Land trust assists Tahoe residents with affordable housing

By Kathryn Reed

A desire to do something for his community.

That is how the now 10-year-old St. Joseph Community Land Trust came into being. Lyn Barnett learned about land trusts at a planning convention in 2001. He was convinced during a lecture that a land trust is what Tahoe needed.

"A lot of long-term renters were asking for help because people were turning rentals into vacation rentals," Barnett said.

At the time Barnett was working for the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. Patrick Conway was the housing coordinator for South Lake Tahoe. Together they researched land trusts to figure out how best to form the local one. At the time there were about 100 in the United States, mostly on the East Coast. Now there are close to three times that number.

Creating a land trust to serve both sides of the state line made it the first bistate trust. It is also faith based, which is not unusual for trusts. Barnett has long been affiliated with the Catholic Church. One benefit for the group is the free office space at St. Theresa Church.

But when it comes to who is on the board, who is helped or who may donate, religion is not part of the equation.

“Our mission is primarily housing, but also housing education, and education that helps people with basic skills in financing to help their overall knowledge to better themselves,” Barnett told *Lake Tahoe News*. “Our primary goal is to help low and moderate income people, but also the general public through education training.”

(See note below about financial workshop.)

The land trust is the majority owner of Sierra Garden Apartments in South Lake Tahoe. The 76-unit complex is all affordable housing. No one has to pay more than 30 percent of his or her income.

Barnett said there is a four-year waiting list for the one-bedroom apartments, and a two- to three-year wait for the two-bedroom units.

Residents are able to serve on the six-member board of the trust.

Barnett’s measure of success for the land trust will be when a majority of the board members are residents. Now one of the six is a resident. He wants the people to have more of say in what goes on with their living quarters.

St. Joseph Land Trust also built a house on Tallac Street about four blocks from Lake Tahoe. The group was the first to do so under TRPA’s moderate housing guidelines.

It was then sold to someone who fit the economic guidelines. The trust owns the land it’s built on. The house must always be sold to someone who meets the moderate-income qualifications.

“The general perception is that the housing market is affordable. But it’s not to locals. And we also have depressed wages,” Barnett said. “Incline is high on our target list. They really see need up there.”

But he said it’s hard to convince businesses that it is good for them to have workers live locally. So they don’t give to the land trust, which could help provide affordable housing.

“In the future I would like to see more partnerships. If the economy is truly indeed improving, people need to know we exist and we can potentially help with their housing needs,” Barnett said.

Working with the local chapter of Habitat for Humanity is a possibility. They could do the rehab work on a fixer up that the trust would buy and then sell to a qualified moderate-income buyer.

A summer workshop geared toward seniors to teach them how not to be a victim of fraud has been talked about.

More information about St. Joseph Land Trust may be found online.

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Note:

The free financial education workshop at Lake Tahoe Community College is Feb. 25 from 6-8pm. The focus will be on financial goal setting, budgeting, money savings tips, and basic bank accounts. The speaker is from Wells Fargo Bank.

RSVP to (530) 541.4660, ext. 741 or email Alee@ltcc.edu. Space is limited. The event is in Room G4. St. Joseph Community Land Trust and LTCC’s Student Support Services are sponsoring the event.

2014 Winter Games not looking good in Russia

By Ryan Dunfee, Powder

When Mark Meadows first visited Sochi, Russia, in 2009, his first impression was how much work there was left to do.

“That was the first thing that hit you,” said Meadows, the vice president of Torrent Engineering, the company responsible for much of the snowmaking infrastructure for the Vancouver, Sochi, and the future Korean Winter Olympics. “You sat there and said, ‘OK, what’s the date? There’s a ton of stuff to be done.’”

The airport baggage claim looked more like a conveyor belt in a warehouse, and the entire airport held maybe 100 people.

Sochi in mid-February.

As he headed up the one-lane road into the Caucasus Mountains, he passed a couple of ski shops, but ski culture in this part of Russia was not an established phenomenon. The small village of Rhosa Khutor had one small ski area with some ageing fixed-grip chairs, and one twenty-room family-run hotel. The only evidence of a future Olympic venue were a few muddy roads leading up to an enormous mountain, and a remote camp of grizzled men living in shipping containers and tents, who were responsible for cutting the trails. They’d started only six months prior. Road access and telephones had only come into the valley 20 years prior.

While the Soviet Union was a force to be reckoned with at any Winter Games during the Cold War, after it collapsed in 1991, Armenia, Georgia, and Azebaijan broke away and became independent countries, taking the Soviets' best winter training facilities with them. So Russia has had to build its snowsports facilities for Sochi more or less from scratch. And Vladimir Putin – The Bear – is evidently using every ounce of his position, his dogged enthusiasm for sport, and undoubtedly many of his state cronies and oligarch friends, to muscle the 2013 Sochi Games forward to completion.

Now, 60,000 workers pound away 24/7 both in the palm tree-lined city of Sochi and in the "mountain cluster" where all the alpine and Nordic events, along with the luge and bobsled, are taking place. A new international airport has been built next to the quiet regional one that Mark flew into five years ago, as have countless high rises. The third-largest gas plant in the world has just been finished, with seven others on the way, to power both the construction and the Games. Twenty kilometers of high-voltage lines, along with high-speed light rail passing through 22 new tunnels, now march up the valley where only the tiny one-way meandered before.

Up in Rhosa Khutor, where the mom-and-pop hotel had been the only show in town,10 brand-new hotels and 1,600 rooms have opened, with some of the foundations for the buildings having only been poured in October. These look down on a river whose course is being moved by bulldozers. Where they had been no ski area, Dopplemayr gondolas and high-speed six packs climb 5,700 vertical feet to the summit, off of which lies alpine terrain to rival Jackson Hole. Putin is punching through the most sensational development plan of any Winter Olympic Games in history, as an event that's usually held in known ski destinations – Whistler, Salt Lake City, Nagano – is being held in a locale more famous as a summer beach retreat in one of the world's most controversial emerging powers.

But, as in Beijing, the coming out party is not coming together without controversy. Sochi is the warmest venue in Winter Olympic history. Despite the nearly 6K of vertical at Rhosa Khutor, leadership decided to place the halfpipe, slopestyle, aerials, and moguls venue at the bottom, where a climate change report revealed that average February temperatures are around 35 degrees Farenheit.

While the run-up to the Beijing Olympics involved a lot of talk about whether the city's notoriously noxious air would be clean enough for elite competitors, at Sochi the concern is whether or not there will be enough snow. The Chinese forced factories to close so air quality would be high enough; the Russians say they can bully the snow into existence regardless of temps via their "Hot Snow" program. The new snowmaking system is reportedly able to make snow at temperatures up to 60 degrees, while a reservoir near the alpine venues holds frozen snow collected from past seasons. In a no-holds-barred, hey-didn't-we-say-this-was-a-green-games approach, chemical additives are at hand to make the snow bond better, and the Ministry of Defense in Moscow even has its hand in cloud-seeding to ensure any rain might fall as snow.

Despite all this, halfpipe skiers at last week's Olympic test event were competing in the rain in a pipe slushed out by 59-degree temps. Nearby, a bare slopestyle venue sat layered with snow-saving tarps, that test event cancelled due to a lack of snow. Many of the snowboarders were saying it was Vancouver all over again.

Human rights groups have cried foul that many of the migrant workers building Sochi's stadiums and facilities have been abused as contractors push to meet construction deadlines. A heavy security presence alludes to the tension, both recent and past, that beleaguers the area. Almost directly off the back of Rhosa Khutor sits Abkazia, the disputed territory that was the subject of the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia. Abkazia's nominal independence is supported heavily by Russia and recognized by only five other countries. Georgia still considers the area a part of its territory.

Sochi itself was once the capital of the Circassians, a North Caucasian ethnic group that was expelled from the area when the Russians conquered the Caucausus in 1864. They still maintain that a genocide of their people has gone unrecognized, and a lobbyist for the group's 3.7 million-strong international diaspora wants athletes to know that they "will be skiing on the bones of our relatives."

Sports Illustrated's Alex Wolff recently wrote: "Putin is interested in much more than being a gracious and modern host. To maximize the nationalist passions on which his United Russia Party plays, The Bear must win." Only time will tell if the potential fissures in Putin's iron plan for Sochi materialize into anything more serious than a slushy halfpipe.

Incline's Pet Network looking for money to make repairs

Pet Network in Incline Village is looking to upgrade its cat and dog houses.

For more than 10 years, Pet Network has housed homeless dogs and cats in the shelter at 401 Village Blvd. During this period, almost 10,000 abandoned animals have found temporary sanctuary while awaiting their adoptive families.

Pet Network is a nonprofit organization that relies on the goodwill of donors to cover operating expenses. Adoption fees are only a token amount of the needed funds to sustain the operations. Necessary funds are raised each year through major events like the annual Fur Ball and smaller events such as Strut Your Mutt and Purses for Pets. Dog and cat boarding, doggie day care and the sale of Science Diet food and pet supplies also help cover costs.

And more recently, the organization has begun offering veterinary services to the public.

All of these efforts result year-after-year in barely breaking even.

Now Pet Network is saddled with some extraordinary maintenance and building repair expenses, to the tune of $100,000. Constant sterilization of surfaces plus human and four-legged traffic have taken a toll. Some of the needed repairs include replacement of cracked and chipped flooring, fixing heating/ventilation/air conditioning systems and raising the height of fencing.

The goal is to raise $100,000 from individual donations by the end of March. To date, $34,000 has been raised.

To make a donation, visit the shelter or contact Becky at (775) 832.4404, ext. 114, or mail a check to the shelter at 401 Village Blvd., Incline Village, NV 89451.

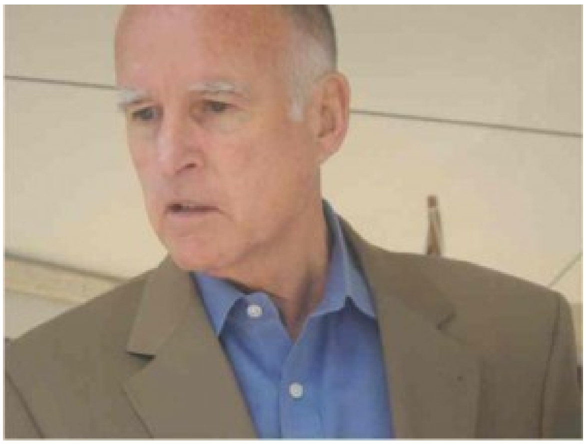
Brown wants local control for school districts

By Sharon Noguchi, San Jose Mercury News

Jerry Brown is pushing an appealing idea: Local control for local schools.

Bucking a national trend, the governor wants to back the state away from making schools account for their spending and for punishing them if their students lag in achievement.

But, perhaps surprisingly, school officials aren't jumping up and down about the proposal.



Gov. Jerry Brown wants to revamp education in California. Photo/LTN file

Elsewhere, education is becoming more results-driven, with everyone from Uncle Sam down to the smallest startup charter school demanding more and more evidence, usually through test scores, that they're getting enough bang for their buck.

The governor wants none of that – but it's unlikely he will get his way and free schools entirely from state oversight. Brown is proposing that school districts tie their plans for student achievement to their budgets. The 58 county offices of education would have the responsibility of approving those plans.

“A central authority should only perform those tasks which cannot be performed at a more immediate or local level,” Brown said in his State of the State address.

“We are moving more authority, accountability and responsibility down to the local level,” said H.D. Palmer, spokesman for the state Department of Finance.

The governor would free schools from line-item reviews in Sacramento over how they spent specific pots of money, and wants the state not to punish schools whose students are failing. Instead, Brown puts his faith in the power of the people – to turn local school board members out of office if their schools don’t perform.

Many school officials like the possibility of reducing accounting and paperwork.

“I really appreciate that,” said Scott Laurence, superintendent of the San Mateo Union High School District. He’d like more leeway in using funds in ways the district determines best serves students.

But he worries that without specific state demands, schools won’t always pay as much attention as they should to various student needs.

In fact, Brown’s proposal sounds like it would take schools back 70 years, when local districts answered only to themselves and their voters. What prompted the state legislators to create 60-odd educational programs – focusing on migrant children, gifted and talented students, English-language learners, arts, counseling and more – was that schools weren’t meeting perceived needs.

“They have forced school districts to pay attention to groups of students that haven’t been a major emphasis for school districts,” Laurence said.

What’s more, the state Supreme Court has ruled that the state has a constitutional obligation to ensure that all students have basic equality of opportunity in education. “That’s a non-delegable role,” said John Affeldt, managing attorney of Public Advocates, a public-interest law firm that has sued the state on various school-equity issues.

That said, Affeldt too thinks the state is overly focused on specific kinds of achievement. “I think the pendulum probably has swung too far to narrow the whole focus of our educational venture around performance.”

And while he advocates pushing the pendulum back, he said, “we can’t swing it all the way back to the 1950s.”

Brown may not want to tell districts how to spend money, but state legislators could have other ideas. “The Legislature has never shown any evidence they believe in local control,” said Ron Bennett, president of School Services Inc., which advises most of the 1,000 school districts in the state on state education finance and law.

But whatever Sacramento decides, it will retain the role of enforcer of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which demands that schools receiving federal aid attain minimal levels of proficiency. The state jumps in with advisers and money – up to $100,000 per school – when districts have large numbers of failing students. Nearly half of California’s 1,000 school districts fall into that category, called “program improvement” by the federal government.

Even as school officials concede that it is cumbersome to answer to higher authorities, they point out that student achievement has steadily grown in the decade since the state beefed up its academic oversight. In addition, a laissez-faire accountability system could make comparisons among school districts tricky.

If each district chooses how it wants to look at accountability, said Mike Nebesnick, director of educational accountability for San Jose Unified, “I don’t think they’re going to be lined up.”

Brown stands behind the principle of “subsidiarity,” which he said is violated “when distant authorities prescribe in minute detail what is taught, how it is taught and how it is to be measured.”

But as much as educators may like flexibility, they worry mostly about funding. Californians have to demand an increase in per-pupil funding, said Wesley Smith, superintendent of the Morgan Hill Unified School District. “We are still 48 out of 50 in per-pupil funding. California students deserve more.”

Law would shield public real estate transactions

By Jim Sanders, Sacramento Bee

When CalPERS balked at releasing records that could shed light on its decision to invest $100 million in an East Palo Alto housing project that failed, a judge ordered disclosure nearly three years ago.

San Francisco Superior Court Judge Charlotte Woolard’s ruling said it is difficult to imagine a more critical time for public scrutiny of the decision-making process than when public funds are at stake.

But newly proposed legislation would make such real estate records confidential in the future, requiring public agencies to disclose gains or losses on a project but not documents that could show why a deal was made, risks involved, marketing strategy or partnership terms.

Assemblyman Kevin Mullin said his Assembly Bill 382 is designed to strike a balance between open government and the need to protect public investments from competitive disadvantage.

Withholding “sensitive information” about real estate deals is in the public interest to “ensure that pension funds are as profitable as possible so that taxpayers aren’t left holding the bag,” said Mullin, D-South San Francisco.

The California Public Employees’ Retirement System has taken no position on AB382, which is sponsored by the State Association of County Retirement Systems.

California’s pension systems invest massive sums in real estate — CalPERS, for example, had real estate investments exceeding $24 billion on Jan. 1, roughly 10 percent of its total investments.

Peter Scheer, director of the First Amendment Coalition, which sued CalPERS in the East Palo Alto case, said the pension agency has been involved in large real estate deals that went sour.

AB382 would “increase the chances that mistakes will be made in real estate investments” because critics would be deprived of documents that could prompt them to raise red flags, Scheer said.

“I think public pensioners and the taxpayers generally benefit from as much transparency as possible,” he said.

The East Palo Alto project raised public-policy as well as investment issues after tenants complained they were harassed and driven out in an effort to circumvent the city’s rent-control laws.

AB382 would add real estate to a list of “alternative investment vehicles” for public agencies – including hedge funds, venture capital funds and private equity funds – that generate internal documents that have been exempt from disclosure since 2005.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed the limited exemption in 2005, responding to concerns that state agencies would lose lucrative opportunities to partner with private investment groups because proprietary information might be released through public records requests.

A legislative analysis of the 2005 legislation, Senate Bill 439, said that investments by the University of California in its top two performing funds over a 14-year period, generating $1.84 billion for UC, were in jeopardy unless changes were made to public records law.

The 2005 bill was a compromise stemming partly from litigation by the First Amendment Coalition and others that resulted in CalPERS disclosing its fees to venture capital firms. The McClatchy Co., owner of the *Bee*, is a member of the First Amendment Coalition.

Specifically, the changes from 2005 require public agencies to release records identifying each investment, dollars committed, profits, cash distributions, internal rates of return, and management fees and costs.

However, public agencies can withhold investment agreements, capital call notices, portfolio positions, due diligence materials, information distributed at partner meetings, and quarterly or annual financial statements about a project.

Robert Van Der Volgen, chief counsel for the Los Angeles County Employees Retirement Association, said AB382 would protect strategic real estate records that could be exploited by other investors.

“We get lots of requests from people who just want to compete: What’s your rental rate? What’s your lease rate? If I tell you that, especially if you own the building across the street, I basically just put myself at a competitive disadvantage,” Van Der Volgen said.

Attorney Karl Olson, who filed the East Palo Alto lawsuit, said that AB 382 could result in withholding documents that could show, for example, that a staff recommendation not to invest in a massive project had been ignored or that a private partner was nearly bankrupt when a big deal occurred.

Scheer said that state law already provides confidentiality if an agency can show that withholding a document “clearly outweighs the public interest served by disclosure.” It also exempts appraisals and other real estate-related evaluations prior to a sale involving public funds.

“Beyond that limited exception, I think the rule should be – and it should apply to real estate transactions as much as any other – that the public is entitled to know all the basic information about these kinds of deals,” Scheer said.

Opinion: McClintock is wrong about corporate taxes

By Patrick Stelmach

Tax dodging is unfair and unpatriotic. The United States of America is home to the most successful corporations in the world, because we are the land of opportunity and equality. However, these values and freedoms are being eroded by tax dodgers.

A small group of corporations exploit loopholes in our tax code by shipping profits to offshore bank accounts to avoid paying taxes, cheating the American people out of$150 billion a year. When anyone dodges taxes, it adds to the deficit and the burden imposed on hard-working, tax-paying Americans through cuts to education and other programs.

Volunteers with California Fair Share collect signatures. Photo/Provided

We can begin to balance our budget and build a stronger economy by closing tax loopholes and ensuring everyone pays their fair share.

Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Granite Bay, would rather keep giving tax breaks to corporations and the wealthy than properly fund our schools and support the middle class. During a town hall meeting Wednesday evening, I asked Rep. McClintock if he would close the corporate tax loopholes and put that money towards education and paying down the debt. Rep. McClintock said he would only end the loopholes if that money were given right back to those corporations through lowering tax rates.

All corporations should pay their taxes like the rest of us. If we close corporate tax loopholes and lower corporate tax rates by the same amount, as Rep. McClintock proposes, we are still letting corporations get away without paying their fair share in taxes.

While the top corporate tax rate is 35 percent, most corporations pay much less in taxes due to loopholes, deductions and subsidies. Total corporate federal taxes fell to 12.1 percent of profits earned from activities within the U.S. in 2011 – a 40-year low, according to the Congressional Budget Office.

Some corporations, like General Electric, paid no taxes to the federal government for several years, because the company aggressively exploits loopholes and ships much of their profits to foreign bank accounts in countries like the Cayman Islands.

Across-the-board cuts, called the sequester, are set for March 1, a prospect that is scaring economists and local leaders alike. The sequester, it is estimated, will have numerous impacts, including a loss of one million jobs and small business loans reduced by $540 million.

With Congress trying to reach a compromise between Republicans and Democrats, Rep. McClintock should do everything within his power to ensure the final budget deal closes outrageous corporate tax loopholes to help reduce the deficit and pay for national priorities.

Patrick Stelmach is the state organizer for California Fair

Share, a statewide, grassroots field and advocacy group, working to provide every Californian with a fair shot, make sure everyone pays their fair share, and that everybody plays by the same set of rules.

Snippets about Lake Tahoe

• Dave Matthews Band will make its first appearance at the Lake Tahoe Outdoor Arena at Harveys in Stateline on Sept. 4. Tickets are available starting March 22.

• Here are Caltrans' roadwork schedules for the week for El Dorado-Tahoe and Sierra.

• Scott Parker has joined the Carson City branch of AAA as the branch manager.

• Barton Women's Health open house is Feb. 26 from 4-6pm. The office is at 2175 South Ave., South Lake Tahoe.

• On March 6 from 6-7pm there is a free lecture on Nutrition and Aging in the board room of Lake Tahoe Community College. Learn about changes to your body as you age; nutrients and supplements to care about; and the truth about weight and exercise.

California making provisions if Nevada leaves TRPA Compact

By Kathryn Reed

Two California state senators introduced a bill on Friday that would bring changes to the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

SB630 amends a series of sections of government code relating to the California Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. The bill is authored by state Sens. Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills, and Darrell Steinberg, D-Sacramento.

California is working on protecting its assets at Lake Tahoe. Photo/LTN file

It asks that the TRPA Regional Plan adopted in December be recognized.

The bill talks about California needing a contingency plan if Nevada goes forward with the provisions in its Senate Bill 271 which calls for the Silver State to withdraw from the bistate Compact in 2015. SB271 was passed two years ago when it looked like the Regional Plan might not get adopted and was at a time when the states were not playing nice.

Since then, officials from both state governments helped create a bridge to compromise that led to the near unanimous adoption of the Regional Plan more than two months ago.

There has been talk among Nevada legislators to repeal that bill in the current session. But the Sierra Club and Friends of the West Shore lawsuit to prevent the Regional Plan from taking effect could play a role in what Nevada does.

The California law introduced Feb. 22 says, “For California to have due time to protect its many interests in the Tahoe basin, the state will need to have a contingency plan in place prior to the dissolution of the bistate Compact, as contemplated by Senate Bill 271.”

It goes on to say, “The bill would revise the membership of the governing body of the agency to eliminate the existing five members of the governing body, and prescribe requirements for the appointment of a new nine-member governing board. The bill would also revise the composition of a technical advisory committee required to be appointed by the agency, and would request the participation of a representative of the governing board of the Nevada Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. The bill would eliminate a provision authorizing the governing body of the agency to contract with the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency for services.”

If Nevada rescinds SB271 and remains part of the Compact that the federal government established more than 40 years ago, then SB630 would likely not go forward.

Pile burning to begin on North Shore

The North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District is planning on conducting pile burning efforts, weather conditions permitting, in the Gale Street and Lariat Circle areas Feb. 25-28.

Smoke resulting from the pile burns will affect the surrounding areas for approximately 24 hours. People who are smoke sensitive are advised to please stay inside and close their windows and doors as much as possible until the smoke dissipates.

For further information, or to be added to the district's smoke sensitive notification list, please call the Fire District at (775) 831.0351, ext. 0.

Emerald Bay on a stormy day

Waves lap on the shore of Emerald Bay near Eagle Point on Feb. 23.