Nepotism in state agency proving problematic

By Jim Sanders, Sacramento Bee

The state agency that decides whether teachers are fit for California classrooms has a record of hiring workers with family ties.

Last year, the employee roster included two sets of siblings, one father-daughter pair, and three instances in which the child of an existing employee was hired temporarily as a student assistant.

A recent audit found 40 percent of employees surveyed said that hiring and promotion at the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing are compromised by family relationships or favoritism – with 19 percent saying it occurs often.

The issue, one of many facing the commission at a legislative hearing this week, involves something that state agencies are not required to track: How often do they hire friends or relatives of employees?

Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg, in a letter to the commission, said the survey found hiring concerns that "strongly suggest the need for a shift to a more professional culture in the organization."

Commission employees provided state auditors with the names of 24 past or present colleagues who they contend are related to each other – a number agency leaders say represents only a small percentage of the 160-member staff.

Yet 43 percent of respondents at the commission said they fear retaliation if they file a grievance or formal complaint.

Read the whole story

Tourism agencies keep eye on gas pumps' impact on travel

By Bill O'Driscoll, Reno Gazette-Journal

As if Joe Kelley needed another challenge.



The interim CEO of the Reno-Sparks Convention & Visitors Authority already has made additional staff and budget cuts since he took over at the recession-weary agency in February.

Now soaring gasoline prices are muscling for his attention to the Reno-Tahoe region's crucial summer tourism season.

"We're very concerned, but certain things are beyond our control," Kelley said of gas prices that have blown past the $4-a-gallon mark. "It's just another battle to fight."

The last time prices were this high was May-June 2008. Then, some resorts, including John Ascuaga's Nugget, countered with gas cards and other promotions to lure Californians, the region's key drive-up market, who might have hesitated to cross the Sierra.

So far this year, the industry is holding back – but watching nevertheless as recession continues to thin travelers' wallets.

"We recognize gas prices could affect summer travel. We're looking to see what we can do to overcome that," said Nugget spokeswoman Missy Hinton.

At Lake Tahoe, “We’re not necessarily entertaining doing anything,” said Carol Chaplin, executive director of the Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority.

“The last time this happened, we might have fared all right based on our destination value. There are a lot of things to do,” she said. “And our (proximity) makes us look attractive to, say, a trip to Hawaii. The last thing we give up as Americans is driving our cars.”

Read the whole story

State gaming win increases; Stateline down 29.8%

By Cy Ryan, Las Vegas Sun

CARSON CITY – After three declining months, casinos on the Las Vegas Strip in March posted a 12.8 percent increase in gaming win fueled by strong showings in baccarat and other table games.

The state Gaming Control Board reported today the Strip casinos reported $527.2 million in win. The Boulder Strip was the only other region of Clark County to register an increase.

Strip casinos were the only area in the state to post a double-digit increase in gaming win, which is computed before business expenses and taxes.

Since November, the win at Strip casinos had declined compared to the same month of the previous year. But Strip casinos saw a 55.1 percent increase in baccarat win, a 23.9 percent gain on blackjack and a 62.4 percent increase in roulette win.

The win from slot machines increased 0.9 percent, while the sports book win fell 38.8 percent with losses in football betting.

Read the whole story

Teachers take their cause to lawmakers in Sacramento

Publisher's note: ***Teachers from Lake Tahoe Unified School District are in Sacramento this week. The union pays for subs in the classroom.***

By Jon Ortiz and David Siders, Sacramento Bee

The state's largest teachers union revved up its faithful Monday to lean on state lawmakers to extend current tax rates – and eventually increase them.

The daylong rally by the California Teachers Association kicked off a week of budget lobbying, press events and teach-ins by the union. Their plans and those of anti-war protesters this week prompted stepped-up Capitol security over concerns that some activists might stage Wisconsin-style sit-ins at the Capitol or commit other acts of civil disobedience.

Although law enforcement officials said the crowds were generally peaceful, they arrested about 65 protesters after warning them to leave the Capitol rotunda after the building closed at 6 p.m. They were charged with misdemeanor trespassing.

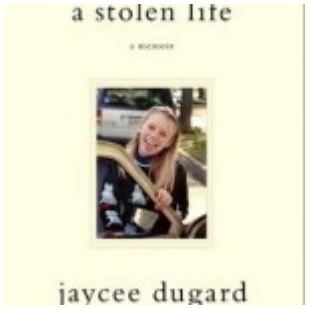
"We're not just here to lobby. We're here to raise some hell," Betty Olson-Jones, president of the Oakland Education

Association, said as the arrests began.

About 1,000 teachers, parents, school support workers and religious leaders began in the morning, urging lawmakers to immediately pass a tax extension to avoid deeper cuts to education budgets around the state. After that, they want a tax hike put before voters.

Read the whole story

Snippets about Lake Tahoe



• Jaycee Lee Dugard's memoir "A Stolen Life" will go on sale July 12.

• Lake Tahoe Community College Foundation's biggest fundraiser – Rhythms & Wine & Microbrew Too is July 9 from 6-9pm at the college. For more information, contact Melonie Guttry at (530) 541.4660, ext. 245 or email guttry@ltcc.edu.

• The 49th annual Lake Valley Firefighters Ball is June 18 at 8pm at MontBleu in Stateline. Tickets are $25 in advance, $30 at the door. They are available from a firefighter or at stations 6 or 7.

• The Food Bank of Northern Nevada is the 2011 recipient of the Mary Ruth Herbers Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Outreach Model Program of the Year Award from Feeding America.

• El Dorado County Sheriff John D'Agostini is having the

inaugural Sheriff’s Day on June 11. More details by clicking on sheriff invite.

Rib festival in Truckee a bit of a throw down

A broad cross-section of the regional culinary scene will throw down the competitive gauntlet at the second annual Truckee RibFest slated for Father’s Day, June 19, at Citizens Bank Plaza from 1-6pm.

Those participating in this good-natured grudge match include Men Wielding Fire Fine Food Catering, PlumpJack Café, Sunnyside Restaurant, Smokey’s Kitchen, Char Pit, Six Peaks Grille, and Truckee Pizza, which will offer some kid-friendly options.

Last year an estimated 500 people got their oink on at the inaugural event.

Event organizers have lined up a number of excellent caterers and restaurants that will offer their own creative variations on ribs. The event will feature judging by industry professionals for best ribs in addition to a People’s Choice award.

A beer garden, children’s activity area, free entertainment and more will round out the festivities.

Truckee High School Boosters Club was selected to be the event’s nonprofit beneficiary.

Adult admission is $12 in advance and $15 on the day of the event. Admission includes entry, plus two food tickets. Each

two-rib sampler costs two tickets. Sides can be purchased for one ticket. Admission for children 12 and under is $10 in advance and $12 on the day of the event. Children's tickets include entry, access to a fun activity center, plus one special food ticket that can be redeemed for hot dogs, pizza and other kid-friendly options. Additional food tickets are available at $5 for two tickets.

For more information or tickets go online.

The Truckee RibFest is a fundraising event produced by Switchback Public Relations + Marketing Inc. For more information, call (530) 550.2252.

Opinion: San Diego case hits correct note on redevelopment

By Dan Walters, Sacramento Bee

The timing could not have been more perfect – or more ironic.

As the Legislature mulls Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal to abolish local redevelopment activities, a San Diego judge has issued a denunciation of one redevelopment agency for running rough-shod over private property owners in its zeal to underwrite a big condominium.

National City, a suburb of San Diego, wanted to seize their property under eminent domain to facilitate construction of a 24-story condominium building. To make the seizure legal, the city declared the property to be blighted and needing to be cleared for new construction.

Taking property in that way was given broad clearance by the

U.S. Supreme Court in its now-famous – or infamous – Kelo decision having to do with a similar case in Connecticut. But to exercise that power, National City still had to meet the state's requirement that it prove blight.

One property owner, the Community Youth Athletic Center, resisted and challenged the city's blight designation. The center, which gives boxing lessons to underprivileged youth, received support from groups opposed to the broad exercise of eminent domain. And San Diego Superior Court Judge Steven Denton sided with the gymnasium as well.

Read the whole story

Tour de California riders use Auburn bike manufacturer

By Blair Anthony Robertson, Sacramento Bee

Jim Felt's career as a design guru and geek who owns an international bicycle manufacturing company may have begun with a run he never finished, a lunch he didn't hold down and the best $100 he ever lost.

In the mid-70s and still in his 20s, Felt was a hotshot motorcycle mechanic, designer and former racer who spent more time partying than taking care of himself. One day, a friend who was into physical fitness bet Felt $100 he couldn't run a mile.

"I was cocky and I told him, 'I'll take your money any day,' " Felt recalled recently, shaking his head and laughing. "I started to run with him and I don't think I made it half a

mile. I bonked. I was throwing up. I was schooled.

“It hit me so hard that I decided then and there I was going to learn how to run.”

He started with short runs, gasping and coughing along the way. But he got better, the outings longer. Eventually, he started riding a road bike so he could get involved in a new sport called triathlon. By then, the 5-foot-9 Felt had gone from 190 pounds to 145.

Read the whole story

Reno Discovery Museum making headway for fall opening

By Jackie Green, Reno Gazette-Journal

In what used to be the old Reno City Hall, a climbable tower of clouds hovers above an outline of the Truckee River. Where the City Council once met now stands an 8,900-pound mining tire. Whole sections of glass windows are being installed as child’s play replaces the serious business of the city.

Though still in the infant stage, the Terry Lee Wells Nevada Discovery Museum is beginning to take shape on Center Street in downtown Reno. The front of the building is getting a facelift to add a 2,700-square-foot lobby. A project that melds a children’s museum with a science museum and targets ages 1-14, the Discovery plans to open in September. Memberships went on sale Monday, a milestone in the seven-year-long process that has involved $20.3 million in fundraising. The museum itself will open in late 2011,

according to its website.

“Almost all of our funding has been local,” said Gretchen Kelly Bietz, director of development for the museum. “We’ve been well-supported from our community.”

When fundraising stalled last year, help came from fourth-generation Nevadan (and “Gilligan’s Island” TV star) Dawn Wells and an investing group of five Nevada women. They made a deal: If the museum board could find $6 million more, they would ante up the rest, ultimately donating nearly $5 million.

“For their gift, we decided to memorialize Terry Lee Wells,” Bietz said.

Read the whole story

Lake Valley fire chief hanging up turnouts for good

By Kathryn Reed

Jeff Michael is leaving home.

The Lake Valley fire chief is retiring after 32 years with the department. It’s a place he calls home. A place where the 59-year-old says he grew up and grew old.

He will be leaving June 24 – the fourth anniversary of the devastating Angora Fire. But that’s not why he picked that date. It just happens to be the end of a pay period.



Jeff Michael

Still, it was that fire of 2007 that Michael gets choked up about.

“To this day I still have nightmares about it,” Michael said. “That was my fire. That was my back yard. The heroic and valiant efforts of all the firefighting agencies was incredible. We saved a lot of homes, but we lost a lot of homes.”

Some of those 254 homes belonged to people who call him boss.

While the fire was fought by many jurisdictions, what wasn’t on U.S. Forest Service property, was within the boundaries of Lake Valley Fire Protection District in El Dorado County.

Michael’s voice changes tone as he talks about the complacency that has set in over time. he points fingers at individual homeowners and agencies operating in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

“I still hear people not wanting to do defensible space. If we had all the homes treated with defensible space, we would have probably saved who knows how many homes,” Michael said.

He’s frustrated he’ll be leaving before the Forest Service begins the 10,000-acre South Shore Fuels Reduction Project.

“People are not allowing the South Shore Plan to go through. Some environmentalists think it should not go through. And the treatment of the burn area. Let’s get that dead wood out,” Michael says with conviction. (A lawsuit has been filed against the Forest Service to prevent the removal of the dead

standing trees in the burn area.) “From a firefighting standpoint you need to get that out of there. It’s how you protect the homes there.”

The job has its good and bad moments – like all careers.

“You live for the moment, but you remember the good you do,” Michael said. “I’ve seen some of the faces of kids where their dad or mom was hurt at a car accident. You take them in your arms and you feel their pain. You can’t help but feel the pain and suffering you see.”

Defining the chief

Michael, who became chief in September 2005, is not just a crusader for his district, but an advocate of fire prevention throughout the basin.

“His leadership post-Angora would be the defining moment in Jeff’s career as fire chief,” said Guy LeFever, fire chief with Tahoe-Douglas Fire Protection District. “Replacing him will be very difficult. I hope they have someone locally who understands the political environment that Lake Valley resides in. The Angora Fire was an eye-opener. A tremendous amount of action has taken place since then. He was on the edge of that change.”

Being the top guy has not meant staying in an office all day.

“He leads by example. These guys would follow him anywhere,” Leona Allen, spokeswoman for the department, said. “One of the things I like about him is he is a chief that doesn’t wear a white shirt all the time. He will drive an ambulance. He will drive a truck. He will come in on his day off.”

Andy Kauffer, battalion chief for Lake Valley, doesn’t even remember how or when he met the chief – but before he started as a volunteer in 1992.

“He is extremely approachable. This district is his passion.

These guys and gals here are his passion. He has a huge heart, but also a firm hand," Kauffer said.

Kauffer remembers a call when he was a firefighter and Michael was a captain. They were at a structure fire, in the kitchen area of the two-story house. As they were going forward all of a sudden a bed falls through the ceiling, inches from them.

"We almost got taken out by a bed. We still can crack up about it to this day," Kauffer said.

Changing times

Michael has seen many changes in his career that has solely been with Lake Valley. The 1970 South Tahoe High School graduate started at the department in 1975 as a volunteer. Four years later he was hired full time. In all that time he never called in sick.

First aid equipment was left over from World War II when he started – which was 30 years after the war ended. It was in the mid-1980s that firefighters per California law became emergency medical technicians

One thing he would do differently is become a paramedic.

"They are quite spectacular out there in the field when you see them with the life-saving abilities they have at their fingertips," Michael said.

He points to the agreement Lake Valley and South Lake Tahoe have with the county to provide ambulance service as something to be proud of. He is excited telemetry units in ambulances that link right to doctors at Barton Memorial Hospital are being tested. That should all be permanent within six months.

Another thing Michael points to when it comes to patient care is the creation of the backcountry bags. It allows his men and women to go off trail with a small amount of meds, a heart monitor and be able to set up an IV for someone injured in the

woods.

One legacy he leaves behind is being an integral part in developing the fire academy at Lake Tahoe Community College. He points to Virginia Boyar at the college as the person who deserves the bulk of the credit.

However, Michael is not a big believer in the need to consolidate fire agencies on the South Shore or shut stations. A lot of that has to do with Lake Valley, South Lake Tahoe and Tahoe-Douglas operating with two people to an engine. The only way to get more personnel to the scene is to have another engine arrive.

Mutual aid is huge between agencies in the basin.

“We have always had consolidation talks. It has to be done for a reason besides money; it has to be because of better service. It has to be because taxpayers in the long run will make out on this. I don’t see it being at that point right now,” Michael said.

What’s next?

Michael and his wife plan to spend the bulk of their time on their 40-acre ranch near Markleeville. He’ll be tending to the chickens, crops and fruit trees. Retirement will also give him more time to spend with his three grandchildren.

As for his replacement, the five-member board that governs the fire district will go over the applications at the May 12 meeting. This is the first time the board has opened the position to applicants outside of the department.

“It’s bittersweet,” Michael says of leaving. “I’m always a proponent that change is good. They can get someone new in there, with new ideas.”