was shot at least once in the chest on Jan. 30 at about 7:45pm in the parking lot of the Beverly Lodge. He died shortly thereafter at Barton Memorial Hospital.

Officers said Wright and his friend Kendra Ghiorso, 45, of Amador County were in town to deliver at least 100 pounds of marijuana.

"We recovered 100 pounds," police Lt. Brian Williams told *Lake Tahoe News*. How much may have been sold prior to the shooting or if any was stolen by the suspects is unknown at this time.

Ghiorso told officers several men came and went during their interaction. One of the buyers reportedly discharged a handgun multiple times in the area of the motel parking lot, striking several vehicles.

"Ghiorso was struck violently in the head with an unidentified solid object, and believes she was possibly pistol-whipped. She sustained a significant, though non-life threatening, head injury," officers said in a press release.

There is no identifying description of the suspects, other than they are men, white and black, and in their 20s. A description of the vehicle the suspects left in is not available.

Inside the vehicle driven by Wright and Ghiorso detectives found two handguns and ammunition.

Anyone who may have information is asked to call 530.542.6100 or Secret Witness at 530.541.6800.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*