

Drought intensifies Christmas trees' eco-friendliness debate

By Sarah Parvini, Los Angeles Times

Before they picked out an eight-foot Christmas tree, Tara White and Ed Dilks wondered whether an artificial tree might be a more eco-friendly choice.

But after doing some research, the Glendale couple decided that the convenience of an artificial tree didn't stack up against the fresh scent and homey feel of a real tree.

"I felt guilty at first," White said, studying the towering noble fir for gaps. "But it's not like they go into the great forest and kill the trees. It's not deforestation."

The question of which tree is more environmentally friendly – real or artificial? – is resurrected each Christmas season.

But the discussion has gained urgency as California limps through a third year of drought. The debate now hinges on whether plastic trees give the environment a break because they don't soak up a scarce resource, water.

U.S. customers bought about 33 million real trees last year compared with 14.7 million artificial trees, according to the National Christmas Tree Assn., which represents tree farmers. The artificial tree industry cites different figures: About 25 million real trees were sold in 2013 compared with nearly 11 million artificial trees, the American Christmas Tree Association said.

The two groups disagree on plenty of other things.

Read the whole story

Caesars lenders reveal plan as debt talks unravel

By Kimberly Pierceall, AP

Looking for cash, Caesars Entertainment officials looked no further than the company's flagship Las Vegas Strip hotel-casino Caesars Palace and saw \$2.6 billion that could be raised by mortgaging the 4,250-room resort modeled after Ancient Rome.

The proposal was revealed this week after the company's bank lenders were the latest creditors to walk away from talks with the hotel-casino giant to restructure a sizable amount of its debt in order to avoid a messy bankruptcy case.

Bank lenders with a first-lien on Caesars debt posted the company's proposals online Thursday after a confidentiality agreement expired. The Caesars Palace proposal was one part of a larger proposal made to lenders to restructure Caesars' debt during talks that began in September.

Caesars is the parent company of Harrah's Lake Tahoe and Harveys at Stateline.

Financial analyst Alex Bumazhny with Fitch Ratings said he had never seen anything like it, but the document dump was likely indicative of how upset creditors might be by the process.

Caesars had previously revealed the general terms of its pitch, splitting Caesars Entertainment Operating Company division into two real estate investment trusts, one to own

hotel-casinos and the other to lease and manage them.

The documents posted online provided more detail including the plan to make Caesars Palace its own real estate investment trust using it to raise \$2.6 billion in cash in new financing. Documents also revealed how much Caesars offered to make its creditors whole through cash, debt and equity: bank lenders would recover everything owed, \$5.4 billion, and noteholders would recover 93.8 percent or \$5.9 billion.

Caesars Entertainment was bought in 2008 with its new owners Apollo Global Management LLC and TPG issuing billions in debt to raise cash for the purchase. As of the company's last quarterly filing, \$22.8 billion in long-term debt weighed down Caesars.

Its operating division holds most of the debt making it the focus of recent lawsuits filed by some creditors claiming the company has drained that division of assets – except Caesars Palace – by moving of its money-making hotel-casino properties to other divisions, cutting guarantees to creditors and allowing debt to mount. The creditors have claimed the company is in default on its agreements.

The company has responded in financial filings calling the claims meritless.

Bumazhny said he thought the idea to raise \$2.6 billion in cash by essentially mortgaging Caesars Palace represented a hefty amount of debt to saddle one property with, saying it represented 10 times the amount of the hotel-casino's earnings before interest, tax depreciation and amortization.

He said it was hard to say why the creditors may have walked away, except to say that the process has been complex and contentious with multiple parties involved at varying levels.

Some of the operating division's junior creditors are owed a \$223 million interest payment Monday.

Fitch Ratings has speculated that the company may skip that payment in order to keep the cash it has left to pledge to its creditors first-in-line to be paid.

“It all depends on how much time Caesars wants to buy itself,” Bumazhny said.

The company said in a financial filing Friday that it’s still in discussions with its remaining bondholders.

Bumazhny said if the company feels it’s near a deal, it may pay the \$223 million it owes Monday.

Caesars spokesman Gary Thompson offered no comment on the filings or whether Caesars would pay its \$223 million interest payment Monday.

A blueprint for funding retirement

By Dave Lopez

What does it take to be comfortable during retirement? Conventional wisdom calls it the 4 percent rule – withdrawing about that amount from your nest egg each year to live comfortably. And, for that, millions of Americans believe they need to stick to a job they don’t like during their earning years.

Unfortunately, the kind of money retirees want to spend each year for a comfortable lifestyle tends to be about \$60,000, which means someone’s nest egg would have to be \$1.5 million for that rate of withdrawal to sustain for 25 years.

Of course, there are additional sources of income during retirement, such as social security, but the program may not survive the coming decades. And, there are additional costs of retirement, including legacy interests and the likelihood of needing long-term medical care.

The fact is that millions of retirees simply do not have or will not have the kind of income they'd like to have during retirement.

Here is an alternative approach to the golden, or distribution years:

- Remember, Social Security is a welfare program. Before President Roosevelt signed the Social Security Act in 1935, seniors worked. America was an agrarian culture, and many who were in their 60s and 70s usually continued duties on the family farm, albeit handling lighter tasks. Social Security is essentially a socialist idea. A response to the Great Depression, its purpose was to move out older workers in favor of employing younger Americans, but times have changed.
- You don't have to remain stuck in your "earning" job. The U.S. government is the biggest employer in the world, and I work with many of its employees. They usually have high-stress jobs and usually want to retire as early as possible and, while leaning on their pension, start working on their own terms as government contractors.
- Consider retiring early and working the job you've always wanted. The model frequently followed by retired government workers can be replicated by millions of other retirees. You don't need a \$1.5 million nest egg when you combine Social Security with a smaller withdrawal amount and a fun job earning \$20,000 a year. Retirees can be creative in how they earn this "fun money."

Let's say your passion is water skiing – why not parlay this hobby into a career? You'll likely have decades of experience

and plenty of contacts. You might work for a ski shop or create a small business giving lessons. Doing something you love is a great way to stay active as an older person.

- No pension? – Create your own. The days of working 30 years for a single company and collecting a sizable pension are mostly over. This means retirees need to get creative and rely on other sources of income, including IRAs and strategies for annuities – effectively creating their own “pension.” Annuities are contracts with insurance companies. The contracts, which can be funded with either a lump sum or through regular payments, are designed as financial vehicles for retirement purposes. The money used to fund the contract grows tax-deferred. Unlike other tax advantaged retirement programs, there are no contribution limits on annuities.

Annuities provide plenty of opportunity. Of course, creative options also yield the risk of complexity. You’ll want to be sure to know what you’re doing, or at least consult with an accredited professional.

- Consider lifestyle changes. Through the distribution years, you should consider moving to a place where the cost of living is cheaper than major metropolitan areas. Simply put, you’ll want your money to go further. Take a play from younger folks who are cutting their cable in favor of only Wi-Fi access. Learn how to cook delicious meals on a budget. For many, learning how to make one’s money work better for them, rather than working for their money, is a preferable lifestyle.

Dave Lopez is the founder of ILG Financial and has been working with individuals and businesses since 1986.

Snippets about Lake Tahoe



- Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care is looking for a home for twin ferrets that are less than 1 year old. People must live in Nevada because California doesn't allow residents to own ferrets. For more info, call 530.577.2273.

- A coyote was hit and killed by a car at Pioneer Trail and Glenwood Avenue in South Lake Tahoe this week. About 30 minutes later a 300-pound bear was hit by three cars on Highway 89 near the standup paddle shop.

- Rubicon Trail in El Dorado County is closed until further notice.

- Tahoe Standup Paddle offers these tips for being on the water in winter.

- Tahoe Science Center will be closed Dec. 24-Jan. 5.

Cops scan social media to assess 'threat rating'

By Brent Skorup, Reuters

A national spotlight is now focused on aggressive law enforcement tactics and the justice system. Today's professional police forces – where officers in even one-stoplight towns might have body armor and mine-resistant vehicles – already raise concerns.

Yet new data-mining technologies can now provide police with vast amounts of surveillance information and could radically increase police power. Policing can be increasingly targeted at specific people and neighborhoods – with potentially serious inequitable effects.

One speaker at a recent national law enforcement conference compared future police work to “Minority Report”, the Tom Cruise film set in 2054 Washington, where a “PreCrime” unit has been set up to stop murders before they happen.

While PreCrime remains science-fiction, many technology advances are already involved with predictive policing – identifying risks and threats with the help of online information, powerful computers and Big Data.

New World Systems, for example, now offers software that allows dispatchers to enter in a person’s name to see if they’ve had contact with the police before. Provided crime data, PredPol claims on its website that its software “forecasts highest risk times and places for future crimes.” These and other technologies are supplanting and enhancing traditional police work.

Read the whole story

S. Tahoe looking to fill commission seats

South Lake Tahoe is looking for people to be on a variety of commissions.

The appointments are for two-year stints.

Two people are need for the **Airport Land Use Commission**. Applicants must have an expertise in aviation by way of education, training, business, experience, vocation, or avocation, have acquired and possesses particular knowledge of, and familiarity with, the function, operation, and role of airports, or is an elected official of a local agency which owns or operates an airport. This commission meets on an as needed basis.

Seven members are needed for the **Building/ADA Board of Appeals**. Applicants must be: a plumbing contractor; a heating and ventilating contractor; an electrical engineer; a general building contractor experienced in residential and commercial construction; an architect or engineer. Each shall have a valid California license and shall have a minimum of five years experience in their field. Also two members will be appointed who are physically handicapped. Applicants must reside within the Tahoe basin portion of El Dorado County. This commission meets on an as needed basis.

Five people are needed to serve on the **Parks & Recreation Commission**. Applicants must reside within the Tahoe basin portion of El Dorado County. The commission meets at least quarterly.

Five people are being sought for the Planning Commission. Applicants must reside within the city limits. The Planning Commission meets monthly assuming there is business to conduct.

Applications may be obtained at the City Clerk's Office at 1901 Airport Road, South Lake Tahoe between 8am-5pm, Monday through Friday. Applications can also be downloaded from the city's website. They are due Dec. 19 at 5pm.

The City Council will be making the appointments Jan. 20.

For more info, contact Suzie Alessi at 530.542.6004.

Flu vaccinations available by appointment

The Public Health Division of the El Dorado County Health and Human Services Agency is offering the flu vaccine by appointment.

The seasonal influenza vaccine is available through Public Health for only \$10 per vaccination. No one will be turned away due to inability to pay. To schedule a vaccination appointment, call 530.573.3155 in South Lake Tahoe or 530.621.6100 in Placerville.

People at high risk for serious complications from the flu, and their close contacts, are especially encouraged to be vaccinated. High-risk individuals include children younger than age 5, adults age 65 and older, pregnant women, people with chronic health conditions (asthma and other lung disease, diabetes, neurological conditions, and heart disease), people who are morbidly obese, healthcare personnel and those living with or caring for persons at high risk of severe influenza-related complications. Individuals must be at least 6 months of age to receive the influenza vaccine.

Bowman, Anderson on top of podium at Dew Tour

By USSA

BRECKENRIDGE, Colo. – Olympic champion and Meyers resident Maddie Bowman came back to the contest season swinging, earning her second consecutive Dew Tour win and sharing the podium with fellow U.S. Freeskiing teammate and Olympian Annalisa Drew.

Bowman, who is coming back from a knee injury, picked up right where she left off last season, riding strong and landing both right and left 900s in her runs on Dec. 12.

“I just wanted to come out here and have fun and get my runs together. It’s a great first comp after knee surgery. I felt a different pressure (after the Olympics) when I came out here, but I just decided to go skiing and have fun. And you always do better when you just go ski and have fun,” Bowman said.

A top qualifier from the semi-finals, Drew put down a solid first run with an alley-opp flat 540 and a left 900 earning her second place and her first Dew Tour podium finish. Japan’s Ayana Onozuka put together an impressively large second run to clinch the third place spot just ahead of last week’s Visa U.S. Freeskiing Grand Prix halfpipe winner Janina Kuzma.

The competition continues today with the women’s freeskiing slopestyle final where young guns Julia Krass and Maggie Voisin will continue to make their mark on the slopestyle scene. Olympic champion David Wise of Reno will look to continue his halfpipe domination in the men’s freeskiing superpipe final.

For the third year in a row, Jamie Anderson of Meyers walked away with top honors at the Dew Tour, over Finland’s Enni

Rukajaravri and New Zealand's Christy Prior.

Anderson – known for putting together consistent gold medal runs – showed up on Friday nursing a rib injury sustained in practice earlier this week. But it didn't seem to matter, as she landed a cab 900 in her first run. It looked like Anderson was on the mend and on her way to the top of the podium with a 96.25 score. While Rukajaravri and New Zealand rider Christy Prior put down 90-point runs, Anderson's first run would prove to be unbeatable.

Snowboarding Dew Tour action continues Dec. 13 with the men's and women's halfpipe finals.

Volunteers helping Tahoe water quality

By Kathryn Reed

A lot of gunk flows into Lake Tahoe, causing the clarity to decline and algae to grow. Most of it comes in the winter and spring via storm runoff. But the lasting effect is making the water near the beaches less inviting, especially in the summer.

None of this is news.

What is new is the concerted effort that is under way to study all of that water that is flowing to the lake. Instead of just having the states mandate that the jurisdictions reduce the amount of fine sediment reaching the lake, there is actual monitoring going on to know what is mixed in with the water and which corrective measures are or are not working.

The jurisdictions around the lake are mandated to reduce their pollutant loads. That is what all the “erosion control” projects are about. The Lahontan Regional Quality Control Board’s total maximum daily load mandate is a 65-year program with the goal of returning the lake clarity to 100 feet – the depth a white dinner plate-like disc could be seen in the 1960s.

Tahoe Resource Conservation District is the lead agency of the Regional Stormwater Management Program. TRCD is seen as a neutral third party between those dictating what must be done and those who must carry out the orders. All sides are part of the program.

“We are providing consistent data collection, management, analysis and reporting methods,” Sarah Bauwens of TRCD told a group of nearly 50 people on Dec. 10 at Lake Tahoe Community College.

A dozen urban catchments are being monitored. Data is being collected from 10 to 12 precipitation events a year, including rain, snow, rain on snow and thunderstorms.

Turbidity, or the cloudiness of the water, is being measured. Data is showing sediment doesn’t just come down with the first rush of water.

“We’ve only done one full year of monitoring. Over time we want to see if there is a downward trend in pollutant load,” Bauwens said.

She said it would take five years’ of data to detect a trend.



Water flows from the pipe below the old Alta Mira building in South Lake Tahoe. Photo/LTN file

In addition to fine sediment, nitrogen and phosphorous are other pollutants that are cause for concern.

The volume of water is measured.

Water samples are sent to labs.

Some of the monitoring occurs at the end of the pipes that carry runoff to the lake, some involves seeing if erosion control measures (best management practices) are working, and then there is the rapid assessment method that tests if things are working based on what the models said would happen.

This program will ideally help the stakeholders be able to make changes sooner if need be.

All of the information is being put in to a dedicated database. There is a scientific advisory group assisting with the program as well as a technical advisory committee to keep everyone up-to-date.

Also assisting with data collection are the pipe keepers, a group of volunteers working for the League to Save Lake Tahoe.

Nephelometric turbidity units, or NTU, are how turbidity is measured. The pipe at Timber Cove measured 150 NTU on Aug. 11. Before this week's storm no water had come out of that pipe

since then. South Lake Tahoe's multi-million dollar Bijou erosion control project is being credited with the turnaround, according to Aaron Hussmann with the League.

At the end of Wednesday's gathering there was a panel discussion with representatives from the League, Lahontan, South Lake Tahoe, TRCD and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

They said:

- Regular maintenance of erosion projects is having better benefits than expected.
- As technology improves, more improvements can be made.
- The first 20-years of the TMDL will shed a lot of light on what is working.
- Looking at how nature worked before all the development came is critical.
- Controlling sediment at the source is ideal.
- Requiring infiltration systems be part of development or redevelopment projects will help.

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Notes:

- More info about Tahoe Resource Conservation District is online.
 - More pipe keepers are needed. Info is online.
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Letter: Chamber says thank you

To the community,

Despite the power outages and high winds in the South Shore, the Marriott Grand Residence Club was warm and cozy with power on Thursday night, which made it the perfect first stop for Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce's annual Winter Wine Walk Business After Hours Mixer.

Nearly 100 guests began their tours at the Marriott Grand Residence Club with a taste from Crystal Basin Cellars before embarking on a tour to participating businesses. Each shop welcomed attendees with food, drinks and raffle prizes. It was a fun, blustery night that included great food, wine and friends.

A special thanks to Yellow Cab and Good Samaritan International for providing safe ride vouchers.

Best,

Shannon Earley, chamber communications coordinator