Ex-Tahoe resident files suit against Calif., Idaho

By Keith Kinnair, Daily Bee

SANDPOINT, Idaho – A Sandpoint developer is suing the states of Idaho and California, and various public and private individuals for alleged constitutional rights violations.

Daniel Jay Tonnemacher is seeking up to $2 million in damages, according to a lawsuit filed in Idaho's U.S. District Court on Friday.

Public records here and in California paint starkly opposing portraits of Tonnemacher. One image portrays Tonnemacher as a disgraced developer with a criminal record, while the other portrays him as victim of government persecution and corruption.

Tonnemacher, 63, said in the suit that he was falsely accused of an unspecified felony offense in El Dorado County about a decade ago and was unlawfully coerced into entering a plea of guilt.

He lived on the streets of South Lake Tahoe and Southern California when he wasn't incarcerated with unreasonably high bail, the suit said.

Read the whole story

Letter: Realtors give to Christmas Cheer

To the community,

The South Tahoe Association of Realtors board of directors held a special vote at their December meeting in response to news of flood damage from a burst pipe at the Christmas Cheer facility.

STAR donated $3,000 to Christmas Cheer to alleviate some of the financial impact to operations before the holiday.

Natalie Yanish, president-elect of the South Tahoe Association of Realtors said, “STAR allocates a budgeted amount each year for donations to local nonprofits, and now that we are at the end of the year, we expended all of those funds. When we heard about the water damage we felt we needed to step up and help, especially at Christmastime.”

Sharon Kerrigan, STAR executive vice president

Quagga mussel found in Southern California lake

By AP

VENTURA — Water district managers say an invasive and potentially destructive mussel appears to have spread to Lake Piru, marking its first appearance in Ventura County.

United Water Conservation District General Manager Michael

Solomon tells the *Ventura County Star* on Monday that while he awaits official confirmation, all evidence shows that the quagga mussel is now in the lake that provides irrigation to major county farms and drinking water to parts of Oxnard.

Water agencies in California have worked to fight off the quagga mussel, a prolific breeder that can clog pipes and machinery.

Susan Ellis of the Department of Fish and Wildlife says the mussel has invaded 26 California lakes and rivers since 2007, but Lake Piru is a rare case because it’s not connected to the Colorado River.

Deaths in Nevada linked to flu

By Angela Chen, KOLO-TV

The Nevada Division of Public and Behavioral Health confirms there have been recent deaths in Nevada and around the nation associated with severe complications of the flu.

However, Center for Disease Control and Prevention officials say it’s not a severe outbreak here and that this flu season is typical.

They also said that while the activity is currently considered low in the United States, it’s also important to know that the incidence of cases is likely to peak in February.

Read the whole story

Health insurance elusive for many Californians

By Ken Carlson, Modesto Bee

A much smaller percentage of California residents receive health insurance through an employer than was the case 25 years ago, a report said.

Data compiled by the California Healthcare Foundation showed that 54 percent of residents received coverage through their jobs last year. That's down from 63 percent in 1988.

Despite its reputation for sunny beaches and affluent lifestyles, California has more residents than any other state who live without insurance to pay for medical bills, which restricts their access to doctors and makes them vulnerable to financial ruin if they get sick.

Although more residents have resorted to public health programs, 1 in 5 Californians under age 65 have no insurance, the seventh-highest uninsured rate in the nation.

Read the whole story

Snippets about Lake Tahoe

• *Via* magazine in the January-February issue mentions Sugar Bowl as a place to kite ski.

• Brent Cutler sold the Sports Exchange in Truckee to longtime manager Rob Cavallo and Brian Murphy.

• Here is the El Dorado-Tahoe Caltrans roadwork schedule for this week.

• High Altitude Adventures, a shop showcasing locally produced products with a percentage of all sales going back to Tahoe area nonprofits, opens Dec. 28 at the Resort at Squaw Creek.

Gay athletes part of U.S. Olympic delegation

By BBC

The U.S. is sending two openly gay sports stars to the Winter Olympics in Sochi as part of its official delegation.

The move is being seen as a challenge to new laws in Russia which ban "propaganda" about homosexuality.

Tennis legend Billie Jean King and ice hockey player Caitlin Cahow will represent the US at the opening and closing ceremonies and other events.

President Obama, who is not going, said the delegation "represents the diversity" of the U.S.

Activists have urged world leaders to boycott the Sochi Games over human rights concerns, despite assurances by Russia President Vladimir Putin that gay athletes will not be discriminated against.

Read the whole story

Poll: Most in U.S. celebrate Christmas, but not all for religious reasons

By Lois M. Collins, Deseret News

QUEENS, N.Y. — Stafford Gregoire and his wife, Linda Chandler, love Christmas. They love getting gifts and giving gifts, and they'll happily greet you with a "Merry Christmas." But the season is, to them, a secular American holiday.

For Rachelle and Don Glenn of Holladay, Utah, Christmas is what the name says: A day to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. And while the family enjoys Santa and the gifts, the day's meaning will always revolve around its religious significance.

"We try to do the Sunday before with worship at our church," said Rachelle Glenn. "And Christmas Eve is more religious. We read the Christmas story from the Bible. We enacted it when the kids were younger, talked more about Jesus and read Luke 2. We keep (the religious and the secular) a bit separate."

With their eight kids, now 29 to 19, they let Christmas Day revolve around the Santa, gift-giving, playful side of the holiday.

These two families represent the two main approaches Americans have to celebrating Christmas. A poll by the Pew Research Center says most Americans do celebrate the holiday — nine out of 10 of them — but only half see it as a mostly religious holiday. A third see it as a mostly cultural holiday.

Read the whole story

MV Transportation to receive nearly $1.5 mil.

By Kathryn Reed

When all the settlement payments are made MV Transportation will get $1,475,965.89.

The Fairfield-based transportation company sought $3 million when it filed a lawsuit against the now defunct South Tahoe Area Transit Authority. The company contended it was owed $2 million for services rendered and another $1 million in lost revenue.

MV ran the South Shore bus service BlueGo starting in summer 2009. (Tahoe Transportation District has since taken over the operation of the bus service.) STATA severed the three-year contract after the first year. MV sued. STATA filed for bankruptcy. Settlements were officially reached in November.

The largest check is being written by Feldman McLaughlin Thiel LLP — for $650,000. Mike McLaughlin, when the firm was Feldman Shaw, was the attorney for STATA before it filed for bankruptcy.

Neither McLaughlin nor Feldman would talk to *Lake Tahoe News* about the settlement because the details of the firm’s negligent legal advice are under a federal seal.

The directors’ insurance settlement is $450,000. The suit against the individual board members of STATA was dropped. But collectively, because of their decisions to keep running the bus system without the funds to do so, the group is being held responsible. The STATA board never reduced service, racked up bills and ended up bankrupt. MV at the time was calling for a reduction in service.

The following are the settlement payments, according to court documents, that have been made to MV:

- MontBleu – $48,500
- The Ridge – $40,000
- Douglas County – $100,000
- Tahoe Regional Planning Agency – $25,000
- Lakeside Inn – $16,652
- South Lake Tahoe – $57,500
- Harrah’s-Harveys – $100,000
- Horizon – $21,500
- Tahoe Transportation District – $36,771.75
- Board of directors – $50,000.

This totals $495,923.75.

Others creditors besides MV will be receiving some money, too.

Opinion: Coca-Cola fights for farmers

By Joel Brinkley

Many Southeast Asians and others around the world owe their thanks to the Coca-Cola Company.

No, I'm not expressing gratitude for the sugary drinks that can help make people fat. But to make those drinks, Coke is one of the world's largest sugar consumers. The company buys sugar from distributors all over the world.


Joel Brinkley

Well, it happens that some of the largest growers and distributors are in Thailand and Cambodia. And as a recent lawsuit made clear, much of the Cambodian sugar is grown on large plantations that used to be farmland for hundreds of poor family farmers.

Across Asia, many countries are guilty of baldly seizing their citizens' land without significant compensation and then selling it to corporations or developers, leaving the owners homeless and often destitute. Arguably, however, Cambodia has the biggest problem. Over time, the Cambodia Daily newspaper reported recently, the government has seized almost 5 million acres — about 10 percent of the nation's entire land mass.

In Cambodia, human-rights advocates and others are now calling the crop produced on this illegally seized land “blood sugar.” (Sometimes landowners who refuse to leave their property are jailed — or shot and killed.)

The Cambodian government contends that the land seizures are actually lifting citizens out of poverty because the companies that buy the land create jobs. But in truth, it’s a net loss because the landowners are thrown off their property and most often find themselves unemployed.

It happens that the sugar grown on the seized land in question was processed first in Cambodia and then in Thailand until finally it wound up with Tate & Lyle Sugars, Britain’s largest sugar marketer.

Earlier this year, Mark Moorstein, a Northern Virginia land-use lawyer, took on a “blood sugar” case as pro-bono, charitable work. He and a partner firm in London sued Tate & Lyle. The suit claimed that “pursuant to Cambodian law, the claimants,” 200 villagers, “are the owners of the land” and “are entitled to the sugar cane.” Tate & Lyle, it added, “knew that the villagers were the owners of the raw sugar or ought to have known.”

As soon as the lawyers filed their suit, Tate & Lyle seemed to panic. Very quickly, it sold its entire sugar-production unit to American Sugar Refining, better known in the United States for its name-brand product: Domino Sugar. That company became the defendant.

Enter the Coca Cola Company. As the lawsuit rolled forward, the company apparently realized that its soft drinks were being made with “blood sugar.” Or perhaps the company already knew that — but grew contrite. After all, a Thai sugar-producing giant, Mitr Phol, gets much of its sugar from Cambodia and is one of Coke’s top three suppliers.

“The Coca-Cola Company commits to zero tolerance for land-grabbing,” the company announced in a statement last month.

Coke committed to hire third-party investigators to look at its sugar suppliers to be sure none of them is buying “blood sugar.”

Cambodian human-rights groups lauded the move. “Coke’s statement is a watershed moment for the communities” victimized by land grabbers, said Eang Vuthy, executive director of Equitable Cambodia. But he and others said they hoped that forceful action will follow Coke’s laudable statement.

Land-grabbing is endemic to Asia, including China, Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam. All those nations, including Cambodia, are thoroughly corrupt with court systems that often do nothing but mirror the government’s view.

In fact, a Cambodian human-rights group filed suit against a sugar-farm seizure in 2007, and to date the court still has not issued a judgment. Now, as one major Cambodian human-rights organization puts it: “In Phnom Penh and the 12 provinces” around it “land-grabbing has affected an estimated 400,000 Cambodians since 2003, helping to create a sizable underclass of landless villagers with no means for self-sustenance.”

That’s why Coke’s decision – if in fact the company follows through – is quite important.

Following Coke’s lead, PepsiCo investors filed a shareholders resolution urging that company to account for alleged land-rights violations in Cambodia, where much of its sugar comes from as well.

“As shareholders we want to know what PepsiCo is doing to ensure that its suppliers are behaving responsibly and preventing land conflicts from undermining its reputation and operations,” a shareholders group said. These people promised to bring up the resolution at Pepsi’s annual meeting early next year.

All of this holds the potential to benefit tens of thousands of poor Southeast Asian people whose governments are mercilessly victimizing them. The corporate “blood sugar” customers hold the greatest power to put a stop to these vile acts.

Joel Brinkley, a professor of journalism at Stanford University, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning former foreign correspondent for the New York Times.