Firefighters spent thousands to keep Stracener off bench

By Joe Ortiz, Sacramento Bee

Among the hundreds of campaign expenses incurred by the state firefighters' union political action committees this year, two relatively small line items reflect a grudge the organization has held for years.

The California Department of Forestry Firefighters Small Contributor PAC made 147 contributions to state and local candidate campaigns in 2012. It also made two independent expenditures totaling $10,500 to oppose Curt Stracener's bid to keep his El Dorado County Superior Court judgeship.

Before former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed him to the bench in 2010, Stracener worked as a senior litigator for the administration who helped shape furlough strategy.

When Stracener ran to retain his seat, the firefighters countered with a campaign tying him to Schwarzenegger with a website picturing the two men together over a caption, "Two of a kind.".

Stracener won re-election in the conservative county.

Stracener's race accounted for a tiny fraction of the $1.39 million the 3,700-member union spent through its two PACs. Some $821,000 went to campaigns and $267,000 went to independent expenditures, according to disclosure documents filed by the organization. Much of the money went into opposing Proposition 32, the failed ballot measure that would have ended payroll-deducted funding of political activities.

About 10 cents of every dollar, some $123,000, paid for "staff/spouse travel, lodging and meals."

Opinion: Schools owe it to children to be more safe

By Lisa Huard

Details in the Newtown, Conn., tragedy will continue to evolve for quite some time. Lives will never be the same; rather they will end up being a “new normal” for the families and friends of all the individuals lost.

Did it happen because gun control allows people to buy assault weapons? Was he mentally ill? Was he bullied? Was he on drugs?



Lisa Huard

When bad things happen we want a definitive answer. We want this because if we have it, then we can prevent it from happening again.

Turn on any newscast throughout the nation and you’ll see schools and districts practicing their drills this week and reviewing their safety plans. Because this situation occurred at an elementary school safety is now again the flavor of the month. Safety and what encompasses it should always be at the forefront of concerns and operations for all schools.

I can tell you as someone who works in the field that it is always an uphill battle to get schools to focus on plans and procedures because it takes away from subject time in the classroom. If safety and all that encompasses it were on standardized tests, I believe our children would grow up healthier and happier and more productive.

As a safe schools consultant I've had emails and phone calls this past week asking me basic questions on how this kind of an event can occur. And each day the media poses a new question with headlines. Today it's asking "Who is to blame?" I don't believe there is ever only one source at the root of violence, rather a continuum of weaknesses in our systems that harm many of our kids, and therefore our society.

I became a teacher in the early 1980s and have watched our school system become less student centered, less humanized. There was a time when our focus did concern itself with what our kids dealt with outside of the school walls. There was a time that the system wanted us to build inclusion in our classrooms, as it was believed that individuals who felt connected and cared for become more secure within themselves and therefore would be better individuals and create better communities.

Many remember years ago when our own school board's mission statement was that all children would have an advocate. We as teachers were a part of trainings that built on this basic need. We as teachers were encouraged and supported to build relationships with our kids and with each other. We in essence built family.

Because of this we were more connected with our kids. We knew the kids who were struggling and who were having trouble and furthermore we had in place support systems to help these kids. As in life, you can't "fix" all situations, but I will tell you, we did fix many.

This premise is no longer the case here. In fact, it's no longer the case throughout the nation. The days of our schools being supported financially to provide the basic elements for a happy and healthy life for kids is no longer available. "Penny wise and pound foolish" in our education system has become the norm.

When I work with school districts in developing safety plans, more often than not, they think about only about procedures for lockdowns, evacuations, and such. On the news I've seen story after story about how schools around the nation are going to be adding more fencing, security cameras, and other such hardware. It's sad how money is available to do this, but money is not available to address the root of the problem. Again, we're reacting with a Band-Aid rather than working on the probable issues. While I do believe there are certain tactics that are essential, I worry that we could be building situations that detach us even more. I don't believe creating fortresses is the answer.

Education always swings on a big pendulum and with that pendulum goes the money. As I said, there were years of financial support from the state and federal government with training and programs to help children develop stronger values and respect for themselves. We believed that helping youth to develop more resiliencies would help them to cope better in life and therefore stay healthier and happier.

Unless tragedy strikes, all children become adults. Our desired outcomes for those adults begin when our kids enter school as those precious young beings. I believe if time and money were spent on our kids feeling safer at school, cared about if they miss, if they were more included as individuals and as a group, then, teachers could teach, kids could learn, test scores would improve, and perhaps communities such as Newtown would not have to suffer.

Santa, if you have time to listen to an adult, would you

please bring the basics back into our schools and keep them there forever?

Lisa Huard is a safe schools consultant who lives in South Lake Tahoe.

Peak to honor 3 Tahoe soldiers gains Placer County support

Placer County supervisors last week gave their support to efforts to name an unnamed peak in eastern Placer County in honor of three Tahoe servicemen who were killed in action in the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The peak, located in the Lake Tahoe Basin on U.S. Forest Service land in Placer County, will be called Gold Star Peak.

The three fallen men include two soldiers and one Marine – Pfc. Phillip Brandon Williams, Sgt. Timothy M. Smith, and Spc. Garrett Fant.

The South Lake Tahoe City Council in November approved the naming. All three men had connections to South Lake Tahoe.

Next up is the board on Geographical Names, which is responsible for approving the naming of this natural feature. The request to name the peak has already been supported by the American Legion and El Dorado County.

The effort, spearheaded by Rep. Tom McClintock, R-Granite Bay, will have a memorial installed at Lakeview Commons with a view across the lake at the ridge where the peak is located.

The peak's name, Gold Star, comes from the Gold Star lapel pin that was established by Congress in 1947 to identify widows, parents and next of kin of service members killed in certain operations.

Eggnog the hard way

By Rosie Schaap, New York Times

Around this time last year, I advocated forgoing eggnog in favor of glogg, the Scandinavian mulled wine. I'm not here to issue a mea culpa, but I'm also not proud when it comes to holiday drinks and certainly not above a little backpedaling.

I have nothing against eggnog. What kind of heartless character could resist its creamy, eggy, decadent charms? But I have an all-or-nothing attitude about it. To my mind, there are two approaches. The first is to buy the best prefab nog available at your grocery store, doctor it with a generous grating of nutmeg, lace it with liquor and be done with it. (I like Ronnybrook Farm Dairy's offering, in those sturdy glass bottles.) But keeping ready-made eggnog close at hand is a peril for me. It's just too easy to pour one little glass after another, and I'm the sort of person who can resist temptation only when it's not sitting in my fridge.

So I'm more likely to go with the second approach, which produces even more spectacular results: eggnog the hard way. I've tried simplified recipes that demand little more than mixing egg yolks, sugar, cream, milk and spirits, folding in

some beaten egg whites and chilling the lot of it. This is inevitably a turnoff for people who just can’t stomach the idea of eating raw eggs, but for me it’s more a matter of flavor and texture than of food safety. I find the taste of raw egg overbearing, and the consistency can’t compete with the lush silkiness that a patiently executed custard base assures. So I go all in, which essentially entails making a custard, letting it rest in an ice bath, stirring vigorously, straining and waiting. This requires time and effort, but it’s absolutely worth it.

Once you’ve signed on, the only controversy is how to liquor it up. Bourbon and brandy have their champions, but rum gets my vote. Its darkly sugared, inherently spicy nature contributes what is, to my taste, the most complementary layer of additional flavor, along with the requisite alcohol. My choice is Rhum Barbancourt 5-star, aged 8 years, from Haiti, a delicious bargain at about $25 a bottle.

By now, it’s obvious that I’m not antinog. But I’ll cop to an occasional resistance. Sometimes in the dead of winter, I just don’t want to drink anything so frosty. In such cases, I prefer a Tom & Jerry, a warmed-up variation of eggnog most especially beloved in the upper Midwest. The ingredients are similar, though it skips the cream, ups the spices and takes the chill off. It’s a homey, old-fashioned surprise, and few holiday sights are more alluring to me than a vintage Tom & Jerry serving bowl — rendered in milk glass and illustrated with holly and ivy — with matching cups. Just make sure there’s a ladle nearby; everyone will want to dip right in. You can save the glogg for another cold winter’s night.

Ritz-Carlton at Northstar changes hands

International real estate investment and services firm Kennedy Wilson today announced it along with unnamed partners bought the Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe and Ritz-Carlton Residences.

The properties had been bank owned.



The Ritz-Carlton, Lake Tahoe has been financially troubled since Day 1. Photo/LTN

However, a year ago JMA Ventures, owners of Homewood Mountain Resort, had entered an agreement to buy the residences.

KW said Pacific Western Bank provided $45 million of financing. The company invested $18 million of equity in the transaction for a 50 percent ownership interest.

The Ritz opened three years ago this month midmountain at Northstar.

KW reps said they will begin marketing the 23 units at the Ritz-Carlton Residences, Lake Tahoe in January.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Freshies hosting fundraiser for LTWC, TY&FS

Help support Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care and Tahoe Youth & Family Services by eating at Freshies in South Lake Tahoe on Dec. 18.

The restaurant is donating a portion of proceeds to these two nonprofits.

Tom and Cheryl Millham from LTWC will have photos of the birds and other animals they have rehabilitated.

Freshies is at 3330 Lake Tahoe Blvd., in the Fremont Mall, next to Bank of America.

Ski report: Stay on open trails

A winter weather advisory is posted until noon. Another 2 to 4 inches of snow above 7,000 feet could fall.

There are great conditions with fresh powder through Lake Tahoe. But remember to stay on open runs only.

Here is the Dec. 18 ski report.

– Curtis Fong

Bankruptcy judge removes El Dorado County from transit case; gives credence to conspiracy

By Kathryn Reed

RENO – Even though plaintiffs wanted to draw El Dorado County back into the fray of the MV Transportation-STATA lawsuit, a bankruptcy court judge on Monday granted the county's motion to dismiss.



Sallie Armstrong, outside counsel for the county, argued that the county's payment of $160,000 to MV two years ago satisfied its obligation. U.S. Bankruptcy Court Judge Gregg Zive agreed.

David Thompson, the federal bankruptcy trustee appointed by Zive, had sought to bring El Dorado County back into the mix.

But the other attorneys representing a multitude of defendants are still on the hook for what could be millions of dollars if the Fairfield-based transit company prevails in its quest to have member agencies and their respective board members of the now defunct and bankrupt South Tahoe Area Transit Authority honor the contract that was in place.

Thompson is essentially representing STATA even though it doesn't really exist. And in turn he represents another plaintiff for the gaggle of defendants to fight. But the judge has made it clear there will not be double recovery.

In 2010, MV filed a lawsuit for a number of reasons; most having to do with not being paid the nearly $3 million it claims it was owed to run the BlueGo bus system on the South Shore.

STATA, a nonprofit conglomerate of private and public entities, was the parent operation of the BlueGo system.

To be determined are what assets belonged to STATA, the value of them, where they are now, how to handle third party beneficiaries, successor liability, and whether conspiracy was involved.

Zive said his tentative ruling is that that conspiracy was plausible.

“I’m going to find out what happened even if I have to use an element of authority of this court,” Zive said. “That more than anything is of particular concern of this court. It’s almost like someone tried to fool me.”

Zive is referring to the approximately $1.6 million that was moved from STATA’s bank account to the Feldman Client Trust Account. STATA didn’t include that cash when it filed for bankruptcy.

Thompson in his September report to the court called it fraud.

The judge took great issue also with the fact that the participation agreement between the member agencies and STATA said that if it didn’t have the money to pay its bills, it must reduce service. The STATA board never reduced service, racked up bills and ended up bankrupt. But the member agencies and the people who were on the board at the time could collectively be held financially responsible.

Zive read from the agreement, emphasizing the word shall.

“Shall makes it mandatory and not discretionary,” the judge said. “You either decrease service levels or pay more.”

Zive said he didn’t understand why the STATA board didn’t reduce service when MV officials were calling for that.

He went on say STATA would have been better off had it followed its own rules and hired an executive director instead of allowing a Tahoe Regional Planning Agency employee to run things.

Joan Wright, representing Ridge Tahoe, said because her client wasn’t part of STATA when it was created in 1998, it should not be held liable. Zive wasn’t buying that line of thinking because Ridge Tahoe had a member on the board, benefited from the contract and was a member when MV was hired.

Lou Bubala, the outside attorney representing South Lake

Tahoe, tried to make a case that California law precludes the city from being held liable under the Government Claims Act. That theory has not been ruled upon.

Bubala also tried to convince the judge there was never a contract between the city and STATA because the mayor at the time, Hal Cole, didn't sign a contract.

"If the city reaps the benefit of a coordinated transit and made payments, how can it disavow its responsibility?" the judge asked. He said maybe with MV the city could weasel out of its obligation, but not to STATA.

As of the end of August, South Lake Tahoe had paid Bubala more than $75,000. City Attorney Patrick Enright did not respond to *Lake Tahoe News'* request asking for the current dollar amount.

Douglas County has spent approximately $47,000 on legal costs related to the STATA litigation, according to County Manager Steve Mokrohisky.

"The county has a $50,000 deductible for legal costs, so insurance will cover any legal costs over $50,000," Mokrohisky told *Lake Tahoe News*.

With the next court date set for Jan. 17, all entities will continue to rack up attorney costs. MV and the court trustee have indicated they will both be going after defendants to recover their legal fees.

Run like Santa – or faster – to raise money for Christmas Cheer

In cooperation with Himmel Haus, Blue Angel Café, and Rainbow Mountain, Heavenly Ski and Snowboard Foundation on Dec. 20 is hosting the inaugural Lake Tahoe Santa Run to benefit Christmas Cheer and the HSSF Scholarship Fund.

Catch Santa on the slopes at Heavenly that day and then join him for the Santa Run that evening.

Preregistration is available online or at the Himmel Haus, 3819 Saddle Road. Cost is $20, plus an unwrapped new toy to be donated to Christmas Cheer. It includes two raffle tickets. Participation is limited.

Registration will take place the day of the race from 4-5pm at the loft in the Blue Angel Café and is $30. All participants must be in Santa dress (or some form of holiday garb), at least black pants, red shirt and Santa hat. Prizes will be awarded for the top three finishers and best costume.

All Santas will need to be at the Blue Angel Café and checked-in by 5:15pm to participate. The race horn will blow at 5:30pm. Santas will run 1.3 miles up Ski Run Boulevard and turn left onto Saddle Road, leading them to the finish at the Himmel Haus. A decorated holiday Rainbow Mountain bus playing music and filled with toys will follow the Santas just in case any need a lift.

The festivities will kick-off at the Blue Angel Café with $3 glasses of warm glühwein and will continue at the Himmel Haus that evening at 6 with live music by the David Patrone Quartet jazz, $4 pints of Wartsteiner Pilsner, raffle prizes, Santa costume dance-off and fun activities for all, children are

welcome. Everyone is encouraged to bring an unwrapped toy to donate to Christmas Cheer. A “Giving Tree” for the Heavenly Ski & Snowboard Foundation will be displayed at the Himmel Haus throughout the holidays.

Letter: Sass should be appointed to S. Tahoe council

To the community,

In light of Claire Fortier’s expected, yet somewhat sudden, departure from the South Lake Tahoe City Council last week, the big question that looms in the minds of many of us city Of South Lake Tahoe voters is who and how will Claire Fortier be replaced.

In my opinion, and in the opinion of many of my fellow South Lake Tahoe voters, whom will hopefully voice their opinion on this matter in some way, shape, or form, feel that the only one specific course of action that would be an acceptable resolution to this situation would be to appoint Austin Sass to the council seat vacated by Ms. Fortier.

By virtue of the results of last month’s election it’s quite obvious that the voters have no desire to see Bruce Grego return to a council seat. I am also quite sure that most city of South Lake Tahoe voters would be highly dismayed were the council to opt for a costly special election. The voters have spoken and the council, in my opinion, should not waste any more time or money on this issue, and should appoint whom I, and many others, see as the most qualified candidate, who

burns with a fire to serve his community to the best of his ability. And I just want to remind you that those abilities are highly developed, and he is highly qualified and prepared to take on the work load that accompanies the job of a city council member of the city of South Lake Tahoe.

Respectfully,

Toogee Sielsch, South Lake Tahoe