

Tahoe snowpack third-lightest since 1981

By Benjamin Spillman, Reno Gazette-Journal

What a difference a year makes.

The winter of 2017-18 is off to a slow start in the Sierra Nevada, a stark contrast from the record-busting snow totals last year.

The contrast from last year is particularly evident in the Lake Tahoe Basin where winter is off to its third-driest start since 1980-81.

Snow survey results posted Thursday show the basin is at 30 percent of normal for the date, compared to 67 percent on the same date last year.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Calif.'s next governor will be its most powerful

By Joe Mathews

Who is the most powerful governor in California history?

The next one.



Joe Mathews

Our state's governorship has grown so great in reach and power that it now constitutes a second American presidency.

California governors now routinely sign international treaties. They head a state government that operates as a fourth branch of American government—employing regulations, lawsuits, and the size of the California market to check the president and Congress. Here at home, our governors dominate not only politics and policy but also California's civic conversation itself.

California's centralized executive power contrasts with the state's image as complex and diverse, with a progressive culture and innovative technology bent on disrupting existing structures. But this diversity and complexity—and the resulting frustration about getting anything done—is at the heart of the governor's power.

Precisely because it's so hard to get attention and to orchestrate policy among so many unruly constituencies, Californians are often desperate to find someone—anyone—with the agency to make a decision and accomplish what they want. And that person has been, more often than not, the governor.

For the past 40 years, the governor's authority has grown, as power was transferred from local governments to Sacramento, via state court decisions (notably equalizing school funding) and by ballot initiatives (like Proposition 13, which restricted local taxation).

As Sacramento made more decisions for Californians, governors

worked to enhance their office's power. Pete Wilson pioneered the use of executive orders for vital policy changes. Gray Davis devised new ways to intervene in the legislative process, declaring of legislators: "Their job is to implement my vision."

Arnold Schwarzenegger devised ballot initiative campaigns to give himself greater leverage with the Legislature. He also pushed through climate change legislation that empowers the state's regulatory agencies to enforce one of the most complicated environmental regimes on Earth.

The state's regular budget crises also enhanced gubernatorial power; governors demanded wider room to manage the state's budget and cash, as the price of compromise. Gov. Jerry Brown also has skillfully bargained for more authority; the state's new law to establish a \$15 minimum wage by 2022 gives the governor the power to delay the hike for different reasons.

And voters, disgusted by gridlock that was easily blamed on the Legislature, have often granted more authority to governors. The most dramatic example was when voters installed legislative term limits in 1990. With that change, lawmakers and staffs could stay for only a few years a time, whereas in the executive branch the governor could rely on department heads and powerful regulators who had long careers and inside knowledge.

The Legislature has failed to counter such executive power—its relatively small number of lawmakers is stretched thin, and has little time for detailed hearings, investigation, or oversight of the governor and his administration. The Legislature also doesn't have the same institutional infrastructure to produce data and reports to guide policymaking; when legislators make laws and budgets, they often rely on the executive branch's numbers.

More recent political reforms also have weakened the

Legislature and thus strengthened the governor. In 2008, voters stripped the Legislature of perhaps its greatest power—the power to draw legislative districts—and gave it to an independent commission. And in 2010, voters got rid of the requirement of a two-thirds vote to pass a budget, which had given the minority party in the Legislature considerable power to challenge the governor.

These days, the opposition has little juice. All the governor needs is the support of the two leaders of the majority party in the Legislature. In this era of one-party Democratic control, that majority party is the governor's own party, further enhancing his power.

California's diminished media also reinforces the notion that the governor is the only game in town. With fewer reporters covering Sacramento, the governor has become the only politician who is covered regularly. Even state Sen. Kevin de León, who has been the most influential legislator of this decade and is now running for U.S. Senate, remains little known across the state.

In much of Sacramento, the power of the governor is considered a positive. In a state so big, goes the argument, it's good to have one elected official—the governor—who can focus attention and accountability.

Of course, that's only true if Californians pick a governor who can use that power responsibly. And right now, few of us are paying much attention to the gubernatorial contest. Instead, Californians are deeply worried about all the power in the American presidency, and how it might be misused by the current occupant of the White House.

But the perils of runaway executive power aren't limited to Washington, D.C. Pay attention, California, because it could happen here.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo

Bennett of Squaw top U.S. skier in downhill

By U.S. Ski & Snowboard

Bryce Bennett of Squaw Valley finished 16th in Thursday's FIS Ski World Cup downhill in Bormio, Italy, to lead three Americans into the top 25.

Dominik Paris of France edged out Norway's Aksel Lund Svindal by 0.04 second for his eighth World Cup downhill victory. Norway's Kjetil Jansrud was third. Jared Goldberg (Holladay, Utah) was 18th and Wiley Maple (Aspen, Colo.) was 24th.

For the women, in her classic dominating style, Mikaela Shiffrin (Eagle-Vail, Colo.) built up a huge advantage on her first run, then charged in the second to win her 36th career FIS Ski World Cup race on a rutted slalom track in Lienz, Austria, Thursday.

"They did a really great job preparing (the course) after the rain and the snowfall. It was not easy, but it was a pleasure to ski," Shiffrin said following her 27th career World Cup slalom victory.

Switzerland's Wendy Holdener was second, followed by Sweden's Frida Hansdotter in third. Resi Stiegler (Jackson Hole, Wyo.), whose father Pepi – the 1964 Olympic slalom gold medalist – grew up in Lienz, was 25th.

Shiffrin, who scored her first World Cup podium in slalom in Lienz in 2011, skied to a 1.14-second first-run advantage over

Hansdotter. In the second run, she charged the top portion of the course, throttled back a bit in the steep middle section and then in classic Shiffrin style, charged to the finish to win by 0.89 seconds.

Big labor sees growth potential in Calif. pot workers

By Scott Smith, AP

Unions have caught a whiff of a rare opportunity to organize a whole new set of workers as recreational marijuana becomes legal in California.

The United Farm Workers, Teamsters and United Food and Commercial Workers are looking to unionize the tens of thousands of potential workers involved in the legal weed game, from planters to rollers to sellers. The move could provide a boost to organized labor's lagging membership – if infighting doesn't get in the way.

The United Farm Workers, co-founded by iconic labor leader Cesar Chavez, says organizing an industry rooted in agriculture is a natural fit, and growers could label their products with the union's logo as a marketing strategy.

Read the whole story

Flu season arrives early

By Megan Molteni, Wired

If you've been putting off your flu shot until the season really gets going, wait no longer. It's already here—and it's looking like it's going to be a doozy.

Influenza viruses quietly circulate year-round in the US, but every winter they go big, triggering a seasonal epidemic of sniffles, sweats, and sore throats. And this year it's come earlier than usual, just in time for a potential peak over the holidays.

Normally, infections start to increase around the beginning of January, peak in February, and then come down by the end of March. But according to data released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Friday, the flu is already widespread in 12 states, including California and New York.

Read the whole story

Tahoe ski resorts: Keep your weed at home

By Jenny Kane, Reno Gazette-Journal

Ski resorts in Nevada and California say that they are plenty prepared for stoners on the slopes because, frankly, it's not a new problem.

"It really shouldn't change much of anything. Legalizing marijuana is not an invitation to come to the ski resort and

smoke marijuana,” said Michael Reitzell, spokesman for California Ski Industry Association. “For some reason, people think outdoors sports are different than other sports. Would you smoke pot and play basketball or any other sport where you could really injure yourself if you weren’t sharp?

“You can take breaks, you can hang out, and maybe it has something to do with après-ski. It can wait.”

Read the whole story

South Shore Y comes alive

By Adam Jensen

Improvements made in the two years since the passage of the Tahoe Valley Area Plan are as diverse as they are abundant.

The redevelopment of several parcels, storm water treatment, transportation upgrades, and plans for additional open space are all taking shape following the passage of the area plan, a key step in implementing the 2012 Regional Plan. The plan, approved in 2015 by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board, covers 337 acres near the intersection of highway 50 and 89, known as the Y, in South Lake Tahoe.

The vision for the area creates commercial, mixed-use, and multi-family development that is pedestrian friendly, transit oriented, and harmonious with the natural environment.

Since the plan’s adoption, proponents have submitted 22 applications for projects located within the area plan boundary. Ten of the projects are complete, 11 have been issued permits and/or are under construction, and one is under review.

“We’re seeing a lot of environmental redevelopment on the land within the Tahoe Valley Area Plan,” said Brandy McMahon, local government coordination program manager for TRPA. “The environmental and community improvements happening around the ‘Y’ will provide long-term benefits to the lake, residents, and visitors.”

Barton Memorial Hospital broke ground on its facilities master plan, which includes the Robert Maloff Center of Excellence. The facility, a 25,000-square-foot orthopedic, sports performance, rehabilitation, and wellness center, is under construction. The project includes the retirement from future development of more than 33,600 square feet of land coverage previously removed from a stream environment zone (SEZ) at Lake Tahoe Airport. The city also approved two mixed-use projects near Barton Memorial Hospital.

The facelift and full remodel of the Factory Stores at the Y transformed a dated shopping mall into The Crossing at Tahoe Valley. A former hardware store was turned into the South Lake Brewing Company. The tear down and rebuild of the McDonald’s near the Y is complete and the city has approved Blue Granite Climbing Gym nearby on Emerald Bay Road, which is scheduled to open in the spring.

“The city is excited to see major improvements to the built environment in the Tahoe Valley area since the adoption of the Tahoe Valley Area Plan,” said John Hitchcock, planning manager for South Lake Tahoe. “All these projects directly benefit the community and visitors with increased options for dining, retail, and recreation opportunities. They also directly benefit the environment with the implementation of water quality best management practices.”

The Tahoe Valley Greenbelt, a project that includes SEZ restoration, storm water improvements, and installation of pedestrian-bicycle pathways and amenities, is also being designed and engineered.

In addition to these projects, Caltrans began work on the Highway 50 to Trout Creek project in spring of 2017. Another lake-saving project within the Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program, it is expected to continue from Winnemucca Avenue to Sierra Boulevard in 2018 and Sierra Boulevard to Trout Creek Bridge in 2019. Benefits of the project include collecting storm water runoff to protect and improve Lake Tahoe's clarity, as well as roadway improvements like curbs, gutters, sidewalks, and 6-foot shoulders for bike lanes.

*This article is republished from the winter 2017 edition of **Tahoe In Depth**.*

Charter wants crackdown on password sharing

By Gerry Smith, Bloomberg

On Twitter, they are openly bartered, donated, even celebrated.

"Anyone have a Spectrum user ID & password I can trade for?" one Twitter user wrote last month. Another thanked her friend "for giving me his Spectrum username and password to watch the World Series Game 7." A third tweeted: "Totally figured out my parents Spectrum password and can watch cable now through my Apple TV. I literally love my life."

Tom Rutledge has had enough. The chief executive officer of Charter Communications Inc., which sells cable TV under the Spectrum name, is leading an industrywide effort to crack down on password sharing. It's a growing problem that could cost

pay-TV companies millions of subscribers—and billions of dollars in revenue—when they can least afford it.

Read the whole story

Legal pot in Calif. brings host of environmental rules

By Ellen Knickmeyer, AP

At a state briefing on environmental rules that await growers entering California's soon-to-be-legal marijuana trade, organic farmers Ulysses Anthony, Tracy Sullivan and Adam Mernit listened intently, eager to make their humble cannabis plot a model of sustainable agriculture in a notoriously destructive industry dominated by the black market.

In line with a 2017 study that found marijuana grows are more damaging, plot for plot, than commercial logging in Northern California forests, Anthony said he has seen too many destructive grows. Trash-strewn clearings. Growers heaping fertilizer at the foot of a centuries-old sequoia tree, needlessly endangering it. Wild streams diverted for irrigation.

"It really bothers me when I see some of the other operations, the treatment of the land," he said.

Read the whole story

Snippets about Lake Tahoe

- After 37 years, Battalion Chief Rich Nalder has announced his retirement from Tahoe-Douglas Fire Protection District.
- Nevada County CEO Rick Haffey has announced he will be retiring in the summer.
- The reason for the Dec. 21 NV Energy outage that cut power to thousands on the South Shore and in the Carson Valley was because a tree fell onto a line while a private contractor was doing work.
- South Tahoe Alliance of Resorts provided \$15,000 this holiday season to three community organizations – \$5,000 each to the Boys and Girls Club of Lake Tahoe, Christmas Cheer, and Live Violence Free.