EDC residents wage ballot battle over growth

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

El Dorado County's growth wars are headed to the November ballot with unexpected drama, quixotic political alliances and developer dollars flowing in conflicting directions.

Local environmentalists and advocates have qualified separate November initiatives – Measure M and Measure O – that seek to protect rural lifestyles, prevent gridlock on Highway 50 and stop traffic-inducing subdivisions in the Sierra foothills region.

Those initiatives, plus a third measure originally backed by a Sacramento group representing commercial builders, are drawing financial opposition from housing developers as well as real estate and engineering firms that are banking on continued residential growth in the county of 180,000 residents.

At stake are competing visions of the future for the county, where a 2004 general growth plan anticipates 21,000 new houses.

The latest ballot battles come 16 years after a voter revolt over the county's approval of projects bringing 11,000 new houses to El Dorado Hills. Measure Y in 1998 prohibited any residential project of five or more units that caused or worsened traffic gridlock. It was reaffirmed by voters in 2008.

Read the whole story

Learn how to take better wildflower pictures

Roger Rosenberger will share his photographic expertise Sept. 3 at 6pm in South Lake Tahoe.

The presentation is ideal for people wanting to be prepared to take better wildflower pictures next spring. Sophisticated camera equipment is not necessary.

The free event is at South Lake Tahoe Library, 1000 Rufus Allen Blvd.

Radon poster contest open to Nev. students

The 2015 Nevada Radon Poster Contest is open to students 9 to 14 enrolled in public, private, territorial, tribal, Department of Defense and home schools.

Radon is a radioactive, colorless, odorless and tasteless gas that comes from the ground. It accumulates in homes and can cause lung cancer. This type of lung cancer is preventable, and the only way to know if a home has elevated levels is to test for it.

The poster contest is part of the Nevada Radon Education Program and is sponsored by Cooperative Extension, the Nevada Division of Public and Behavioral Health, Kansas State

University and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Posters in this year's Nevada Radon Poster Contest should convey one of these messages: 1) What is radon? 2) Where does radon come from? 3) How does radon get into our homes? 4) Radon can cause lung cancer, and 5) Test your home for radon. Posters will be judged on content accuracy, visual communication of the topic, reproducibility and originality. They can be created with crayon, markers, paint, collage, pencil, photographs or computer graphics. There is no fee to enter, but each child is limited to one entry. Entries must be received at 4955 Energy Way in Reno by Oct. 31.

Cash prizes for the top five entries are $75 for first place, $60 for second, $45 for third and $25 for fourth and fifth place. The top three entries are also awarded cash prizes for their teachers or sponsoring organization's representative and are entered in the national contest. National contest winners receive $1,000 for first place, $600 for second, $400 for third and $400 for special online voting recognition. National winners will receive recognition, and the posters will be reproduced and distributed nationally to promote radon awareness.

Caesars losses continue to grow

By Anna Prior and Josh Beckerman, Wall Street Journal

Caesars said its most recent results reflect strength in Las Vegas, helping to offset less favorable conditions in Atlantic City, N.J., and regional markets.

Caesars Entertainment Corp. said its second-quarter loss widened as the casino operator said strong Las Vegas results were offset by persistent softness in Atlantic City and regional markets, including Lake Tahoe. Caesars in the parent company of Harrah's Lake Tahoe and Harveys in Stateline.

Caesars has struggled to recover fully from the recession and hasn't posted a profit since late 2009. The company runs casinos across the U.S. with hubs in Las Vegas and Atlantic City. It has been weighed down by its debt load since the recession, and its failure to acquire a gambling license in Macau has hobbled its ability to compete in that fast-growing market.

Last week, Caesars and a group of its creditors traded competing lawsuits over the company's plans to rework its more than $20 billion debt load.

On Monday, Caesars reported a second-quarter loss of $466.4 million, or $3.24 a share, compared with a prior-year loss of $212.2 million, or $1.69 a share. The loss from continuing operations widened to $3.06 a share from $1.65.

Read the whole story

Hefty retiree package for Meeks Bay fire chief

By Kathryn Reed

Questions are swirling on the West Shore and in Placerville because of the package John Pang received when he retired as

fire chief from Meeks Bay Fire Protection District earlier this year.

Pang, who worked for the district from January 1995 to April 2014, will receive a $6,746.09 check each month in retirement pay, according to CalPERS. That's $80,953.08 a year to do nothing. It's possible the monthly rate will be recalculated once CalPERS has all of the 2014 payout information.

While he was fire chief his total wages were $146,212 in 2013 and $131,776 in 2012. This was to manage a handful of employees. Meeks responds to about 200 calls a year, most of which are medical aid.

This compares to the South Lake Tahoe fire chief who oversees 37 employees and is paid $157,131.73 per year. In 2013 the South Lake Tahoe Fire Department responded to 3,293 calls; approximately 70 percent were medical aid.



John Pang

When members of the Meeks district, who have voluntarily voted to tax themselves to help pay for fire costs, started asking questions the district had outside counsel look into the legalities.

Ed Miller, president of the fire district board, had a prepared statement ready when *LTN* called. He told *Lake Tahoe News* further questions could be asked in public at the next board meeting later this month. The statement states that Stephen Lieberman, independent counsel, reviewed Pang's contract, salary, sick and vacation pay and determined it did

not violate CalPERS rules and there was no gifting of public money.

The statement says, “Chief Pang retired with well earned retirement benefits ….”

Miller, at the urging of Lieberman, is not releasing the attorney’s full report. Attorney-client confidentiality was cited.

In 2012, the state Public Employee Retirement System instituted new rules, part of the Public Employees Pension Reform Act. Some of the changes deal with spiking of salaries. This means generating questionable extra pay in the last few years to inflate what the pension payout will be.

CalPERS is using Pang’s last year of wages to calculate his pension. His last year is inflated because of the sick time and vacation payouts.

In 2012, Pang exercised his contractual option to receive a 7.3 percent salary increase in lieu of the district continuing to pay 8 percent into deferred compensation.

In July 2012, El Dorado County Auditor-Controller Joe Harn sent a letter to Miller stating, “Implementing this change will cause an increase to your district PERS actuarial rate for many years to come. Additionally, implementing this change could be construed as income spiking. CalPERS is very sensitive to cases of income spiking and has a research unit dedicated to the review of these potential cases.”

Rosanna Westmoreland with CalPERS said while the agency does 20 to 30 audits a year, spiking and other inappropriate actions are usually investigated when someone anonymously calls the ethics hotline – 866.513.4216. Meeks Bay Fire has not been audited, according to Westmoreland.

“Unless it’s reported, we don’t look to see if there is

something inappropriate," Westmoreland told *Lake Tahoe News*.

CalPERS relies on the public agency to provide the salary and compensation information for retirees.

Another issue involving Pang is that he used sick leave hours to buy credit in the CalPERS system. In a letter dated July 25, 2014, Harn questions Miller about the legitimacy of doing this. Pang's final termination pay was worth $503,597. Of that, $302,939 was to be used to purchase additional PERS service from his unused sick leave.

"Since a significant portion of these sick leave hours were awarded to Pang pursuant to his various employment contracts and not accrued by Pang, I believe that it is inappropriate that these hours be used to purchase PERS credits," Harn wrote.

The district has never responded to Harn.

Included in that final half million-dollar payout was $195,012.54 for Nationwide to pay for Pang's post-employment health plan. In other words, part of his ongoing perks are taxpayer funded health benefits for the rest of his life.

Ken Corcoran, a resident of the fire district and retired auditor-controller from Contra Costa County, raised similar and more questions. In a May 28, 2014, letter to the board, Corcoran said at most Pang should have been able to accumulate about 1,900 hours of sick time if he never called in sick. But the district paid out 5,080 worth of hours.

"… it is my belief that the proposed conversion of sick leave hours to service time will create an unfunded liability for the district, resulting in many years of increased retirement rates to cover this shortfall," Corcoran wrote.

In public comments at the May board meeting, Corcoran submitted a letter stating, "I can honestly say that in my

extensive work experience in the area of compensation I NEVER encountered a pay package so generous in almost every category. Considering the district has five full time employees, the pay and benefits provided to the chief appear wildly excessive.”

(Miller said in the last couple years the board has changed the compensation package for all new hires.)

Corcoran questioned the comp time vs. administrative leave, and the fact the board allowed Pang to accrue 25 weeks of vacation. (He received five weeks per year.)

But these are all things Miller, the board president, said his investigator found to be legal.

The ethics, according to others, is another matter.

El Dorado County has given the district $2,191,172 from fiscal year ending 2001 through fiscal year ending 2010 because Meeks fire cried poor and needed help.

The residents are paying for fire service. Each parcel is assessed $325 per year. Voters approved Measure Z in 1992 at $85 and Measure R in 1998 at $45. The board imposed a fire protection assessment of $195 in 2009.

Letter: League teaching kids to keep Tahoe blue

To the community,

The League to Save Lake Tahoe hosted a Stewards of Stormwater event in Incline Village on Aug. 7 in partnership with Tahoe Family Solutions' Camp Explore program, IVGID, the Nevada Tahoe Conservation District, and Washoe County. Over 50 kids from Tahoe Family Solutions along with other volunteers helped place 41 metal markers on storm drains that lead to Lake Tahoe and picked up 40 pounds of litter on the streets.

This community volunteer project educates and engages the public about protecting our waterways from illegal dumping of wastes into the Lake Tahoe watershed. Marking community storm drains with "Keep Tahoe Blue – No Dumping" markers helps to keep pollutants out of Lake Tahoe's environment. The communities around Lake Tahoe have outdated storm drain systems that discharge directly into the Lake or its tributaries. Washing automobiles and dumping household wastes into the storm drain system can have substantial impacts to water quality and public health.

Roughly 43 pipes enter directly into in Lake Tahoe, carrying untreated stormwater, sediment and other pollutants in runoff from our local communities. One of the easiest and most effective ways to be proactive about keeping Tahoe blue is to not dump anything into storm drains. The Stewards of Stormwater program is a great way to mobilize communities, and we are grateful for our collaboration with Incline Village organizations to help do this important work.

"We are very excited for the Camp Explore kids to work with the League to Save Lake Tahoe," said Sharon Silva, director of Camp Explore. "It fits perfectly with our mission of educating kids about stewardship of the outdoors. It will also allow the kids to become experts on a component of keeping Tahoe blue and to then share that information with their families and neighbors."

Volunteers also learned about water basins, how stormwater runoff impacts lake clarity, how to properly dispose of

chemicals and the importance of no dumping.

Marilee Movius, League to Save Lake Tahoe's community engagement manager

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Nevada County considers limiting outdoor events

By Richard Chang, Sacramento Bee

After selecting wedding rings and finding the right caterer, brides and grooms in Nevada County may soon have to draw up a traffic abatement plan.

The Board of Supervisors plans to vote Tuesday on an ordinance that would limit and regulate outdoor events, including weddings, parties and concerts, that in recent years have become highly popular in the rural region.

Under current rules, permits are required only for outdoor musical events. If the ordinance passes, nearly all outdoor events – with the exception of non-commercial and political gatherings – will be subject to an extensive permitting process through the Nevada County Sheriff's Office.

The permit requirements include drawing up a detailed site plan, providing toilets and access to water. Organizers will also be required to submit plans on parking and traffic, depending on the area.

The ordinance would cap the number of events on any given property to four per year, which wedding-related business owners have called a death sentence for their livelihoods. Violators could face misdemeanor charges, including up to a

$5,000 fine or jail time.

Read the whole story

Sly Park detour all week during construction

Sly Park Road will be closed to through traffic at the Highway 50 undercrossing due to bridge demolition work this week.

The work is part of a $15.1 million project to replace the existing structure that was built in 1964 and has shown signs of deterioration. The new bridge is being constructed with precast and prestressed girder. The project will also add sidewalks and curb ramps to both sides of Sly Park Road and improve sight distance for motorists on Highway 50.

Completion is expected late this year.

During demolition work this week, Sly Park Road is scheduled to be closed to through traffic overnight from 9pm-5am through Friday and 10pm Friday to 5am Saturday. Marked detours will be in place.

Snippets about Lake Tahoe



• A record $780,000 was raised Aug. 2 at the League to Save Lake Tahoe's annual Oscar de la Renta fundraiser in Incline Village.
• Vail Resorts, owner of Kirkwood Mountain Resort, is opening a retail shop at the resort.
• Placer County Water Agency's water use through July is down 17.5 percent from a year ago.
• Tahoe Regional Young Professionals is having a mixer Aug. 12 from 6-9pm at Brothers Bar in South Lake Tahoe. It is free for members, $10 for non-members.
• On Oct. 12, Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe will celebrate the change of season with the return of its annual Harvest Fest. The family friendly event including a candy apple bar, pumpkin patch in the woods (pumpkins available for purchase), complimentary pumpkin decorating, s'mores roasting with the marshmologist, hot cocoa and apple cider tasting and a children's costume party in the backyard of the resort from 1-5pm.

Bottled water coming from drought-stricken Calif.

By Julia Lurie, Mother Jones

Bottled-water drinkers, we have a problem: There's a good chance that your water comes from California, a state experiencing the third-driest year on record.

The details of where and how bottling companies get their water are often quite murky, but generally speaking, bottled water falls into two categories. The first is "spring water,"

or groundwater that’s collected, according to the EPA, “at the point where water flows naturally to the earth’s surface or from a borehole that taps into the underground source.” About 55 percent of bottled water in the United States is spring water, including Crystal Geyser and Arrowhead.

The other 45 percent comes from the municipal water supply, meaning that companies, including Aquafina and Dasani, simply treat tap water—the same stuff that comes out of your faucet at home—and bottle it up. (Weird, right?)

But regardless of whether companies bottle from springs or the tap, lots of them are using water in exactly the areas that need it most right now.

Read the whole story