Truckee controlled burn becomes uncontrolled fire

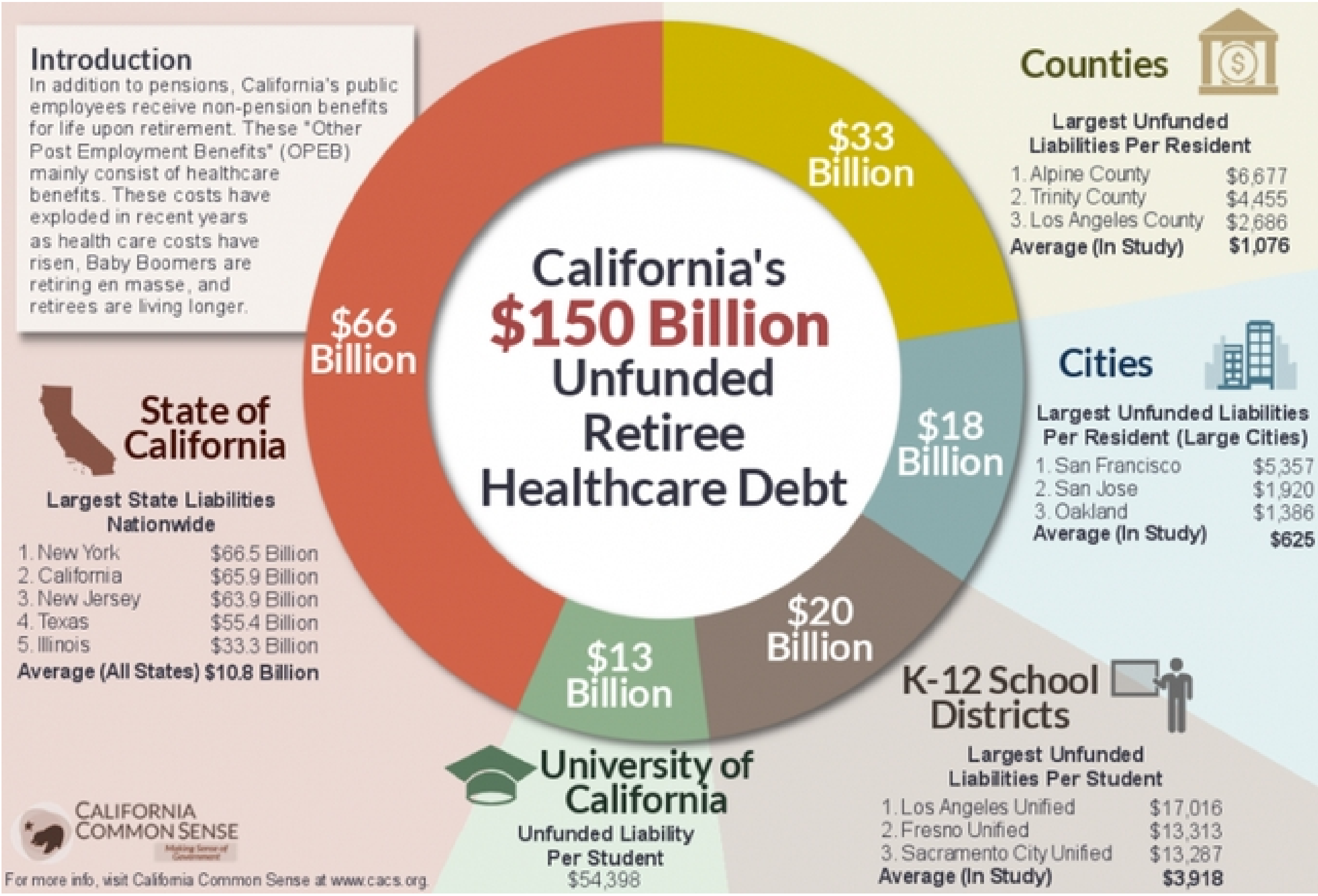
What started as a controlled burn in Truckee on Monday caused some concern when it got out of control.

Truckee firefighters along with U.S. Forest Service, Calfire, and Northstar Fire responded to a controlled burn that got away with the approaching winds. High winds threatened one structure after fanning the flames. No structures were lost or damaged and the April 13 fire was limited to 2 acres, according to fire officials on scene.

“Please be vigilant in watching the weather changes while conducting any burning activities. Severe drought conditions will limit burning this spring,” Truckee fire officials said in a statement.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

S. Lake Tahoe’s midyear budget shows promise



Unfunded health care liabilities are not unique to South Lake Tahoe. Graphic/California Common Sense

By Kathryn Reed

Two budgets in one year. That is essentially what South Lake Tahoe will have.

While the City Council will go over the midyear budget a week from today, the reality is that what will be presented by staff is more like a brand new budget. This is because timing of events did not allow inclusion of the employee contracts when the 2014-15 budget was adopted last fall.

The contracts with the six employee groups include a complete overhaul of health care benefits and raises.

Those changes along with adjustments to the expense and revenue columns have created a midyear surplus of approximately $890,000. The council on April 21 will be tasked with allocating that pot of cash.

Staff is recommending $600,000 be set aside for year three of the employee contracts to pay for the raises. About $50,000 will be used for the city's 50th birthday bash. The remainder is expected to be set aside to see how the fiscal year ends. This in part has to do with the drought and not knowing if projected revenues will be forthcoming if tourists don't make Tahoe their vacation spot of choice.

However, hotel taxes through January, the last numbers available, are up 5 percent for the fiscal year.

"Last year the drought brought people up (here)," City Manager Nancy Kerry said. "This year could be different. It may be hard to get a boat in the water."

Another concern of the city is property values because they are declining. Property taxes, along with transient occupancy tax and sales tax are the three main revenue sources for South Lake Tahoe.

The county tax collector has advised the city to expect $1 million less in property taxes from the redevelopment area, Kerry said. This is because values have been adjusted. Numbers for the rest of town remain unknown. The city will cover that shortfall with money that has been set aside in the TOT trust fund for redevelopment.

Refinancing redevelopment bonds is a way the city is cutting its expenses. That should occur later this spring.

A sign the economy is doing better is the robust number of building permits being issued; with revenues up $250,000 beyond what was forecasted.

With three key changes, Kerry practically revolutionized how the budget is done and the council's role. One change is to only put in the budget what the true needs are, second is to bring more one-time expenses to the council, and the biggest change was to tackle the unfunded health care liability. One-time expenses include buying defibrillators for most public buildings, additional containers for marijuana evidence, and money to invest in economic development. When Kerry took the helm less than three years ago, the employee unfunded liability expense in the city was about $45 million. Had changes not taken place last fall, that number would now be $53 million. An actuarial last month found that the liability has been reduced by 73 percent and that in 11 years the liability will be nearly non-existent.

By changing the health care plan, eliminating retiree health benefits for employees not yet retired, and modifying coverage the city will see a cost savings of $1.5 million a year for three fiscal years starting with the current one.

"Now resources will be able to be spent on residents' needs," Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*.

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Notes:

• South Lake Tahoe City Council meets April 21 at 9am at Lake Tahoe Airport.

SF Giants 2015 home opener

San Francisco Giants on Opening Day – April 13, 2015 – at AT&T Park raise the 2014 World Series flag.

Letter: Groomers take at turn at Bread & Broth

To the community,

Members of Heavenly Mountain Resort's grooming crew volunteered at Heavenly's Bread & Broth's Adopt A Day dinner on April 6. Just like the snow they make into corduroy, the Heavenly grooming team was awesome.

Representing Heavenly's crew were Todd Rudis, manager; supervisors Lupe Barrientos and Kyle Henderson; and leads Tyler Lehman and Daniel Huizar. Also joining the grooming crew was Heavenly's environmental manager, Frank Papandrea. S

erving the community is the focus of the Vail Epic Promise Grant program. The funding B&B receives from the program sponsors six Heavenly Mountain Resort and six Kirkwood Mountain Resort Adopt a Day of Nourishments a year. The sponsorships provide Heavenly and Kirkwood employees the opportunity to serve the community.

"It has been a rough year for all of us, so getting the opportunity to give back to those who really need the help puts things into perspective," said Kyle Henderson. "If you can put a smile on someone's face when they need it, it helps you realize how good you have it, even if there is no snow."

In addition to Heavenly's dinner sponsorship, the American Legion brought bags of clothing and boxes of shoes for the B&B guests. By the end of the evening, most of the donated clothing/shoes found new homes. Heavenly Mountain Resort, its employees and the American Legion are just three of the reasons that make the Lake Tahoe South Shore community so great.

For more B&B information, go online or find us on Facebook.

Guests try to decipher what's in a hotel brand name

By Scott Mayerowitz, AP

Today's traveler faces a bewildering choice of hotel brands with similar-sounding and confusing names. Want to stay at a Hyatt? Take your pick. There's Hyatt Regency, Park Hyatt, Grand Hyatt, Hyatt House, Hyatt Place and, coming soon, Hyatt Centric.

Vacationers once relied on big-name hotel brands to signal the kind of experience they could expect. People knew what Holiday Inn, Hilton, Hyatt or Marriott meant. Familiarity bred a sense of comfort.

No longer.

The world's 10 largest hotel chains now offer a combined 113 brands at various price points, 31 of which didn't exist a decade ago. And there's no sign of this proliferation slowing down.

Thanks to high occupancy levels and cheap interest rates, developers are scrambling to build new properties. At the same time, hotels are trying to lure a new generation of travelers in search of authenticity. They want unique and hip places to sleep, not cookie-cutter facsimiles of hundreds of other hotels.

These so-called lifestyle hotels are the hot, new area for growth. They are designed to attract millennials: travelers between the ages of 18 and 34 who hotels say aren't interested in marble bathtubs but might enjoy beanbag chairs.

"The big hotel chains are in the business of pretending they aren't big chains. They want you to think they are boutiques," says Pauline Frommer, editorial director for Frommer's, the travel guide company founded by her father, Arthur Frommer. "This dizzying array of brand names is a good way for them to hide. The vast majority of the public is not going to keep track."

In the past year, Marriott International Inc. launched Moxy, Hilton Worldwide Holdings Inc. created Canopy, Best Western International Inc. came up with Vib and InterContinental Hotels Group PLC — the parent company of Holiday Inn — purchased Kimpton, adding its boutique hotels to the larger chain.

And hotel executives say more brands are on the way.

"The Internet has driven people to more niches. Everything is more segmented," says Best Western CEO David Kong. "Our six brands are actually six different needs."

This is a good time to own a hotel.

U.S. hotels are now selling 65 percent of their room nights, up from 55 percent five years ago, according to travel-research company STR Inc. Guests are also paying more: $115.72 on average a night, up from $97.31.

That's why there are 128,874 additional hotel rooms already under construction in the U.S., up 32 percent from last year, according to STR. Another 306,644 rooms are in various planning stages, all of which will be added to the exiting supply of 5 million rooms.

Hotel companies typically don't build or own individual properties but collect management or franchise fees from the owners. Those developers need to decide if their building is going to be a Hilton, Comfort Inn, Sheraton or something else. Competition is fierce from the hotel chains to ensure that new properties falls under their brand. But a city can support only so many Marriott hotels. That’s why Marriott International offers 19 different brands, including Courtyard, Residence Inn, Ritz-Carlton and TownePlace Suites.

Several hotel executives acknowledge an excess of brands, although each blames their competitors, not themselves.

“With very few exceptions, brands are probably overdone,” says Steve Joyce, CEO of Choice Hotels, whose 11 brands include Comfort Inn, EconoLodge, MainStay Suites and Cambria Suites. “I don’t see a consumer demand.”

But with developers eager to break ground while financing remains cheap, hotel companies are willing to do anything to sign on new properties. Many of the new developments are in tight urban spaces that couldn’t fit traditional, boxy hotels, let alone their ballrooms. In the next four years, a quarter of Marriott’s growth will come from brands that didn’t exist five years ago.

“It’s not a question of how many brands. It is a question of the right brands,” says Anthony Capuano, global chief development officer for Marriott. “We may need more.”

The last time the hotel industry saw this many new brands introduced was in 2006 and 2007, in the boom just before the Great Recession, says Adam Weissenberg, the global leader of Deloitte & Touche’s travel consulting business.

Despite what hotels are saying, Weissenberg says this isn’t being driven by the guests’ desires.

“Are there that many different customers out there?” he says. “Or are you really catering to the developers who are looking for more ways to build hotels and you can collect more fees?”

Will most of these brands still be around in five years? Some experts doubt it. You can't design a brand with just millennials in mind, says Mark Lunt of Ernst and Young's real estate transaction advisory business.

"Tastes will ultimately change," Lunt says.

After all, most guests are just looking for a clean room, comfortable bed and perhaps free Wi-Fi and breakfast.

Maybe the key question for guests is: Which brand is it that promises to leave a light on?

Being a night owl may be bad for your health

By Nicholas Bakalar, New York Times

A new study suggests that early to bed and early to rise makes a man healthy – although not necessarily wealthy or wise.

Korean researchers recruited 1,620 men and women, ages 47 to 59, and administered a questionnaire to establish whether they were morning people or night owls.

They found 480 morning types, 95 night owls, and 1,045 who fit into neither group.

Read the whole story

Should foot races be booted from the PCT?

By Yitka, Outdoor

You're hiking through a grove of spruce trees on the Pacific Crest Trail when you hear voices up ahead. Fifty yards away you spot a few pop-up tents and several dozen people hanging out, cheering. They offer you a cold soda and some chips and cookies. They're hosting a trail running race, they explain — so watch out for runners coming the opposite direction.

Despite its reputation as a Mecca for through-hikers, the PCT is host to a growing number of trail races, which draw between 75 and 400 trail-runners to small sections of the trail during about a dozen weekends between March and October. The atmosphere of these events may not call to mind the type of meditative experience Cheryl Strayed chronicled in her best-selling book, Wild, but does sharing the trail with a few hundred runners on a given day diminish the experience of the individual? That question is at the heart of an emerging controversy over the overarching purpose and meaning of the trail as a public resource.

In October, a trail-race director in Washington named Candice Burt had hoped to use a 50-mile stretch of the trail for a new 200-mile ultramarathon she is organizing for August. She contacted the Pacific Crest Trail Association (PCTA), the nonprofit that partners with the U.S. Forest Service to manage the PCT, and a representative "basically told me [the race] wasn't going to happen." Even though the PCTA doesn't issue race permits, the group's influence over the permit issuing Forest Service is undisputed.

Read the whole story

Truckee making life better for pedestrians, cyclists

By Barbara Osborne, Sacramento Bee

Bicyclists and pedestrians who have braved Truckee's infamous "mouse hole" tunnel on Highway 89, the busy route between Interstate 80 and Tahoe City, soon will have safer passage.

The 25-foot-wide, concrete arch beneath Union Pacific railroad tracks was constructed in 1928. It has no shoulders or space to accommodate more than two vehicles on Highway 89, which narrows from four lanes to two at the tunnel's southbound entrance.

Despite a lighted "peds in tunnel when flashing" sign, it's a treacherous spot for pedestrians and bicyclists. With a mobile-home park, college and shopping center nearby, the tunnel receives heavy use.

Read the whole story

Mom, daughter lose appeal in bear trap tampering case

By Associated Press

A Reno woman and her mother have lost an appeal after becoming the first people prosecuted in Nevada for interfering with the capture of troublesome bears at Lake Tahoe.

Season Morrison and her mother, Cheryl Morrison, of Truckee, admitted they deliberately tripped a culvert bear trap state wildlife officials set in October 2013 in Incline Village but maintained the trap had been set illegally.

They were convicted last May of interfering with a wildlife officer and tampering with a motor vehicle.

Justice of the Peace E. Alan Tiras later ordered both to complete community service and pay $1,000 fines, and sentenced Season Morrison to 30 days in jail.

Washoe County District Judge Janet Berry on March 26 denied their appeals, saying Tiras' decision was supported by evidence and free of error.

Their lawyer says it's unlikely Berry's ruling will be appealed.

Snippets about Lake Tahoe

• Lake Tahoe Historical Society will be putting on a Fireside Chat featuring Bill Kingman, who does the weekly Then and Now column for *Lake Tahoe News*, presenting a slideshow of Tahoe history at Camp Richardson Lodge on April 14 at 7pm.

• Tahoe Transportation District's top planner, Alfred Knotts, has left to be the transportation division director for Park City.

• This is National Volunteer Week.

• There will be talk about osteoporosis prevention and treatment on April 16 from 6-7pm by William Cottrell of Tahoe Orthopedics & Sports Medicine at Sierra Nevada College, room TCES 139 in Incline Village.