Select California lawmakers had more money to spend in 2011

By Jim Sanders and Phillip Reese, Sacramento Bee

With California billions behind on its budget and public services shrinking, the Assembly collectively tightened its belt last year – but not all of its members did.

Records released under court order show that Assembly Speaker John A. Pérez boosted the budgets of six members by tens of thousands of dollars apiece despite the fiscal emergency.

Member-by-member records lift the curtain, for the first time, on how often Pérez used his authority to add to lawmakers' budgets, who benefited, and by what amounts.

Most Assembly members stayed within dollar limits set by Pérez; in fact, five legislators returned more than $150,000 apiece that they were authorized to spend, records show. But Assembly Republican Nathan Fletcher and Democrats Wilmer Amina Carter, Julia Brownley, Jim Beall, Sandré Swanson and Anthony Portantino saw their discretionary funding boosted by Pérez in a year when most state agencies were slashing costs.

Nearly every recipient of an augmentation from Pérez was a Democrat. The party's members control the 80-person house and receive the most coveted posts and largest budgets. Republicans typically receive some aid from their caucus to fund staff.

Any extra money from Pérez went to the members' committee or leadership coffers, not to their personal office budget of $263,000, making it difficult for the public to track how much was spent on personal aides.

Overall, the newly released records shed light on the extent to which legislators use committee funds for their own purposes: Of more than $17.5 million in committee funding last year, roughly $8.8 million was spent for committee staff and $8.7 million for office or district aides of their chairmen.

Totals are from Assembly data through mid-October and the house's own projections of its spending through the Nov. 30 end of the legislative year.

Robin Swanson, Pérez's spokeswoman, said that the Los Angeles Democrat "offsets any necessary augmentations by reducing Assembly spending overall."

Read the whole story

Angora Fire at root of youth's volunteer award

Ashlee Smith, 13, of Sparks and Angela Foremaster, 18, of North Las Vegas have been named Nevada's youth volunteers for 2012 by the Prudential Spirit of Community Awards.

The nationwide program honors young people for outstanding acts of volunteerism.

Ashlee, a seventh-grader at Lou Mendive Middle School, founded a nonprofit organization that has collected and distributed more than 175,000 toys over the past five years for child victims of house fires and natural disasters. When Ashlee was 5, her family's home burned down. Everything they owned was destroyed, including Ashlee's special toy – a stuffed horse.

A few years later, her father, a firefighter, was battling the

Angora Fire.

“He sent us pictures of destroyed houses and all included burned toys in the yards,” Ashlee said in a statement. “I knew right away how the kids were feeling, and I knew I had to help.”

That same day, Ashlee began calling television and radio stations, newspapers and local businesses to ask for help. Toy donations came flooding in. She spent her entire summer vacation organizing toys, posting flyers and appealing for more donations. With additional support from toy companies, Ashlee was able to fill a whole semi-truck trailer with toys, which she delivered to the children affected by the South Lake Tahoe fire. Since that initial fire, Ashlee’s organization, Ashlee’s Toy Closet, has continued its quest to make sure that no child is left without the comfort of a toy.

Last year, she provided toys for children devastated by the tornado in Joplin, Mo. Ashlee has also begun supplying Christmas and birthday presents for local needy children who otherwise would go without.

Angela, a senior at Legacy High School, collected small gifts to fill 250 Christmas stockings for foster children and homeless teens in the greater Las Vegas area.

As state honorees, Ashlee and Angela each will receive $1,000, an engraved silver medallion, and an all-expense-paid trip in early May to Washington, D.C., where they will join the top two honorees from each of the other states and the District of Columbia for several days of national recognition events. Ten of them will be named America’s top youth volunteers for 2012 at that time.

Snowshoe event benefits Eric Nageotte-Lowe Scholarship Fund

The Tahoe Mountain Milers Running Club is hosting the Fresh Tracks 5K Snowshoe Walk and Race on Feb. 26 at 10am at Camp Richardson Resort.

The beneficiary is the Eric Nageotte-Lowe Scholarship Fund for the Heavenly Freestyle Team.

Check out the website for complete information and a mail-in registration form.

Register by Feb. 15 and the fee is $30, which includes a sweat shirt, snowshoe rental, post-race refreshments, and continued day use of groomed Camp Richardson trails.

Sweat shirts are for the first 50 registrants.

Online registration is available.

Entry forms are available at Kahle Community Center, South Lake Tahoe Recreation Center, Lake Tahoe Community College, Eclipse Running in Reno, CV Sports in Carson City, and the Douglas County Public Libraries in Minden and Lake Tahoe.

Day of race registration is $40.

For those who like to compete, unique handmade age-group awards are three deep.

There will be barbecued sausages and hot dogs along with other post-race refreshments.

For more information, call (775) 588.2864 or email tahoecarol@charter.net.

Future of planning in Tahoe basin coming into focus

By Kathryn Reed

Artists' renderings of what Tahoe could look like are on easels. Talk is about not having a cookie cutter approach to planning. What might be allowed in one area won't necessarily be permitted in another. Incentives to rid sensitive land of development and instead concentrate redevelopment in central locations are goals.

For those who were around during the placed-based planning sessions of 2005 and 2006, the message of Wednesday's meeting sounded like something that should have happened six months, maybe a year after those meetings came to a close.

Those gatherings six and seven years ago were to give input into the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's update of the Regional Plan. That was supposed to be finalized in 2007. Now the target date is December 2012, with the draft of the environmental documents slated for release March 28.



TRPA Executive Director Joanne Marchetta on Feb. 8 oulines proposed changes to the Regional Plan. Photo/Kathryn Reed

While some point to the Angora Fire of June 2007 and then the attention being turned to all-things fire, as well as the shorezone plan as reasons the Regional Plan update got derailed, the overriding reasons are people couldn't even decide what should be studied in the environmental impact statement or the process to get there. Despite scoping sessions being under way in fall 2007 regarding the EIS, the process got hijacked by special interest groups.

Fast forward to Feb. 8, 2012, to a room at Lake Tahoe Community College filled with more than 70 people. TRPA Executive Director Joanne Marchetta is talking about how what is coming down the pike is part philosophical, part practical change.

Keeping the lake in the forefront

Lake clarity remains the driving force for what will be allowed to occur. But with the basin nearly built out, the emphasis isn't on stopping growth – that has been achieved – but on smart redevelopment.

“We got so good at stopping things in the 1980s that we locked the status quo in place,” Marchetta said.

She talks about the need to balance the environment, economy and community interests. The triple bottom line is what her predecessor called it.

Doing nothing will keep Lake Tahoe’s clarity on the downhill path, she said.

But spending a billion dollars in the last 10 years hasn’t helped it either.

“The emphasis in the Regional Plan, unlike the last one, is fixing the built environment,” Marchetta said.

The mantra from all regulatory agencies is the built environment needs to be improved. Fifteen percent of the Lake Tahoe Basin is privately owned. Of that, Marchetta said, 1 percent is the main contributor to Tahoe’s decrease in clarity.

Walk near the shoreline and so much is brown instead of “blue”.

Seventy-two percent of the fine sediment reaching the lake is from the built environment, including roads. Marchetta gave the example of people needing to sweep their garages. That is fine sediment picked up from area roads that eventually reaches the lake.

Local control

While none of the information above is new, what could be new if the Governing Board approves the Regional Plan update and no one files a lawsuit to stop it, is creating an arena where doing small or large scale projects are not time- or cost-prohibitive because of the permitting process.

What the committee putting together the Regional Plan wants to

do is allow the five counties and one city in the basin to develop local plans, have the TRPA approve them, and then most individual projects would never need a TRPA permit. Bigger items, like Homewood, would still undergo TRPA scrutiny.

Julie Regan with the TRPA told *Lake Tahoe News* after the meeting that these community plans would differ from the current community plans and/or plan area statements because the bi-state regulatory agency would approve them based on what winds up in the Regional Plan update. Then individual projects only need permitting by the local entity – not TRPA.

The six jurisdictions will have about a year to file a letter of intent with TRPA to create the plans. If that isn't done, then the TRPA will be the permit issuer. Time lines are not finalized as to when the plans would need to be completed.

To avoid the one-size fits all approach like the current Regional Plan, the committee is looking at allowing height and density variances from one area of the basin to another. For instance, a 96-foot high building might be allowed on the South Shore, but not in Tahoe City.

Local entities have been clamoring for more say in what their communities look like.

But some local politicians want more say in what goes on. (Only one elected official was at the Feb. 8 meeting – an LTCC board member.)

At the Feb. 7 South Lake Tahoe City Council meeting, Bruce Grego said there would be no way he would vote for the Regional Plan if the issue of drive-through windows is not addressed.

Supposedly that topic is being put on a "to-do list", but won't be an item in the update. As it stands now, no new drive-throughs are allowed. The longtime theory is idling cars are problem.

Arlo Stockham, TRPA regional planning coordinator, told the council on Tuesday, “In the area plan you will be developing, you can have drive-up windows. The EIS is not analyzing regionwide impacts of that change. It would require delaying the process or supplemental review.”

“This year people in the basin get justice or it’s the end of TRPA,” Grego said.

That statement is in reference to Nevada Senate Bill 271 that would have the Silver State pull out of the bi-state Compact if changes are not made.

What’s next

On Feb. 15 the TRPA goes to the Tahoe City Yacht Club at 6pm for a similar meeting to the one at LTCC. A week later, there will be a meeting in Incline Village about the Regional Plan update. Time and location are still being worked out.

March 28 the draft of the environmental documents for the Regional Plan will be released at the Governing Board meeting. People will have 60 days to comment.

In December, the Regional Plan is expected to be voted on by the Governing Board. Any litigation that might be filed must be done so within 60 days.

Credit union giving $10,000 in college scholarships

Ten students who live or attend school in El Dorado, Amador, Placer, Sacramento, Yolo, Yuba, Sutter, Butte, Contra Costa, Nevada, San Joaquin, or Solano counties will receive a $1,000 scholarship this spring from SAFE Credit Union.

Grade point average, financial need, community involvement, letters of recommendation and a personal statement will be judged.

Call (916) 979.7233 for a packet. The deadline to apply is March 12.

Placerville airplane broker accused of laundering money for drug runners

By Rick Daysog, Sacramento Bee

Federal prosecutors have filed criminal charges against a Placerville aircraft broker in a novel case involving the alleged sale of six planes to Mexican drug traffickers.

Joe Stancil, former owner of a Placerville Toyota dealership,

and his company Stancil Enterprises Inc. were charged last week with helping buyers from Sinaloa, Baja California and Sonora, Mexico, evade federal reporting requirements for large cash transactions.

“The principal object of the conspiracy was to … increase sales of planes at Stancil Enterprises Inc. by obtaining business from apparently criminal elements who wished to purchase planes with currency while evading all cash transaction reporting requirements,” the complaint said.

Donald Heller, an attorney for Stancil, said his client didn’t know the buyers and was not aware that the customers were involved in criminal activities.

Heller said he’s working out a plea deal with the U.S. attorney’s office that likely will include a deferred prosecution agreement.

Prosecutors also are seeking the forfeiture of more than $423,000 allegedly received from the airplane sales.

Read the whole story

Pet owners support changing trap regulations

By Mark Robison, Reno Gazette-Journal

Jason Ruckman took his two German wire-haired pointers named Gauge and Gretchen for a run in the ravine next to the South Valley Sports Complex last month.

The puppies ran a little ahead out of sight – they were being

trained to be hunting dogs – so he whistled to call them back. Only Gauge returned. That's when Ruckman heard a whimper.

He followed the sound and found Gretchen caught in a live box trap baited with a few meats. The trap also contained snare traps, one of which got around Gretchen's neck.

"She started struggling against it immediately and she started choking," said Jason's wife, Amie. "Jason was trying to help her and she was freaking out and completely panicking because her air supply was being cut off."

He ran to his truck, got lineman's pliers to cut her free and ran back, she said.

"By now she was not moving, she was passed out," Amie Ruckman said, her voice cracking. "Sorry, it makes me choke up every time I think of it. He had to give her mouth-to-snout resuscitation."

The trap was set by David Steven Fulton of Reno. The Nevada Department of Wildlife cited Fulton for having a trap within 200 feet of a roadway and for the way it was baited. The law restricts usage of game species as bait, including trout.

NDOW is helping the state Wildlife Commission develop rules regarding trapping near congested areas. The Wildlife Commission unveiled a draft trapping proposal last week that would make the use of traps illegal on public property within 1,000 yards of a residence.

Truckee River Winery looking for ice carvers

As part of the 2012 Snowfest, Truckee River Winery is teaming up with High Fives to bring you the inaugural ice carving contest – Wine n' Ice on March 7 from 1-5pm.

For those interested in competing, entry packets are available at the tasting room. The $100 registration fee covers the cost of a block of ice. The top three contestants will receive an assortment of wine and other gifts, plus win back their entry fee. Entry forms are due back to Truckee River Winery by Feb. 17.

Spectators are welcome. Cover is $20, which includes soup, chili, appetizers and dessert as well as one glass of TRW wine, and a souvenir wine glass. Part of proceeds raised will go to High Fives Foundation.

In addition to the competition, there will be barrel roll races, live music and other outdoor games and entertainment. Guests are encouraged to sport their favorite, most colorful spandex, with prizes awarded to Best Dressed Male, Female, Tandem and Group. All ages welcome..

For questions about registration or information about the event, call (530) 587.4626 or email info@truckeeriverwinery.com.

Dining at Dragonfly helps cancer foundation

Dragonfly Restaurant and Sushi Bar has paired up with Northern Nevada Children's Cancer Foundation to help raise money for children battling cancer.

The Basa meal prepared by chef and owner Billy McCullough will donate $3 of the sales to this foundation to alleviate the burden for three Truckee families.

The Northern Nevada Children's Cancer Foundation's vision is to reach every family affected by childhood cancer in the Northern Nevada and Eastern Sierra regions. Their mission is to enhance the quality of life for children with cancer and their families by providing financial assistance and compassionate support programs.

Take advantage of this chance to assist local families with children who are battling cancer from now through Feb. 28.

Dragonfly is located upstairs at 10118 Donner Pass Road, in the middle of downtown Truckee.

Reno teen shows anti-terrorism device to president

By Erin Kelly, Gannett

WASHINGTON — At the White House Science Fair on Tuesday, President Barack Obama joked that 17-year-old Taylor Wilson of Reno must have one of the most radioactive garages in the

nation.

Taylor, a senior at the prestigious Davidson Academy of Reno, has been studying nuclear science since he was 10 years old and got a chance to show Obama his patented invention to help detect highly enriched uranium and weapons grade plutonium.

“He asked what my parents thought about the nuclear material in my garage,” Taylor said after meeting the president.

But, all joking aside, Obama also told Taylor that his invention could help protect the United States from terrorists. In a roomful with a marshmallow-shooting air cannon and robots, Taylor’s invention stood out for its seriousness.

The teenager said his detection system could be used as a monitor at U.S. ports to scan cargo containers for dangerous radioactive materials that terrorists may try to smuggle into the country. He said his device would cost less than $100.

Read the whole story