Vail Resorts lowers profit expectations

By Mark Harden, Denver Business Journal

Vail Resorts Inc. said Tuesday it saw a 4.3 percent rise in lift ticket revenue and a 2 percent gain in total skier visits for the 2012-13 ski season through Sunday from the same period of last year's winter season.

But the ski resort operator also pulled back on its profit guidance for fiscal-year 2013, with CEO Rob Katz citing "the challenging early season."

Broomfield-based Vail Resorts – operator of Heavenly, Northstar, Kirkwood as well as Colorado's Vail, Breckenridge, Beaver Creek and Keystone ski resorts – also posted year-over-year increases in various other revenue streams in a report Tuesday.

It said dining revenue was up 9 percent from a year earlier, retail and rental revenue rose 7.7 percent, and ski school revenue was up 2.9 percent.

But despite year-over-year revenue increases that were boosted by generous snow over the holidays, results were hampered by weaker snow through mid-December, "when conditions at our Colorado resorts were very poor and highly unusual," Katz said.

The company said it now projects fiscal-year 2013 net income of $38.9 million to $48.9 million, down from the $50 million to $60 million it projected in September.

Vail Resorts' fiscal year runs through July 31.

The revenue numbers for the 2011-12 season were adjusted to include revenue from Kirkwood resort, which Vail Resorts

acquired in April 2012.

The comparisons cover seven ski areas, but do not include two recently acquired “urban” ski resorts, Afton Alps in Minnesota and Mount Brighton in Michigan, the company said.

In other news, Vail Resorts said Tuesday it is adding Bruce Sewell, senior vice president and general counsel of Apple Inc., to its board. Sewell is a former professional ski patroller.

$14,000 in grant funds available for special events

The North Lake Tahoe Chamber/CVB/Resort Association is accepting applications for the 2012-13 Special Events Grant Program until Feb. 22 at 5pm.

There is $14,000 available to award recipients to be used this fiscal year that ends June 2013, or next fiscal year. The available funds are open to those with events planned for the Placer County/North Lake Tahoe region. The majority of grants awarded will be between $500 and $2,500.

For more information, contact Judy Laverty at (530) 581.8702 or judy@puretahoenorth.com.

Brown presses for efficiencies at California's universities

By David Siders, Sacramento Bee

Gov. Jerry Brown, who paid relatively little attention to the University of California for the first two years of his term, started showing up for board meetings late last year, urging spending reductions as part of a "new paradigm" in higher education.

"We are going to have to restrain this system in many, many of its elements," Brown said in November, "and this will come with great resistance."

If his intentions were not entirely clear, they became so Thursday, when Brown released his annual budget plan. He chastised the UC and California State University systems for years of cost increases and rising tuition. Though he proposed additional funding of $250 million next year for each system, the amount fell short of what they requested.

"The phrase is, 'Deploy your teaching resources more effectively,'" Brown said.

The Democratic governor said he will attend meetings of the UC and CSU governing boards this month to press for improved graduation rates and operational efficiencies, including online education.

"Oh to be a fly on the wall," Assemblywoman Kristin Olsen, R-Modesto, said on Twitter, anticipating "sparks."

Brown acknowledged meetings with UC officials last year "didn't turn out to be as productive as I would like," but he said discussions are still "embryonic."

“We haven’t totally clarified … what’s at stake here or what has to be done, so I want to move diplomatically but carefully,” he said.

Brown said he will be “listening a lot, meeting behind the scenes and figuring out, can we turn down this relentless increase in spending that is so much higher than the normal cost of living.”

In his budget proposal, Brown said that while “other public agencies were retrenching, UC expenditures increased by 15 percent and CSU expenditures increased by 3 percent” since 2007. He lamented that only 16 percent of CSU students complete degrees within four years and 60 percent of students do so at UC.

“The rising cost of higher education not only threatens affordability, it also threatens the quality of California’s system of higher education as it relies on a model that is not sustainable,” Brown said in his budget plan.

It is unclear how receptive UC regents will be to Brown’s involvement in their affairs. The university system is administered independently by the regents and subject to only limited legislative oversight.

“You can’t, and we wouldn’t want to, impose some sort of mandates on them,” the state Department of Finance’s Nick Schweizer told reporters in a conference call after the budget’s release. “But at the same time we do want to move them in a better direction as to where things have been going.”

Patrick Lenz, UC’s vice president for budget and capital resources, said in a prepared statement that the university had absorbed nearly $1 billion in state funding cuts during the past five years and that Brown’s budget proposal is a “very positive step forward in a process that will unfold over the next several months.”

Lenz said UC has already enacted significant spending cuts and blamed “the state’s recent disinvestment in higher education” for forcing tuition increases. He said UC shares Brown’s interest in avoiding tuition hikes.

“In the end, however,” Lenz added, “the university must always work to assure that its fundamental attribute remains intact, and that is the quality of education, research, health care and public service that the state has come to expect from its university.”

While UC officials had raised the possibility of tuition increases despite passage of Proposition 30, Brown’s November tax initiative, a UC administrator said Friday that the governor’s budget plan appears to provide sufficient revenue to avoid them.

“When you add everything up, I think our initial reaction is that we can manage without a tuition increase for ’13-’14,” said Daniel Dooley, senior vice president of external relations at UC. “We’re pretty excited about what he’s proposed.”

In a prepared statement, CSU Chancellor Timothy White said Brown’s proposal “heads us in the right direction.” However, he said the college system still faces “many fiscal challenges.”

At the Capitol, Brown was widely praised by lawmakers for the additional college funding he proposed.

“I think it’s a good signal from the governor that he wants to be supportive, and I hope that, in turn, our CSU system and our UC system see it that way, and there’s better interactions and better rapport,” said Assemblywoman Nancy Skinner, D-Berkeley.

“If I were a UC administrator, I would take that proposed budget as … an olive branch, a sign that the governor values

the role of higher education in California and wants to work with the UC system to make it better."

Raquel Morales, president of the UC Student Association, said Brown's funding proposal is "the bare minimum that we expected" and that UC remains underfunded.

"We don't know what's going to happen, we don't know how the UC's going to react," she said, describing students as "stuck in the middle, I guess you could say, between Governor Brown's proposal and the Board of Regents."

Brown, who sits on the UC board but rarely participated in meetings until November, argued that month for expanded online course offerings, saying regents must "get more grounded" in their approach. He proposes to provide $10 million each to the UC and CSU systems to expand the number of courses available online.

UC administrators said in a report ahead of the board meeting this week that UC offers online courses, including some for credit, and that online education is "currently the subject of much debate – and excitement – about its use in undergraduate and graduate degree programs."

Faculty members have raised concerns about the effect of online education on academic quality and on their institutions' reputations, while proponents have accused UC of moving too slowly to expand offerings.

"No one's really ever called them out on that, so I think the governor's going to make a huge, huge impact," said Dean Florez, a former Democratic state senator and president of the 20 Million Minds Foundation, a promoter of online education. "I think the governor is really kind of pushing in a way the institutions haven't been pushed before."

Brown also proposes in his budget to cap the number of credits students can accrue at subsidized, in-state prices – initially

limiting most students to 150 percent of what is necessary to complete most degrees.

The proposal, which would affect far more students in the CSU system than at UC, is similar to a plan mulled by CSU officials last year.

Trustees put off a discussion about the issue in November, at Brown's request. At the time, the governor said he understood it was an effort to "manage our resources very carefully" and that he wanted to "take a look at that."

"We all will," Brown said, "and I want to participate."

North Shore chamber mixer benefits SnowFest

Hacienda Del Lago will host the North Lake Tahoe Chamber/CVB/Resort Association Business Mixer and the annual SnowFest fundraiser – Party Like It's Snowfest – on Jan. 17 from 5-8pm.

Hacienda Del Lago is located at 760 North Lake Blvd., Boatworks Mall, in Tahoe City.

The cost is $20.

SnowFest is scheduled for March 1-10 and will take place at a variety of venues throughout the North Lake Tahoe region.

For more information about the mixer, call (530) 581.8764 or email deanna@puretahoenorth.com.

Lobbyists ready for Nevada legislative session

By Anne Knowles, Northern Nevada Business Weekly

In three weeks the 77th Regular Session of the Nevada Legislature begins and the state capital will once again host a swarm of lawmakers, citizens, reporters and, maybe most of all, lobbyists.

About 250 lobbyists have already registered for the session, and about half of them were in the legislative building in Carson City last week for a now mandatory two-hour training class which covers everything from ethics to fire exits to filing required monthly expense reports on time.

But all of them were already busy meeting with clients, legislators and one another to prepare for the upcoming session and continue work they've been doing since the last time the Legislature convened. The spotlight may be on every other year for a few months, but lobbying is a year-round, full-time profession.

"The session is the high-profile, high-activity period of time," says Nicole Willis-Grimes, director of public affairs with the Ferraro Group in Reno, which represents Saint Mary's Regional Medical Center, Dacole Company and Las Vegas Limousines among other businesses. "But in the interim there is a lot of regulatory work. We're hired for the relationship we have with people and for ongoing monitoring."

That includes representing clients' interest as bills passed during session are forged into regulations as well as tracking candidates, both to advise larger clients on whom to support

during election campaigns and for building rapport with individuals those clients may need in the future.

“I spend time meeting new candidates who may not even become a legislator,” says Jeanette Belz of J.K. Belz & Associates Inc. in Reno, which represents Liberty Mutual Insurance Group, Nevada Academy of Ophthalmology and Nevada Psychiatric Association among others. “I don’t know if they’ll be elected or who they might affect, whether they’ll benefit one client or another.”

That’s why, in part, most lobbyists work on monthly retainer rather than billable hours, with expenses calculated in, and often sign one- to two-year all-inclusive contracts that usually turn into long-term relationships.

Each contract is unique and retainers vary depending on the amount of a work a client requires, including the most difficult task, what lobbyists uniformly call “heavy lifting.”

“Getting legislation passed is heavy lifting,” says Lesley Pittman, president of Sierra Strategies in Reno, which represents Station Casinos Inc., Reno Diagnostic Centers, United Way of Southern Nevada and others. “It is much harder to get something passed than to kill it, especially if it is controversial or goes against public opinion.”

But even just keeping tabs on a few bills or issues can quickly turn into a time-consuming headache.

“Right now there are 883 bill draft requests and 1,500 bills on average in each session,” says Chris Ferrari, president of Ferrari Public Affairs, a Reno firm that works with ValueOptions, Corrections Corporation of America and Alliance Trust Co. among others. “A bill that could start out as innocuous could become a problem for someone as amended.” Clients are found in a number of ways, say lobbyists. Starting out, lobbyists use their lobbying skills to develop a clientele.

“I came to Nevada in 1995 to work as the president of the hospital association, and I worked for a lobbyist for two years before starting out on my own,” says Belz. “I had no clients so I started by going to every meeting I could think of and making sure people knew I was available. I was at an interim committee meeting on electrical deregulation and met someone sitting in the audience. That’s how I got my first contract.”

Large, well-established firms such as the Ferraro Group, run by longtime lobbyists Greg Ferraro and Bob Ostrovsky, and R&R Partners, headed by well-known Nevada lobbyist Billy Vassiliadis, need no introduction. Many lobbyists find clients through referrals from other lobbyists who are approached by a potential client whose interests are in conflict with a business or group they already represent.

“When you get to be the size of our company, you run into conflicts a lot,” says Mike Draper, director of government and public affairs in Nevada with R&R Partners, which has offices in Washington, D.C., Denver, Los Angeles and elsewhere as well as Reno and Las Vegas. “If a client is in an industry we already represent, either we don’t take that client or we go to our existing client and see if we can work together.”

Working together to build consensus is a key part of the job, say lobbyists.

“Depending on the issue or the industry, we work hard to find other businesses or industries that have same concern and we form coalitions,” says Misty Grinner, senior public affairs with The Ferraro Group. Coalition-building may be easier in Nevada, where a relatively small group of lobbyists, both paid and unpaid, know one another and have ready access to members of the citizen legislature. But that presents problems, too, especially with the turnover necessitated by term limits.

“These are average Joes, from all walks of life, and it’s

unfair to expect them to be experts on all sorts of policies and issues," says Draper. "Lobbying has become ability to disseminate info to legislators. Lobbying has evolved and some of the stereotypes of the business are not nearly as accurate as they used to be."

"Lobbying or lobbyist is a dirty word, but the absolute most important piece of lobbying is your credibility," says Draper. "Credibility is your most important asset."

Carving contest of a different kind at Northstar

Snow is for skiing, snowboarding and snowball fights, among other things. One of the most creative uses for the white stuff will be showcased Feb. 8-12 at Northstar ski resort, at the inaugural Carve Tahoe competition. It's free to spectators.

At the snow-sculpture contest, expert snow-carvers from more than 20 countries will shape 20-ton blocks of snow into imaginative figures.

On Feb. 13, judges will decide which entries are the best. The sculptures will be on display "until the sun melts them away."

While you're there, take a free spin on Northstar's ice-skating rink, which will operate into April (skate rental is $10).

To learn more about Carve Tahoe, go online.

– Sacramento Bee

Man accused of killing mama bear goes to court

By Los Angeles Times

A Northern California man is facing charges for allegedly shooting a mother bear whose cubs he later tried to sell at a gas station last summer, authorities say.

Chris Puett said he shot the mother of the two bears, a brother and sister, who are now sleeping through their first winter at Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care.

“I was defending my life. I don’t feel that there should be penalties for defending my life,” Puett said in a TV interview.

While there are strict rules against poaching bears, and killing a bear with cubs, those rules don’t apply when the bear is charging or threatening a human life, and that’s what Puett claims happened.

Back when he shot the mother last summer, he said he killed her. And he collected her cubs in a cage, he said, until he could find someone to take the place of their mother.

He was found last June trying to sell the two baby black bears at a gas station in North San Juan, 75 miles northeast of Sacramento, telling California Department of Fish and Game wardens he was “just trying to find them a good home.”

The reason, he said, was because he had shot and killed their mother on his property a few days before.

“He told us he had shot the mother bear in self-defense and the mother bear ran off, leaving the cubs behind,” department spokesman Patrick Foy said at the time.

Puett said in an interview this week with KTXL-TV in Sacramento that the cub’s mother was after some dog food when the two came face-to-face. But now he’s saying he didn’t kill her. He says he aimed the gun to the side when he fired so he only injured her.

The Department of Fish and Game isn’t buying it, Puett said.

“They think my whole story is a bunch of bear poo,” he said.

Even though no one’s ever found the mother bear’s body, Puett says he’s facing some pretty stiff penalties for what he did that day. He goes to court Wednesday in Nevada County to face the bear-killing charges.

“I do not want to forfeit my gun. I do not want to take a hunter safety course, because I wasn’t hunting. And the fine is a fine,” he said.

Wildlife officials say the two bears will be transferred within the next month, while they are in hibernation, to a den in the wild in or around the Tahoe National Forest.

Ski report: Mercury moving up

Temperatures will be getting back to normal, but winds may hamper the operation of upper mountain resorts.

Here is the Jan. 15 ski report.

— Curtis Fong

Snippets about Lake Tahoe

• Barton Health will move part of the South Lake Tahoe Community Clinic Jan. 16-20. This is the completion of the first phase of the clinic's expansion and renovation. The clinic will remain open for emergent patients during the move. The project will be finished this summer.

• TEDxSouthLakeTahoe is March 23. Cost is $100. It's limited to 70 people. More info is online.

• Manzanita at the Ritz-Carlton at Northstar is having a winemaker dinner with Robert Sinskey Vineyards on Jan. 31. For more info, go online.

• Lake Tahoe Community Colleges' Connect Ed is partnering with Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce to offer an Event Marketing workshop. The workshop is Jan. 18 from noon-1:30pm at LTCC. Register online.

• Bryan Meek, who broke both legs in a fall on Mt. Tallac in December, emailed *Lake Tahoe News* to say, "Hi, I just wanted you to know I am recovering back in PDX, OR and doing well despite lack of leg use for the time, a small price to pay to be alive/kicking."

USGS officials to give lecture on ARkStorm potential at Tahoe

Dale Cox and Michael Dettinger with the U.S. Geological Survey will discuss ARkStorm impacts at Lake Tahoe on Jan. 31 at the Tahoe Center for Environmental Sciences in Incline Village.

The no-host bar opens at 5:30pm, with the presentation begins 6pm. Cost is $5.

The USGS is working with local communities to use the science, technology, expertise and meteorological data behind the ARkStorm scenario to test the resiliency of communities and expose vulnerabilities usually only realized following catastrophic events. Modeling such an extreme event allows officials at all levels to be prepared when disaster strikes.

For more information, contact Heather Segale at (775) 881.7562 or tercinfo@ucdavis.edu.