Federal dollars help El Dorado County become more energy efficient

More than 2,500 interior building lights were upgraded with lower wattage fluorescent lamps in four buildings at the El Dorado County Government Center in Placerville, and at three county facilities in South Lake Tahoe.

The $729,734 for the project came form federal stimulus funds.

In addition, 77 parking lights and 165 High Pressure Sodium traffic signal safety lights were retrofitted to LED fixtures. The lighting upgrades consume less energy and require less maintenance compared to older lighting technologies.

The county also replaced 15 older motors for wastewater pumps at the Union Mine Waste Water Treatment Facility with energy efficient models and installed five new variable frequency drives. The new technology electronically controls and regulates the amount of power the wastewater pumps use.

Placerville received a separate grant of $55,226 to retrofit streetlights and parking lot lights to energy saving LEDs. Interior lights at the public safety buildings, town hall, and city hall were switched to 28 watt florescent bulbs and energy efficient ballasts.

The grant paid for the labor required to install the interior lights while the El Dorado Energy Watch program provided the lighting equipment. The grant paid for equipment and labor for the parking lot and streetlight retrofit.

El Dorado County and Placerville are expecting to save a combined 525,090 kilowatt hours annually.

Report: Median net worth at lowest level since 1969

By Harry Bradford, Huffington Post

Stunning new research from a New York University economics professor reveals just how wide the chasm between the rich and everyone else has grown over the past few decades.

In 2010 median net worth in the U.S. hit its lowest point since 1969 at $57,000, according to a recent study by NYU Professor Edward Wolff, who studied Americans' net worth from 1983 – 2010.

During the same period, income inequality skyrocketed in the U.S., Wolff found, largely thanks to the housing bust, which took a significant bite out of middle-class Americans' assets. Wolff found that while middle income earners lost 18 percent of their net worth, those in the top 1 percent increased their wealth by 71 percent over the same time period, according to Wolff's report.

The findings bring into sharper relief existing evidence that average Americans are getting squeezed ever tighter, while the country's wealthiest watch their fortunes explode. In 2010, the annual median wage fell to $26,364, its lowest level since 1999, according to a separate study. The decline in wages may have, in part, contributed to growing wealth inequality, resulting in a member of the 1 percent's worth equaling 288 times that of the median U.S. household, the Economic Policy Institute found in a report released in September.

The Great Recession is responsible for much of that disparity with the wealth of the median family declining a record 38.8

percent between 2007 and 2010. Those between the ages of 35 and 44 were hit particularly hard. Partly as a result, half of American households now possess just 1 percent of the nation's wealth.

Senate likely to fold on online poker

By Karoun Demirjian, Las Vegas Sun

It's sad times for online poker in the Senate.

A few months ago, Nevada Sens. Harry Reid and Dean Heller were talking big about the Internet poker bill they would be sure to pass before the year was out.

Now they are hinting, in noticeably deflated tones, that a big poker bill may once again be a political impossibility.

Heller and Reid blamed different political forces of nature Tuesday for stymieing their best efforts to get a bill legalizing online poker onto the Senate's agenda.

Poker "is an issue that's on the front burner for me, for Sen. Reid and Sen. Kyl," Heller said Tuesday. "The front burner for everybody else is this rules package and the fiscal cliff … it's just hard getting it to the forefront so that we can make it an issue and get it moving."

"I said on a number of occasions that to bring an Internet poker bill to come to the floor you need 15, 17 Republican votes," Reid said Tuesday. "At this stage, we've gotten none."

Reid and Heller promised to bury the hatchet after the elections and work together to get a bill that would roll back the Department of Justice’s reading of the 1961 Wire Act to render all forms of interstate gambling online illegal, save for poker, and regulate the internet poker market. The legislation, which exists presently in draft form, is seen as hugely beneficial to the Nevada gaming industry.

Two years ago, Reid tried unsuccessfully to work legislation mainstreaming online poker into a tax compromise bill.

Now once again, a bill to regulate taxes and spending — the much-anticipated but ever-elusive legislation to avoid the fiscal cliff — likely provides the best potential vehicle to get poker language going through the Senate.

But doing so requires the support of at least 60 members of the Senate, so that members can be sure they could avoid a filibuster.

Prior to the election, Reid and his staffers stated that he expected Heller to corral 15 Republicans and bring the poker bill over the finish line.

That number appeared to inch up slightly on Tuesday, as Reid hearkened back to the deal as requiring Republicans to pony up “15, 17” votes.

Reid’s staffers have estimated they have approximately 45 votes for an online poker bill on the Democrats’ side of the aisle.

AT&T service out in parts of

South Lake Tahoe

Phone and Internet service are out in parts of South Lake Tahoe because a vehicle damaged an AT&T pole.

Electricity is not affected.

The areas impacted are in the Bonanza neighborhood, and businesses and residents behind the Raley’s at the Y.

It is not known when service will be restored.

Ski report: Hang on because the wind is howling

While the brunt of the next storm is not expected to arrive until tonight, the wind is causing problems this morning. Mt. Rose won’t be opening today. Heavenly is starting on wind hold.

Here is the Nov. 29 ski report.

— *Curtis Fong*

Holiday Festival benefits TAP

Tahoe Arts Project is putting on a Holiday Festival on Dec. 8 from 11am-4pm.

For $10 (those 12 and younger are free), there will be arts and crafts vendors, cookie decorating, music by Sister Analog, Marcia Sarosik Dancers and Santa.

Food, wine and hot chocolate are included in the price.

All proceeds benefit TAP.

The event is at St. Theresa’s Grace Hall, 1041 Lyons Ave., South Lake Tahoe.

For more info, call (530) 542.3632.

Survey: Americans not using vacation time, airline food getting healthier

By Hugo Martín, Los Angeles Times

As an information technology supervisor at Pitzer College in Claremont, Dennis Crowley had so much work to do last year that he finished 2011 without using nearly five days of paid vacation.

“And to be frank, I was too busy to even realize I was losing time,” he said.

Crowley’s situation is not unusual. A survey by Harris Interactive Inc. found that by the end of 2012, Americans will leave an average of 9.2 days of vacation unused, up from the average of 6.2 days in 2011.

Nearly 90 percent of those questioned said they would take more leisure trips on their vacation if they had the time and money to do so, according to the survey of more than 2,000 U.S. adults that was commissioned by travel website Hotwire.

Hotwire has a selfish reason for pointing out the survey results: The travel website says vacationers can save lots of money by traveling between Thanksgiving and Christmas. During the holiday gap, hotel rates drop 33 percent in Boston, 28 percent in San Francisco and 26 percent in Seattle, compared with the peak summer travel season, according to the website.

Crowley has learned his lesson. He said he is keeping closer tabs on his vacation time this year. But instead of using his accrued vacation time to travel, he said is spending more time with his children.

Airline food getting more healthful

On the nation’s airlines, the days of free lunch are long over. That also goes for breakfast, dinner and snacks. Once complimentary, most airline food now comes with a price tag.

But there is some good news about what you get to eat on commercial airlines: It is getting more healthful.

That’s the assessment of Charles Platkin, a professor of nutrition at the City University of New York’s Hunter College who has tested and ranked airline foods off and on since 2000. With few exceptions, Platkin said most airlines now offer at least one healthful meal alternative on their menu.

“It’s actually moving in a good direction,” he said. “It’s been an ebb and flow, but the overall trend is positive.”

Platkin gave the top ranking this year to Virgin America, noting that the airline based in California offers low-calorie options such as roasted pear and arugula salad, a “protein plate” with hummus and whole wheat pita bread, plus oatmeal for breakfast. He gave the airline 41/4 stars out of a maximum of five stars.

At the bottom of the list was Allegiant Air, with a rating of only one and a half stars. Platkin said the Las Vegas airline “made it clear that their foods were not healthy. It shows.”

The airline’s snacks include M&Ms, Oreo Brownies and Pringles chips

Air Canada and Alaska Airlines came in second and third, respectively, in Platkin’s ranking. The other big airlines – including United, American, Delta and US Airways – ranked in the middle of the list.

Platkin does not eat the food on every airline. “I don’t have that kind of time,” he said. “I have classes to teach.”

Instead, he collects and reviews lists of food items, including the ingredients and calorie numbers, from the airlines.

TSA defends stopping traveler over watch

A traveler was stopped by federal security officers at the Oakland International Airport this month because of an unusual wristwatch he was wearing.

When word got out about the incident, critics of the Transportation Security Administration blasted the agency, saying it was another example of the TSA overreacting.

In hopes of stifling the uproar, the TSA released a photo of the watch last week. This is no ordinary timepiece. It includes a toggle switch, wires and what look like tiny fuses attached to the wristband.

A TSA explosives detection team determined that the watch was not an explosive device. Still, the Alameda County sheriff’s deputies, who were called by the TSA to investigate, arrested the watch owner, Geoffrey McGann, a teacher and artist from Rancho Palos Verdes. He was jailed on suspicion of possession of components to make a destructive device, according to news reports.

The Alameda County district attorney’s office declined last week to file charges against McGann.

McGann’s attorney accused the TSA of being “hyper-vigilant.”

The TSA responded in its blog last week, saying, “Terrorists take everyday items and attempt to manipulate them to make improvised explosive devices. Our officers are trained to look for anomalies such as this one.”

Public slow to weigh in on Northstar’s expansion

By Kathryn Reed

KINGS BEACH — Electrical transmissions and connectivity of the various land holdings were the two main concerns brought up at the Wednesday scoping session of the Northstar Mountain Master Plan.

Of the approximately 20 people at the Nov. 28 meeting, only two members of the public spoke.

Dave McClure of Tahoe Vista would like to see a power consumption table based on what the ski resort is using today and what it expects to use if the proposed new lifts were operational.

He also asked planners to explain how the CalPeco transmission upgrades will play into this. CalPeco is the parent company of Liberty Utilities, which provides electricity to the California side of Lake Tahoe as well as to the Truckee area.

Gerry Haas with Placer County on Nov. 28 goes over Northstar's proposals. Photo/LTN

Ann Nichols, representing the North Tahoe Preservation Alliance, wants a map that shows Northstar's plans, but one that also includes the CalPeco line, the timberland production zone, along with adjacent parcels and their uses.

The comments will be addressed in the environmental document.

Nichols also brought up the issue of whether the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency will be involved with any of this because she said Mount Pluto – the highest point on the mountain – is considered to be in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

Northstar is in Truckee; where the tentacles of TRPA do not reach.

Gerry Hass, senior planner with Placer County, told *Lake Tahoe News* after the meeting that his department has contacted TRPA.

There has been no definitive ruling as to whether any of the proposed plans are technically in Lake Tahoe. He pointed to a map showing the changes for the Mount Pluto area on the Truckee side, not the Tahoe side of the peak.

Wednesday’s meeting was to gather input from people regarding environmental impacts of the plan. It had nothing to do with the merits of the plan.

Most of Northstar, which is privately held property and not U.S. Forest Service land, is zoned forestry. A portion, mostly on the perimeter, is considered timberland production zone. These TPZ areas are what necessitate a special use permit.

“… such uses and facilities are already permitted by Alpine, Sierra and Lassen counties. Placer County is not being placed in a position of approving a TPZ that has not already been implemented by other surrounding counties,” Jessica VanPernis, spokeswoman for Northstar, told *Lake Tahoe News* after the meeting. “Further, Northstar is the only existing resort in Placer County with TPZ lands within its boundaries, therefore limiting the proposed ski lifts, trails, snowmaking and related facility uses to Northstar.”

Of the proposed seven new lifts, it’s possible five would be built in the short term. They are all labeled with letters for now – which ironically is how Northstar used to label all of its chairlifts.

What’s called the C Lift would start on the north side of Sawmill Lake (the reservoir used for snowmaking) and would end just below the current Vista Express. The base of the lift area might have campsites and could be where the cross country center would be relocated.

On the opposite side of the mountain two lifts and a surface lift are being talked about so the Sawtooth Ridge area would be opened up. This would add 550 acres of terrain, but little actual trail creation would be done in order to retain the remote wilderness experience.

The J Lift would go from the village to Lookout Mountain.

Five skier bridges are proposed. They would need to be sturdy enough to hold a snowcat.

Haas said widening of trails is proposed mostly on existing routes.

Expanding the current restaurant at the top of Mount Pluto is planned. Adding a warming hut to the backside is also on the drawing board.

People have until Dec. 6 to comment on what Vail Resorts, owners of Northstar, want to do at the Truckee-area resort in the next 15 years. In the spring the draft environment impact report is expected to be released for a 45-day comment period. Future meetings are planned before the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors. More information is online. Here is a map of the proposed changes.

The EIR will tackle the usual spectrum of concerns – from aesthetics to air quality to biological and cultural resources – along with any comments people submit.

No written comments had been received before the meeting. Haas said that’s pretty typical with a plan like this – comments tend to come in closer to the deadline.

California bonds looking a bit more appealing

By Kelly Nolan, Wall Street Journal

California has long ranked second only to Illinois in the dubious honor of being the least-loved state among municipal-bond investors.

But since Election Day, some investors have had a change of heart.

On Nov. 6, California voters approved temporary tax increases that Standard & Poor's estimates will boost the state's revenue by more than $6 billion over the next several years. The tax rise was a controversial move in the already high-tax state, but it suddenly made California's bonds more appealing, market participants said. California also passed modest pension changes this year.

Meanwhile, Illinois has done little to address its $83 billion unfunded pension liability. The state had roughly $6 billion in unpaid bills as of the end of September, according to the state comptroller's office.

That has separated the two states in the minds of some investors. The difference in yield, or spread, between the debt of the two lowest-rated states has increased to its widest point since early March 2011, according to Thomson Reuters Municipal Market Data.

Last week, the yield on 30-year Illinois debt was 0.60 percentage point above that of similar California debt. As prices fall, yields rise. The higher the yield, the bigger the perceived risk. On Election Day, the spread was 0.42 percentage point. In July, it was 0.18 percentage point.

“Over the past year, California has done much more than Illinois to help its fiscal situation,” said Tom Weyl, head of municipal research at Barclays. As a consequence, “there appears to be decoupling” in the way the states’ bonds are trading.

California’s debt has rebounded so much that its yields this month fell below that of Nevada for the first time since August 2009, according to MMD.

In November, California munis have returned 1.50 percent through Friday, according to S&P Dow Jones Indices, compared with 1.43 percent for Illinois. For 2012, S&P Municipal Bond California index has returned 9.80 percent, while the Illinois index has returned 9.78 percent.

Both states are outperforming the broader muni market, as investors hunt for extra yield amid rock-bottom rates in markets such as Treasury bonds. The S&P National AMT-Free Municipal Bond index has returned 1.32 percent in November and 7.88 percent so far this year, through Friday.

The passage of the tax increase, under Proposition 30, was the “catalyst for this rally” in California bonds, said Dan Berger, MMD’s senior market strategist.

Investors are favoring California debt, even though S&P and Fitch Ratings give the Golden State the lowest rating of all 50 states, at A-minus, while Illinois is rated a notch higher, at A. Moody’s Investors Service gives Illinois the lowest state rating at A2, while it rates California a notch higher at A1.

“The market is signaling California has a better chance of getting upgraded, while Illinois may see a downgrade,” said Cynthia Clemson, vice president and co-director of municipal investments at Eaton Vance.

John Flahive, director of fixed income at BNY Mellon Wealth Management, said his firm has bought more California bonds in light of Proposition 30’s passage, while keeping exposure to Illinois debt steady. “Illinois has to make some fiscal changes.…California can grow their way out of the problem,” said Mr. Flahive, whose firm oversees about $22 billion in munis.

To be sure, California still faces challenges, market participants say, and the tax increase voters approved this month is only for seven years, meaning a more permanent solution must be found to mend the state’s budget woes.

Robert Donahue, managing director at research advisory firm Municipal Market Advisors, said investors should be leery of California’s boom-and-bust economy, as well as its more tenuous cash position. The state’s current cash deficit stands at $24.7 billion, covered with $14.7 billion of internal borrowing, and a $10 billion short-term debt deal from earlier this year, he said.

“Things can change relatively rapidly,” especially if there is an event that hinders the state from selling short-term debt, Mr. Donahue said. California is “lucky Proposition 30 passed, because if it didn’t, we’d be having a different conversation right now.”

Eaton Vance’s Clemson said her firm is keeping its holdings of California bonds steady, while it has avoided buying Illinois’s general obligation debt. With Illinois, “we are waiting for them to signal they are serious about fixing their problems,” she said. With California, “I’d prefer to see them come up with more permanent budget solutions.”

Unity sponsors movie night

Unity at the Lake movie night will feature “Defending Your Life” with Albert Brooks and Meryl Streep. This film about overcoming fear through great love.

The movie will be shown Nov. 30 at 7pm, 1195 Rufus Allen Blvd., South Lake Tahoe.

Popcorn provided. The film is 111 minutes. Donations accepted.