Money Matters: End of the year tax planning

By Nic Abelow

As the end of the year approaches, it is an ideal time to review your financial strategy, which can impact your finances this year and possibly for years to come. There are a number of opportunities you can explore to help you save your money and pursue your financial goals before year end.



Nic Abelow

Make the most of capital gains and losses. If you have capital gains or losses, we can review your portfolio management and rebalancing options to make sure you're taking advantage of gain and loss tax strategies.

Maximize tax-advantaged accounts. If you have not fully funded your qualified retirement plans or individual retirement accounts, doing so could not only provide tax advantages, but also help position you for long-term financial independence.

Benefit from year-end gifting. You and your spouse can each give up to $14,000 to the same person. Thus, you could gift a child as much as $28,000 a year without incurring a tax liability. If you're a grandparent, consider funding your grandchildren's education by contributing to a 529 or other college savings plan that may improve your tax situation.

Required minimum distribution. If you're turning 70½ years of age or older, you're required by the Internal Revenue Service to take a required minimum distribution this year and each year hereafter from your retirement accounts.

Do not forget about end-of-year strategies that could potentially benefit your short- and long-term goals.

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Snippets about Lake Tahoe

· Opening dates: Donner Ski Ranch – Dec. 2; Homewood – Dec. 9, Soda Springs – Dec. 9, Diamond Peak – Dec. 14.

· Santa will be coming to the Tahoe City Golf Course with a sleigh full of presents and ready to chow on some pancakes on Dec. 9 from 10am-1pm.

· South Lake Tahoe Fire Rescue is hosting a Coats for Kids Drive from Dec. 26-Jan. 31. Drop off gently used or new coats to Fire Station No. 1 at 1252 Ski Run Blvd. or Fire Station No. 3 at 2101 Lake Tahoe Blvd.

· Here are the El Dorado-Tahoe and Sierra roadwork schedules from Caltrans for the coming week.

· Dee Byrne has been promoted to the role of vice president of skier services at Squaw Valley Alpine Meadow, overseeing ski and snowboard school, ski teams, resort activities sales and service, and hosts. Elianne "El" Furtney has been promoted to managing director of the resorts' ski and snowboard school.

Calif. lawmakers push back on White House with new wildfire request

By Emily Cadei, McClatchy

California's House members are joining across party lines to call for $4.4 billion for wildfire recovery from Congress, a unified statement that boosts the state's chances of securing much-needed funds to help rebuild after this fall's devastating fires.

The request is also a rebuke of the White House, which sent a $44 billion disaster aid request to Congress last month that made little mention of the state's fire victims. The Trump administration later clarified that its requests for money for Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Small Business Administration would all apply to California's fire recovery, as well as Hurricanes Harvey and Irma.

Even so, the sums the White House outlined on Nov. 17 were far less than what states affected by these disasters said they need to rebuild. California Democratic Reps. Mike Thompson and Jared Huffman called the $44 billion request "anemic" even if applied just to hurricane recovery, and not nearly enough if wildfire needs were also included in the mix.

Read the whole story

Squaw Valley creates nonprofit foundation

Squaw Valley Ski Holdings has created the nonprofit Squaw Valley Foundation.

The Squaw Valley Foundation will be responsible for the management and distribution of millions of dollars generated from the 1.5 percent project transfer fee related to the redevelopment of the Village at Squaw Valley.

It will be run by a seven-member board, which has yet to be picked. It will be comprised of a mix of local residents and business owners, second homeowners and a public service district appointee.

It is estimated that the fees from the village redevelopment could generate as much as $15 million in first-time real estate sales, and more than $2 million annually in re-sales.

Lego challenge at Douglas County libraries

The Douglas County Library will be hosting a Winter Lego Building Challenge from Dec. 16 to Jan. 3.

Children, teens, and adults are invited to build an original Lego brick structure to enter in the contest. This year’s theme is Magical Worlds. Children who want to use the library’s bricks may go to the Minden or Zephyr Cove library on Dec. 16 from 2:30-3:30pm to build their entries.

The rules and entry forms are at the library. Each participant is allowed one entry. Creations will be entered in one of six categories based on the builder's age, or families can enter a family build together. All participants under the age of 4 must use DUPLO bricks.

Carson River, grasslands, sage dominate easy hike



Rhoda, Liz and Rosemary along the Carson River on the Bentley Heritage Trail. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

MINDEN – Meandering through grasses more than 6-feet high,

mesmerized by sage bushes just as tall and with thick trunks, a brief oops where the trek went through slick mud, the Carson River wending its way through the valley as the snow covered Sierra peaks scratched the sky – all of this provided more reasons to be thankful on Thanksgiving weekend.

With the recent snow in Tahoe, hiking at any elevation above lake level may necessitate snowshoes, and yet it doesn't quite feel like snowshoe season has truly arrived. To keep hiking this time of year requires dropping in elevation. That's just what the four of us did the day after Thanksgiving.



The Carson River and Sierra mountains are focal points along the trail. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The Carson Valley Trails Association has been busy creating a trails throughout the Minden-Gardnerville-Genoa area.

This particular one – the Bentley Heritage Trail – is like being in the middle of nowhere, and yet so close to civilization.

We are so used to hiking in the Tahoe area that is was strange to have no elevation gain. A 1 percent grade is what you'll

encounter.

With no trees, it seemed like you could see forever – which was wonderful.

While the network of trails here is 4.8 miles, what is great is that hikers can easily make it shorter. This is because trail builders made several links from one side to the other. The other nice touch was the off-shoots to the Carson River.

Our goal was to make a circle. We kinda did that.



Private property via an easement has created this nearly 5-mile trail system. Photo/Kathryn Reed

While at first I was thinking the signage was wonderful, there were a couple incidents where we weren't quite sure where to go. The main obstacle was when we got to what I would call the end of trail before it curves around to head back. The arrows pointed left and right. We thought we needed to go right to keep with our plan to go counter-clockwise. Well, it turns out this was one of the spurs to the river and not the actual trail. After a muddy adventure near the water, we turned

around and figured out our mistake.

We also weren’t sure which direction to go at another junction. Instead of completing the circle, we wound up going across to the side we started on.

Neither of these hiccups was that big of a deal, but for first-timers a little more info besides an arrow would have been nice. Things like “river,” “trailhead,” “eastern trail” would have kept us where we wanted to be.

Still, we’d all recommend this trail – just not in the summer or anytime it is hot. It is completely exposed, with zero shade. The river might provide some cooling off, though.

It was easy to see how high the river had been this spring based on the erosion along the banks and the wash along the side.

A surprising find were some tiny clam shells along the shore, that to this non-scientist looked like the invasive clams found at Lake Tahoe.

Carson Valley Trails Association, with the Nature Conservancy, local Eagle Scouts, and the property owner built the hiking trail system.

The trails association had to replace some of the boardwalks this year that had been ruined by the spring flooding.

The biggest negative for me is that dogs are not allowed. This is because cattle could be in the area. Horses, bikes and motorized vehicles are also not permitted. But I’m thankful the private property owner agreed to the easement that allows the public onto these lands. The easement protects four miles of the Carson River, conserves wildlife habitat, safeguards more than 1,000 acres of floodplain, and encourages sustainable agricultural practices.



This hike is mostly a single-track trail through grassland. Photo/Kathryn Reed

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Getting there:

From South Lake Tahoe head east on Highway 50. Go right onto Kingsbury Grade. At the bottom, go left on Foothill Road. Turn right on Muller Lane. Turn left onto Highway 395. Turn right on Stephanie Lane, then left on Heybourne Road. The trailhead is to the left and is well marked.

Opinion: Social media makes democracy less democratic

By Rogers Brubaker

Anxieties that new communications technologies and media formats would undermine democratic citizenship go back more than a century. In the late 19th century, critics worried

about sensationalistic “yellow journalism”; a cartoon from that era even used the phrase “fake news. And indeed the newly cheap mass newspapers—in reckless disregard of facts—helped push the United States into war with Spain in 1898.

A generation later, newspaperman and political commentator Walter Lippmann observed that people “live in the same world, but they think and feel in different ones,” anticipating our current concerns about “media bubbles” by almost a century.

Yet the revolution in digital communication initially generated more enthusiasm than anxiety. Many believed that the internet would enhance rather than diminish democratic citizenship, by empowering ordinary citizens, bypassing institutional gatekeepers, enabling bottom-up mobilization and lateral communication, and making politics more transparent. It would thus foster more responsive government and enable more participatory forms of citizenship. Some forecasted that it would undermine authoritarian regimes, and indeed it was only a few years ago that commentators were celebrating the role of Twitter and Facebook in the Arab Spring.

Today the mood is much darker: The digital dream of renewing democratic citizenship has given way to a digital nightmare of undermining democratic citizenship. And not just because of Donald Trump. Trump is a symptom as much as a cause. It’s important to look beyond Trump—and beyond the discussions of fake news and Russian manipulation—to broader developments that have created a crisis of public knowledge.

The last decade has seen a transition from connectivity to hyperconnectivity. The share of the United States population over age 14 with a smartphone soared from a mere 11 percent at the end of 2008 to 75 percent at the end of 2014. The same period saw the explosive growth of social media. Regular Facebook users amounted to only 13 percent of the U.S. population at the end of 2008, but just four years later they made up more than half the population (and of course a much

higher fraction among younger people). Worldwide, Facebook had 10 times as many users by the end of last year—nearly 2 billion—as it had in 2009. Twitter users increased more than sixfold in the United States from 2010 to 2014, growing from 10 million to 63 million. More Americans under 50 today regularly get news online than from television.

Hyperconnectivity is not just a technological fact; it is shaped by—and shapes in turn—economics, politics, law, and culture as well. Our current regime of connectivity is based on digital surveillance—which has rightly been described as the dominant business model of the Internet economy. The core of this business model is the extraction of massive amounts of personal data from users in exchange for nominally free services.

This intensifying and ever more sophisticated system of corporate surveillance is more comprehensive and arguably more insidious than even the most powerful systems of government surveillance. It not only enables micro-targeted (and therefore more valuable) commercial advertising. More ominously, this system of surveillance enables micro-targeted and customized political advertising. It’s true that the claims of Cambridge Analytica to have decisively helped elect Donald Trump through such micro-targeting have been debunked. But increasingly sophisticated forms of data aggregation and analysis, which allow increasingly accurate inferences about individuals’ traits and dispositions, have undoubtedly made possible forms of customizable micro-targeting that pose new threats to the public sphere and democratic decision-making.

The threat goes well beyond the issue of fake news. Manipulative and non-transparent micro-targeting threatens democratic decision-making regardless of whether the targeted message contains false information.

Democracy depends on public discussion and argument. If political persuasion operates behind the scenes through

individualized targeting, it becomes inaccessible to public debate. The individual herself is unaware of being targeted, and since the message is invisible to others, it cannot be engaged or countered.

The threat also goes beyond targeted political advertising. Digital surveillance enables micro-targeted and customized content of all kinds, including news stories that are specifically tailored to the recipient. Such customized news content may be presented as part of a broader, putatively non-political effort to produce and deliver personally relevant information. But even if it is not intended to persuade, customized news challenges the very idea of the publicness of news, and it builds fragmentation—and even privatization—into the basic practices of the digital ecosystem.

The intensification of digital surveillance is driven by the relentlessly commercialized competition for attention. Obviously, this is not new—getting attention has been central to mass journalism for more than a century. What's new is the way in which attention is more pervasively and precisely measured, more precisely tracked across time and context, and more precisely monetized than ever before. The ubiquitous measurement, tracking, and monetization of attention have enshrined popularity as the ultimate measure of value (and virility as the highest form of popularity).

In the media systems of Europe and North America, the commercial logic of popularity has coexisted in recent decades with a professional logic of appropriateness, newsworthiness, objectivity, and—at its best—critical inquiry. But now the logic of popularity is entirely dominant, and not only in online media. As the head of CBS, Leslie Moonves, memorably commented in early 2016, the Trump campaign "may not be good for America, but it's damn good for CBS."

Moreover, the metrics of popularity can be gamed and manipulated. Popularity can be manufactured, for example, by

using bots to flood Twitter with messages and gain visibility as a “trending topic.” This manipulated visibility can then become self-reinforcing if the topic is picked up—as trending Twitter topics often are—by journalists.

There is a deep affinity between the commercial logic of popularity in a hyper-connected digital ecosystem and the cultural and political logic of populism. Populism is an ideology of immediacy or direct access. It challenges gatekeepers and mediating institutions—political parties, professional expertise, and the mainstream media—in the name of “direct access” to knowledge, direct access to culture, and direct access to political decision-making.

Digital hyperconnectivity seems to facilitate precisely such direct access. It seems to be based on disintermediation—on bypassing gatekeepers of all kinds and directly connecting everybody to everyone and everything (including all “the world’s information,” which Google’s famous mission statement claims to make “universally accessible”). Insofar as there is an ideology of hyperconnectivity, it is precisely a populist ideology, an ideology of disintermediation.

But in fact hyperconnectivity simply replaces one mode of mediation with another. In the domain of news, it tends to replace mediation and filtering based on professional judgment with mediation and filtering based on metrics and algorithms. Who sees what—in Facebook news feeds or Google search results—is not neutral or unfiltered. Rather, who sees what is governed by complex and utterly nontransparent proprietary algorithms.

The affinity between the commercial logic of popularity and the cultural and political logic of populism has another side. The pursuit of popularity in a hyper-connected digital environment accentuates the populist style of communication that already characterized media-driven forms of political communication well before the internet age—a style

characterized by dramatization, confrontation, negativity, emotionalization, personalization, visualization, and hyper-simplification.

The sheer superabundance of content that courses through the digital ecosystem also erodes democratic citizenship. Digital abundance is at once polarizing and paralyzing. There has been much talk of Internet-based filter-bubbles and echo chambers that segregate the public into separate cognitive, emotional, and political worlds. But polarization depends on colliding worlds, not on sealed and separate worlds. It depends on mobilization against a despised, feared, or loathed "other." Digital superabundance facilitates such polarizing mobilization by assuring an inexhaustible and continuously renewed supply of discrediting representations of "the other." Breitbart News, for example, sustains a continuous stream of stories attacking liberals, leftists, multiculturalists, Muslims, the mainstream press, as well as anyone else who attacks Trump.

Abundance also can be paralyzing. Research suggests that most people are more exposed to contrary views than the theory of filter bubbles would suggest. But this does not mean that they are critically assessing alternative perspectives. The sheer profusion and hyper-availability of radically different views of the world—not just differing opinions or "alternative facts"—can overwhelm people's limited capacities for critical appraisal and paralyze their faculties of judgment and discernment. Digital superabundance, in other words, can create a "blanket of fog." Inundated in a sea of information, pseudo-information, misinformation, and disinformation, people may feel powerless to cut through the fog and assess competing claims. And declining trust in the media—as well as declining participation in the interpretive communities fostered by churches, unions, parties and other mediating institutions—may lead many people to retreat into a stance of generalized distrust.

Digital hyperconnectivity has created a media and information ecosystem that is distinctively vulnerable to the propagation of fake news in the service of profit or propaganda. But fake news is only the tip of a much larger iceberg.

The social mediatization of politics, the intensifying web of surveillance and micro-targeting, the marginalization of institutional gatekeepers, the substitution of algorithms for professional judgment, the relentless pursuit and ubiquitous measurement of popularity, the accentuation of a populist style of communication, and the sheer superabundance of information, misinformation, and disinformation—all these developments have contributed to a crisis of public knowledge.

The institutions that generate, refine, assess, popularize, and disseminate knowledge—science, universities, and the mainstream and elite media—have suffered a massive loss in public trust and legitimacy. The digital ecosystem that incubates and circulates what purports to be knowledge is increasingly disconnected from these institutions. A mood of "epistemological populism" breeds a pervasive suspicion of expertise. Deep gaps divide the views of scientists from those of the public about subjects such as evolution, the causes of climate change, the safety of vaccines, and the safety of genetically modified foods. Robust conceptions of democratic citizenship are unthinkable without at least minimal assumptions about public knowledge and deliberative reason. But today even the most attenuated assumptions seem wholly untenable.

What can be done? First, since manifestly false news stories are just a symptom or indicator of a deeper and more systemic problem of public knowledge, strategies for addressing this problem must address this larger problem and not focus solely on fake news. Second, the problem is not simply technological but economic, political, and cultural. For this reason, we cannot simply look for technological fixes.

Third, Google, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media platforms must be held accountable as public institutions and de facto news publishers. They cannot be allowed to hide behind the claim that they are just neutral platforms, responsible only to their users for optimizing their experience. Just what form this broader public accountability should take is a difficult and complex question. But it is certainly not sufficient for Facebook to step up ex-post fact-checking on stories that have been flagged as problematic. That is too little, too late.

Fourth, the crisis of public knowledge makes it urgent to strengthen public broadcasting and other forms of public journalism. The commitment to public journalism has been weakening in recent decades in Europe and the United States. But now more than ever, that commitment must be renewed.

Lastly, we need to invent and invest in new forms of civic education that would seek to cultivate the new forms of literacy, numeracy, and critical intelligence that are needed for democratic citizenship in an age of digital hyperconnectivity. And we need new efforts to reclaim and rebuild a space of genuinely public discussion and debate to counter the growing fragmentation, privatization, and polarization of the digital ecosystem.

Rogers Brubaker is professor of sociology at UCLA. His most recent books include "Grounds for Difference" and "Trans: Gender and Race in an Age of Unsettled Identities." His current research addresses the pan-European and trans-Atlantic populist moment.

CPUC rules utility can’t pass fire lawsuit costs onto customers

By Kevin Fixler, Santa Rosa Press Democrat

State regulators moved Thursday to deny a California utilities giant the ability to pass costs from a wildfire legal settlement onto its customers – a decision that could have broad implications for the fire-ravaged North Bay.

With its unanimous 5-0 vote, the California Public Utilities Commission rejected San Diego Gas & Electric’s request for authority to hike rates to cover $379 million in uninsured damages it must pay stemming from three costly wildfires in 2007.

Ahead of the meeting, commission staff recommended against granting the petition that both Pacific Gas & Electric and Southern California Edison supported. Two of the agency’s administrative judges wrote a lengthy opinion outlining how they found the publicly-traded utility’s control and management of its facilities before the wildfires to be “imprudent” and “unreasonable.”

Read the whole story

Clean Tahoe rate increase in

the works

By Kathryn Reed

Clean Tahoe, the nonprofit that deals with trash incidents beyond the scope of the garbage company, is looking at ways to increase its rates.

All El Dorado County residents in the basin pay $4.80 a year for the service. South Tahoe Refuse collects the fee via its bills. The last increase was in 1999.

While the hope was to increase the rate as STR went through its process, legally this cannot happen.

“It’s up to the county and city what works best for them to fund the program. I think there are lot of different ways,” Tom Bruen, attorney for the South Lake Tahoe Waste Management Authority, told that board.

It’s possible Clean Tahoe could become a subcontractor of STR. This would likely trigger a revision to the franchise agreement.

The rate issue has been a point of discussion for at least 18 months.

The joint powers authority board at its November meeting recommended South Lake Tahoe and El Dorado County electeds come up with a plan to increase Clean Tahoe’s rates.

There was even talk of having Douglas County possibly be part of Clean Tahoe. No one in the room had knowledge as to why at least the lake portion of Douglas was not part of this entity.

The goal for Catherine Cecchi, who heads Clean Tahoe, is to make the program sustainable. She told the board further cuts aren’t possible. Benefits for employees were eliminated years ago. The income is so lacking that even buying a wheelbarrow

is challenging. The budget has been scrutinized at least by the former South Lake Tahoe city attorney.

Clean Tahoe is also on its last legs with one of its two vehicles.

The JPA board, which is made up of a rep from South Lake Tahoe (Wendy David), El Dorado County (Sue Novasel) and Douglas County (Nancy McDermid), told Cecchi to come back to them with particulars – namely a price – for a truck that Clean Tahoe wants to buy. The three at that time will contemplate offering a zero interest loan through the JPA.

Old ‘Welcome to Nevada’ signs a collector’s item

By Daria Sokolova View, Las Vegas Review Journal

When the Nevada Department of Transportation switched the design of the longtime “Welcome to Nevada” sign this year, a battle for the pieces of history ensued.

Department spokesman Tony Illia said he was shocked by the amount of interest in the old highway fixtures.

“You cannot believe how many people wanted those signs,” he said. “They were fighting over them. We had thousands of people calling and emailing me, and I was just flabbergasted. These are huge signs; you can’t just hang them up in your house.”

About 14,500 Nevadans entered the free raffle via phone, website and social media, and NDOT randomly selected four winners from each region of the state.

Read the whole story