Opinion: First Amendment hijacked by moneyed interests

By Robert Reich

A funny thing happened to the First Amendment on its way to the public forum: It was hijacked.

According to the Supreme Court, money is now speech, and corporations are now people.

Yet when real people without money assemble to express their dissatisfaction with the political consequences of this, they're treated as public nuisances – clubbed, pepper-sprayed, thrown out of public parks and evicted from public spaces.

The Supreme Court's Citizens United decision last year ended all limits on political spending. Now millions of dollars are being funneled to politicians without a trace.

The limits were eroding even before Citizens United. For years, large corporations have been flooding Washington with lobbyists who bundle individual contributions into a formidable war chest, bankrolling more and more lawmakers' campaigns.

And a revolving door has developed between official Washington and Wall Street – with bank executives becoming public officials who make rules that benefit the banks before heading back to the Street to make money off the rules they created.

Other top officials, including an increasing proportion of former members of Congress, are cashing in by joining lobbying powerhouses and pressuring their former colleagues to do whatever their clients want.

Robert Reich Robert Reich, former U.S. Secretary of Labor, is professor of public policy at UC Berkeley and the author of

“Aftershock: The Next Economy and America’s Future.”

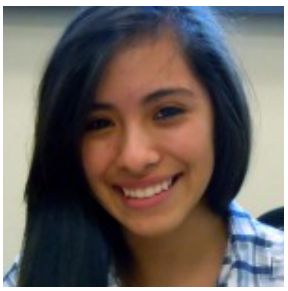
Read the whole story

8th-grader eager to use her voice to prove she’s got talent

By Kathryn Reed

At 13, Stephanie Hernandez doesn’t have the life experiences to write lyrics about the angst of a woman scorned, but she does have the voice and conviction to deliver the words for the world to hear.

The South Tahoe Middle School eighth-grader will be traveling to Anaheim next weekend to audition for “America’s Got Talent” – the popular NBC television show now in its sixth season that features potential stars competing in song, dance, comedy, juggling, magic and other talents. The end prize is $1 million.



Stephanie
Hernandez

Hernandez recorded Christina Perri's "Jar of Hearts" for her demo tape and plans to sing Carrie Underwood's "Before He Cheats" at the tryout Dec. 11.

Considering Perri got her break performing the single on "So You Think You Can Dance" and Underwood won "American Idol", Hernandez may be smart in picking music from established female television winners.

Excitement – at least on Friday – filled her more than nerves or butterflies. She admits that may all change in a week. While Hernandez considers the stage her friend, this audition will be the biggest stage she has performed on.

"I love the feeling of getting to connect with the audience. I embrace the energy and feed off of that," Hernandez told *Lake Tahoe News*.

She credits her dad's side of the family for her singing ability. She's been singing since age 3.

Country is her favorite genre, but she also likes jazz and punk.

She will be on stage today in Stateline as part of Miss Marcia's Lake Tahoe Shining Stars. Hernandez enjoys dance and acting, but it's singing that she is passionate about.

Hernandez can't imagine singing not being a focal part of her professional life in the future. And she wants Lake Tahoe to remain her home base.

She can be heard walking down the halls at school humming. In the shower, it's full on vocals.

To keep her throat relaxed her former voice coach, Susy Grubb, told her about sucking on black licorice and taking a teaspoon

of honey.

“It clears the throat so the higher notes seem more clear,” Hernandez said of the honey. “I do this when my throat is not the greatest and before I perform.”

Hernandez can’t say enough good things about her family, friends and everyone at STMS who have helped her reach this point. It was school receptionist Jo Walker who after hearing Hernandez kept prodding her to send in the tape. Teacher Carol Murdock was integral in creating the video. And Principal Beth Delacour is making sure her grades aren’t suffering with all of these distractions. She is an AVID student and has people in her corner who want her to focus on going to college, too.

But this week the spotlight is on her voice – and what she is going to wear. That she still hadn’t figured out as of Dec. 2. And shoes? And her hair? She admits there are lots of things to finalize this coming week that go well beyond singing.

If she’s picked, then it’s more tryouts in Las Vegas before going to Los Angeles.

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Hernandez will likely be giving a recap of her experience and a demo of sorts at the Dec. 13 Lake Tahoe Unified School District 6pm board meeting.

Nevada tax revenues better than projected

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – Despite ongoing volatility in Nevada's gaming industry, strong consumer buying is helping to keep the state's tax revenues on an even keel four months into the new two-year budget, state officials say.

Nevada's taxable sales increased by more than 10 percent in September, the first double-digit gain seen in the report since December 2010, which was helped by a large natural gas pipeline project in Northern Nevada. Before that, the last double-digit gain came in February 2006.

Car sales were up 9.4 percent in the September report, while business at bars and restaurants was up 14.5 percent and the accommodations category was up 21.6 percent.

Compared to the May 2011 Economic Forum projections, the general fund portion of the sales and use taxes is about 1.45 percent or $2.9 million above their forecast for fiscal year 2012 through September, according to the Nevada Department of Taxation.

Gaming revenues have been a disappointment, however, due largely to the influence the card game baccarat, played by high rollers on the Las Vegas Strip, has had on the monthly casino win.

The September gaming win was down 5.9 percent compared to September 2010 due in large part to baccarat.

Michael Lawton, senior research analyst for the Gaming Control Board, said gaming percentage fee tax collections so far this fiscal year are 7.4 percent, or nearly $16 million, below the

forum projections made in May.

The live entertainment tax collected on major casino shows is about $6 million above projections, however, which reflects the increase in visitor volume seen in the casino industry, he said.

“Every indication we get from the operators is that the business models are good,” Lawton said. “Everyone knows visitation is up, hotel revenues are up, air traffic is up. It’s just the volatility of baccarat tends to rear its ugly head. We’re expecting it to come back in, like I said, October and November, to have a couple of strong months to finish off the calendar year.

“We’re only four months in so I don’t think we need to push the panic button yet,” he said.

Nevada state Budget Director Jeff Mohlenkamp said in a statement that overall tax revenues are tracking above projections. The budget office will continue to closely monitor the collections, he said.

“We are very pleased with the increases in sales tax revenues,” Mohlenkamp said. “For fiscal year 2011 we experienced increases of 5.3 percent over fiscal year 2010. Further, sales tax has increased on (a) year-over-year basis for 15 consecutive months and is on track to outpace projections during fiscal year 2012.”

The 2012 fiscal year began July 1. Nevada’s legislatively approved budget runs for two years, through June 30, 2013. Sales and gaming taxes together make up about 58 percent of the revenue needed to support Nevada’s $6.2 billion, two-year general fund budget.

Nevada’s fiscal position appears to mirror that of many other states, according to a new report from the National Association of State Legislatures.

The organization's "State Budget Update: Fall 2011" analysis shows that only four states, California, Missouri, New York and Washington, are reporting a new budget gap since the fiscal year began. Fifteen states had reported budget gaps at this time in 2010.

"Better revenue performance is driving the improvement in state finances," the report said. "Collections in most states have stabilized or are growing, and the general revenue outlook for the remainder of the fiscal year reflects confidence in continued modest growth."

The report said of Nevada: "Nevada continues to experience economic challenges related to high unemployment and a weak housing market. Although these conditions have been considered in the state's revenue forecast for the current biennium, continued weakness in employment could affect sales tax and payroll tax revenues."

The Nevada Economic Forum, a panel of five financial experts who set the tax projections that must be used to balance the state budget, will meet Dec. 13 to hear an update on the state's tax collections. It cannot change the projects made in May that were used to finalize the current budget, however.

River's 'wild and scenic' designation may impact Yosemite

By Joshua Emerson Smith, Merced Sun-Star

A well-intentioned plan to preserve the natural beauty of the

Merced River may wind up limiting the number of visitors U.S. national parks can have at any one time.

A 1987 federal law designated the river as a “wild and scenic” location that needed to be preserved. To do that today, however, it seems that restrictions could be imposed on the number of visitors allowed into Yosemite and, ultimately, all other national parks.

Under a federal court order, Yosemite National Park officials will have to limit the number of people allowed in park locations at any one time. The ruling is aimed at protecting the Merced River under its “wild and scenic” designation.

Once approved, the plan probably will set a precedent for how all national parks regulate protected lands and waters around the country.

Public comments on the plan can be made until Dec. 14.

Based on a decision by the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in 2009, the Merced River Plan must include specific numbers for how many people can be in areas of the park at one time. This will be the third proposed plan by park officials after more than a decade of legal wrangling, plus $50 million in court costs and other expenditures.

Read the whole story

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5 U.S. women in top 30 in downhill; Vonn dominates

By USSA

LAKE LOUISE, Alberta – Lindsey Vonn of Vail rocketed to her second Audi FIS Alpine World Cup downhill win in as many days Saturday to notch the 44th victory of her career and 10th in Lake Louise.

Vonn has now stood on the top of the podium in three of the four World Cup races she's started this season including a giant slalom victory on the opening World Cup event in Soelden, Austria. The decisive 1.68 second victory was the second largest margin of victory in her career following the blistering 1.95 gap she put on the rest of the World Cup field Friday in the opening Winterstart race.

"It would be great to ski well again (Sunda) and go into the super G at Beaver Creek with a lot of momentum. I'm really excited to get back home to Vail and race in front of my hometown fans," Vonn, who has been having back issues, said.

French racer Marie Marchand-Arvier was second with 2011 downhill World Champion Elisabeth Goergl of Austria in third. Stacey Cook of Mammoth was ninth, Leanne Smith of North Conway, N.H., 11th, Julia Mancuso of Squaw Valley 23rd and Chelsea Marshall of Pittsfield, Vt., 26th as five Americans landed in the top 30 for the second straight day.

Horse meat may soon be sold in U.S. grocery stores

By Steve Timko, Reno Gazette-Journal

The slaughter of horses for food, stopped in the U.S. in 2006,

could resume again under action approved by Congress and signed by the president.

Congress agreed to start paying again for inspections of facilities that slaughter horses.

The Bureau of Land Management has no plans to change its policy that forbids using captured wild horses for meat.

Wild horse advocates call the action bad news.

BLM spokeswoman JoLynn Worley said if a buyer is known to sell horses for slaughter, the BLM can refuse to sell to them. Or if a buyer tries to sell a wild horse for meat, the BLM can refuse to sell to them in the future.

Wild horses have a freeze brand and slaughterhouses are instructed to call the BLM before killing them, Worley said.

Read the whole story

Vail Resorts changing its focus of lodging division

By Mark Harden, Denver Business Journal

Vail Resorts Inc. this week announced a “strategic shift” for its lodging division, saying it plans to focus on adding properties at its ski resorts and Grand Teton National Park rather than elsewhere, and anticipates staff cuts in the division.

“The current economic and real estate environments make it difficult to realize the benefits of growing our lodging

division outside of our mountain resorts and the national parks," Rob Katz, chairman and CEO of the Broomfield-based company, said in a news release. "We believe that by narrowing the focus of our lodging segment, we will provide an enhanced experience for our guests and better long-term profitability."

The new policy appears to have the greatest impact on RockResorts, a company luxury lodging unit that operates hotels at Vail Resorts' ski areas as well as across the Caribbean.

The company statement said Vail Resorts will "no longer seek to add new RockResorts-managed properties which are located outside of the company's six mountain resorts."

Read the whole story

Warning – be sure to inspect Christmas lights

Christmas, what a wonderful time of year. South Lake Tahoe firefighters would like to wish everyone a Merry Christmas and to remind you that when decorating your home, please inspect your lighting strings and extension cords for broken, frayed, or damaged wires.

Be careful not to overload an electrical circuit with the use of multiple plug connections or splitters.

Finally, remember to discard your Christmas tree soon after Christmas before it becomes a tinder dry fire hazard.

Happy holidays from the city of South Lake Tahoe firefighters.

– Sallie Ross-Filgo, South Lake Tahoe Fire Department

Opinion: Douglas County wrestling with declining revenues

By Steve Mokrohisky

Douglas County has faced significant economic challenges recently. Over the past four years, assessed property values have decreased by nearly $1 billion, and sales tax, room tax, gaming and building revenues have all declined.

The general fund, including sheriff, district attorney, judicial, community development and general services, has cut over $4 million in expenses. At the same time, the demand for public services and costs from the state of Nevada continue to increase. The state has increased its costs to the county by over $500,000.



Steve
Mokrohisky

In order to manage the reduction in revenues and increase in expenses, positions have been eliminated, regional partnerships and privatization have been initiated, and employees have absorbed health insurance and retirement costs, as well as salary cuts. Over 65 full-time equivalent positions have been eliminated since 2008 and many more positions continue to be held vacant to reduce costs.

For fiscal year (FY) 2011-12, county employees took the equivalent of a 5 percent pay cut and will receive no merit increases. Additionally, it is the county's policy that increases in health insurance costs are borne by the employee, not the taxpayer.

The county has completed a five-year financial forecast of the general fund with the revenue and expense information currently available. The forecast projects an approximate $3 million shortfall in the general fund for next fiscal year that would grow to $5.8 million in FY16-17 if wages are restored to previous levels. If current wage reductions continue, next year's shortfall would shrink to nearly $1.5 million.

With these early projections and no legislative session this year, we have begun work earlier than normal to identify solutions to fix the structural imbalance. Douglas County will need to continue to be diligent in implementing sound financial practices, reducing costs, stabilizing revenues, and using innovative solutions to eliminate the shortfalls and

provide the highest quality services possible to our residents.

Budget facts:

• Sales tax revenue has decreased 35 percent since 2006

• Room tax revenue has decreased 30 percent since 2006

• Building related revenue has decreased 67 percent since 2006

• 65 full-time equivalent positions have been eliminated since 2008

• Participation in recreation programs has increased 3 percent since 2006

• Sheriff calls for service have increased 8 percent since 2007

• Registered library borrowers as a percent of population is 72 percent – a 32 percent increase since 2006

• Social Service clients have increased 46 percent since 2006.

Steve Mokrohisky is manager of Douglas County.

K’s Kitchen: Leek and potato

soup

By Kathryn Reed

It's been a while since I subscribed to *Bon Appetite* magazine. Eventually I didn't find enough recipes for a vegetarian so I stopped paying the annual subscription.

Ironically, I was sent an offer for a year for what I think was $10. I signed up. I can afford that gamble. Then a few days after that a friend sent me a soup recipe (see below) from the May 1996 *Bon Appetite*. The food gods must be in alignment.



The recipe actually comes via Epicurious. The tagline to this website is: For People Who Love to Eat. It has a slew of categories ranging from Top Rated Recipes to Holidays to Drinks to International Cooking.

It's one of those sites that is worth bookmarking. They probably have an app, too, which could come in handy when you're grocery shopping and nothing sounds goods.

On the recipes online is a button to click to have a grocery list made that can then be printed or emailed. It even offers wine pairings. (Sauvignon Blanc is recommended for the soup below.) Under their preparation notes is a place to add your notes to personalize the recipe.

I doubled the recipe below because I like big bowls of soup, wanted to share it, and wanted to eat it more than just one day. And I'm glad I made so much because it is super good. It tastes like a cream soup but doesn't have all that fat.

Leek and Potato Soup (Serves 4)

3 T butter

3 large leeks (white and pale green parts only), halved lengthwise, thinly sliced (about 4½ cups)

2 large russet potatoes (about 18 ounces total), peeled, diced

4½ C (or more) chicken stock or canned low-salt broth

2 T chopped fresh chives

Melt butter in heavy large saucepan over medium heat. Add leeks; stir to coat with butter. Cover saucepan; cook until leeks are tender, stirring often, about 10 minutes. Add potatoes. Cover and cook until potatoes begin to soften but do not brown, stirring often, about 10 minutes. Add stock. Bring to boil. Reduce heat, cover and simmer until vegetables are very tender, about 30 minutes.

Puree soup in batches in processor until smooth. Return to saucepan. Thin with additional stock if soup is too thick. Season with salt and pepper.

(Can be prepared 1 day ahead. Cover and refrigerate.)

Bring soup to simmer. Ladle into bowls. Garnish with chives and serve.