Big money behind California ballot propositions

By Normitsu Onishi, New York Times

SAN FRANCISCO — Next month, California voters will be asked to consider 11 ballot propositions whose passage would carry the full force of law, an exercise in direct democracy that traces back to the Progressive Era of the early 20th century.

Tom Steyer, the founder of Farallon Capital Management, a hedge fund, has spent $22 million on Proposition 39 to rescind a three-year-old tax benefit given to out-of-state companies.

This time around, though, four of them are initiatives of single rich individuals, while others are being challenged by equally wealthy critics pouring in millions of dollars to defeat them — a sign, in this era of "super PACs" and Citizens United, of the increasingly sophisticated use of the populist tool by the wealthy to influence politics in the nation's most populous state.

Tom Steyer, the founder of Farallon Capital Management, a hedge fund based here, has spent $22 million on Proposition 39 to rescind a three-year-old tax benefit given to out-of-state companies. In an interview, Mr. Steyer said he decided to finance the initiative after leaders in the Democratic-controlled Legislature failed to eliminate the break themselves.

"I'm someone who believes that actually the best thing we can have is a highly respected and competent Legislature," Steyer said. "But it seemed as if there was a need for somebody to do something, and I have a bad enough temper that I figured I wasn't going to wait any longer."

Joining Steyer on their own deep-pocketed crusades are George

Joseph, a billionaire insurance executive hoping to change the state's auto insurance laws; Chris Kelly, a former Facebook executive who has spent $2.1 million on a proposal to crack down on human traffickers that critics say is intended to burnish his own future political prospects; and Molly Munger, the wealthy daughter of Warren E. Buffett's partner at Berkshire Hathaway, who has mounted a tax initiative aimed at derailing Gov. Jerry Brown's tax initiative.

To be sure, rich individuals have sponsored ballot initiatives to advance pet projects in the past. But now they are doing so in greater numbers and using their resources to build coalitions with like-minded groups to increase the success rate of their initiatives and actually help set government policy, experts said.

"Their level of giving is something we haven't seen before," said Kim Alexander, president of the California Voter Foundation, a private organization that has long tracked the money behind ballot initiatives. "We've seen companies giving that much, and unions and PACs that have a lot at stake giving $10, $20 million in an election, but you didn't see that so much for individual donors. So that's something that is bringing us to a new level this cycle."

Supporters say the ballot initiatives will help break the partisan gridlock in Sacramento. Critics say that the increasing involvement of rich individuals perverts the original intent of the initiatives, established by reformers like California's Gov. Hiram W. Johnson to empower the electorate and curtail the influence of the Gilded Age's special interests.

"Hiram Johnson would probably be turning over in his grave, since he gave us the initiative process to fight the railroad barons," said Jamie Court, president of Consumer Watchdog. "There has been no ballot in modern history with this type of concentration of millionaire and billionaire wealth behind it.

If this was a reality TV show, we'd call it the billionaire ballot."

Consumer Watchdog has spent $72,500 to fight the initiative to change auto insurance laws, Proposition 33, which is being bankrolled almost single-handedly by Joseph, the insurance executive. He has funneled $16 million into the initiative, which would lower rates for drivers with continued coverage. Opponents argue that the measure, which could raise rates for drivers who have not maintained coverage, would hurt the poor.

Steyer's opponents argue that repealing the out-of-state tax break would make California less competitive in attracting businesses from other states. But they appeared to have given up the fight against Proposition 39, having spent a total of just $56,000.

"What was it they say in 'The Untouchables'?" Steyer said, explaining that he did not regret his lopsided spending. "Don't take a knife to a gunfight."

The popularity of ballot initiatives has kept growing since the passing of the landmark Proposition 13 in 1978, which capped property tax rates and cut $5 million in taxes. But the cost of placing an initiative on the ballot and waging a campaign has grown exponentially, so nearly no initiatives have been driven purely by volunteers in recent decades, said Mark Baldassare, president of the Public Policy Institute of California.

An industry of political consultants and signature-gathering companies supports a thriving business in which just placing an initiative on the ballot can cost $3 million.

For the rich, even though voters endorse only a third of ballot initiatives, the process provides a more direct, high-profile way of exercising political influence than running for office or backing a candidate. The potential impact can also go beyond California's borders because of its history as a

bellwether.

“You’re not sure of winning, but if you do, it’s a huge win,” said Thad Kousser, a political scientist at University of California, San Diego. “You can spend $15 million of your own money and change a fundamental law in one of the world’s biggest economies.”

Arnold Schwarzenegger became governor in part after establishing his political credentials by spending $1 million to sponsor an education initiative in 2002. The initiative has since become an attractive option for those with political aspirations.

Kelly, a former chief privacy officer at Facebook who ran unsuccessfully for attorney general of California in 2010, has spent his millions on Proposition 35, which would establish longer sentences for human traffickers. Some, including advocates for human trafficking victims, have opposed the initiative as well intentioned but poorly formed. But none have raised money to challenge it.

Others have questioned the motive behind the initiative, which experts say is the kind that could pass the Legislature.

“It could be something that makes Chris Kelly say: ‘Hey, I brought you this initiative. It was backed by 80 percent of the people, and this is going to help launch my career,’” Kousser said.

Even before Californians vote yes or no, the self-financed initiatives are having an outsize impact on government.

With more than three weeks left before Election Day, Ms. Munger, the daughter of Charles Munger and a civil rights lawyer, has already spent $31 million on her tax-raising initiative, Proposition 38, which could derail Governor Brown’s own tax-increase plan, Proposition 30. Her brother, Charles Jr., a physicist, has funneled $22 million into

efforts against the governor’s measure and in support of yet another initiative to outlaw political donations by labor unions.

Nathan Ballard, a spokesman for Proposition 38, which would redirect the extra tax revenues toward education, waved away criticism that rich individuals like Munger have an undue influence through the ballot initiatives. He said that the political establishment behind the governor’s plan was also attacking Munger, whom a leader of the campaign against Proposition 38 compared to Marie Antoinette.

“This is a classic battle between an idealistic outsider and the Praetorian Guard of the status quo,” Ballard said.

Website helps victims find stolen bikes

By Aaron Sankin, Huffington Post

Coming outside to see an empty rack where your bicycle used to be is one of the painful realities of living in a major city.

No matter how strong your lock is, there’s never a guarantee that it will be there when you get back—no matter how safe the neighborhood typically is.

But Stolen Bike Finder, a new search engine built by the bloggers at Priceonomics, could make bike theft a thing of the past.

The tool works by not only helping you retrieve your stolen bike but also by disincentivizing thieves from absconding with your ride in the first place. The site’s founders assumed that

if they could make it more expensive and difficult for thieves to fence a stolen bike, it would make them less likely to do so.

The authors explained, “The solution we built is based on the only effective solution to bike theft we’ve encountered – self-policing by victims. If your bike is stolen, try to find where the thief is selling it and stop them.

The site allows users to enter the make and model of their stolen bike and see if anything similar is being sold anywhere in the country on auction sites like eBay and Craigslist. Visitors will be notified whenever a bike matching the description of the one they lost pops up.

A forum for people to safely buy and sell their bikes with verified proof of ownership exists alongside the search tool.

Priceonomics has regularly posted about the economics of bike theft, arguing it’s so common because the crime involves a low likelihood of being caught and light penalties for those who are.

Snippets about Lake Tahoe



• Tahoe Transportation District is having a meeting about the loop road on Oct. 30 from 5-7pm at Lake Tahoe Community College.

• The shoulder-to-shoulder repavement project on Highway 89

from Squaw Valley Road to West River Street is complete. There will be a ribbon cutting Oct. 19 at 10am at Squaw Valley Park on the corner of Highway 89 and Squaw Valley Road.

• On Nov. 2 at 7 pm Bona Fide Books will launch Brooklyn poet Lexa Hillyer's award-winning collection "Acquainted with the Cold" at a reading at the Lake Tahoe Community College's Writers' Series. The event is free and open to the public.

• Highland Woods and Sierra Tract neighborhoods in South Lake Tahoe will meeting Nov. 7 from 6-7pm at the Parks and Rec center at 1180 Rufus Allen Blvd.

• The 11th annual Tahoe Adventure Film Festival is Dec. 8 at 7:30pm MontBleu in Stateline.

Letter: Consider S. Tahoe council incumbents' records before voting

To the community,

The City Council election is less than a month away. Who will get the gold ring on the city's merry-go-round? There are two incumbents on the ballot. Hal Cole and Bruce Grego. Cole has served on the council 16 years. He poses as one who has done no harm in serving. No harm, no foul.

But his record says otherwise. Repeatedly he has supported redevelopment (RD) schemes that have put the city in a hole financially. In 1995, he voted to take all the TOT money in RD area one and use it to service the RD debt. TOT is a general tax dollar. Over the years $40 million have been taken from

the general fund to service RD debt. The RD long-term debt is $200 million. No wonder the streets are crumbling and that there’s no city hall.



Bill Crawford

Cole voted for the city’s parking garage, a loser from day one. And he was the cheerleader for the convention center deal. His name is on the contract.

Cole, in 2000, voted for and pushed hard for Measure S, which has been political chaos for 12 years. Also, he and others put pressure on the city attorney to rush the adoption of the first contract on Lakeview Commons, which ended in the city losing a lawsuit. Money was lost and the project was delayed a year. Cole has done great harm.

The incumbent, Bruce Grego, sacrificed his integrity on the alter of greed when he colluded with the city manager [at the time] and the assistant city attorney [at the time] to cut a $937.50 city check for Grego. Cole, to his credit, said Grego should return the money to the city. I wanted Grego censure, but couldn’t get the vote to do so.

Don’t forget to vote.

Bill Crawford, South Lake Tahoe

PS: T.E. Lawrence wrote, “Old and wise means tired and disappointed.” Amen.

Think Pink: Early breast cancer detection saves lives

Publisher's note: ***October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month. People are affected by cancer in all sorts of ways and communities do various things to shine a spotlight on various cancers. This is the first of four stories about cancer.***

By Kathryn Reed

> *We had so many requests for mammograms in the next 30 days. It was incredible.*
>
> *A fellow went home from work, called on the telephone and said I am going to put my wife on the phone and she is going to make an appointment for her mammogram.*
>
> *In our imaging center where gals come to get mammograms it was unheard of to have men in that department. Today that department is full of support of their woman to have a mammogram. It has become socially acceptable.*

Those are the words of Melody Christenson as she told *Lake Tahoe News* about the evolution of Think Pink. She is on the NorCal Think Pink board of directors.



When Christenson was working for MD Imaging in 1997, she along with oncologist Mike Figueroa of Cancer Care Consultants (now Solace Cancer Care) and Carol Lake of the American Cancer Society created Think Pink.

Today is the 16th annual Think Pink Breast Cancer Awareness Day.

While the movement started in Redding, the cause has spread to be an international drive to educate women about the need for regular mammograms. The Redding people got so many inquiries from people outside the area wanting to dovetail off the Think Pink theme that a video was created so people could start their own event. The video and other info are on the NorCal Think Pink Breast Cancer Awareness website.

“We want to let women know there is no prevention. We don’t have any idea for the cause. Right now (it’s about) early detection, self-breast exams, if they feel a lump or bump, get to their doctor,” Figueroa told *Lake Tahoe News*. “Early detection is the best protection. That is the message.”

The trio came up with Think Pink as a contrast to the Susan G. Komen Foundation’s Denim Days that were going on 16 years ago. (Komen now is all about pink and not denim.) For one, Figueroa said helping promote Lee jeans had no correlation to breast cancer. Figueroa and Christenson said jeans are a regular clothing item in Redding so every day is denim day.

“In joking around we said if you really want someone to pay attention in Redding, they need to wear pink,” Christenson said. Cowboys and construction workers in pink turn people’s heads.

Today, someone not wearing pink is more likely to turn heads in this city that is ground zero for Think Pink.

Figueroa as director of a cancer center also knew how many women were being diagnosed with stage 3 and 4 breast cancer.

“It was out of proportion with what I thought should be the real numbers,” he said. He knew with awareness, understanding and early mammograms that those numbers could be changed.

Figueroa said in the Redding area the number of women with stage 3 or 4 breast cancer dropped substantially in the first five years of Think Pink and after 10 years those numbers were "tumbling down". He added if he were to see 50 cases of breast cancer this year, maybe two or three would be stage 4.

"It is one of the cancers you can make a significant difference in the mortality rate if you know about it early," Christenson said of breast cancer.

There is a 98 percent cure rate for people detected with stage 1 or 2 breast cancer.

Sixteen years ago, the group started handing out 500 bags of promotional material about what women can and should do when it comes to having healthy breasts. Now 40,000 bags are distributed – with a cadre of volunteers starting before the break of dawn.

Bags are handed out in the counties of Shasta, Tehama, Trinity, Modoc and Siskiyou.

Money raised by NorCal Think Pink goes toward education and being able to put on Think Pink Day.

In the first year more than $1,000 was raised by having business owners donate $1 for every employee who wore pink – really wore pink, not just a ribbon.

The board of directors that is responsible for Think Pink works year-round. While today is the big event, activities have been going on all month. After all, October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month.

The event culminates tonight with the Sundial Bridge being bathed in pink lights.

Breast cancer facts from the American Cancer Society and Centers for Disease Control and Protection:

• Excluding cancers of the skin, breast cancer is the most common cancer among women, accounting for nearly 1 in 3 cancers diagnosed in U.S. women.

• Ninety-five percent of new cases and 97 percent of breast cancer deaths occurred in women 40 years of age and older.

• Since 1971, the American Cancer Society has awarded approximately $450.7 million in breast cancer research grants. The society is currently funding $114 million in breast cancer research through more than 200 research study grants.

• In 2008 (the most recent year numbers are available), 210,203 women were diagnosed with breast cancer; 40,589 women died from breast cancer.

Tahoe resorts not well regarded by Ski magazine readers

Not one Lake Tahoe area ski resort made it into the top 10 of *Ski* magazine's annual reader survey.

Mammoth – while not Tahoe – is the only California resort to make it in the top 20. It came in at No. 18.

The Tahoe resorts making the top 30 are Northstar at 27, Heavenly Mountain Resort at 28, and Squaw Valley at 29.

The top resort this year is Whistler Blackcomb in British

Columbia – home of the 2010 Winter Olympics.

No Tahoe resort made it into the top five of the subcategories. Those were nightlife, go big or go home, top chefs, powder,

The top 10 California-Nevada resorts are:

• Mammoth

• Northstar

• Heavenly

• Squaw Valley

• Sugar Bowl

• Mt. Rose

• Alpine Meadow

• Kirkwood

• Homewood

• Sierra-at-Tahoe.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

El Dorado Winery Association receives grant to assist with

marketing

El Dorado Winery Association is one of nine organizations to receive a marketing focused grant for agriculture education and outreach and one of three organizations focused on California wine.

The $179,000 grant is from the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

The money, which will be given out over three years, will help with the winery association’s marketing campaign Taste At A Higher Level.

“Receiving this grant is a vote of confidence for El Dorado Wine Country,” Beth Jones, EDWA president and co-owner of Lava Cap Winery, said in a statement. “We are excited to share our unique assets, which is part of our new marketing campaign targeting key markets important to our constituents.”

Opinion: Government good at limiting access to information

By Whitney Evans, Quill

The freedom of speech, assembly, religion, the press and to petition government are seen as fundamental rights, thanks to the U.S. Constitution. Beyond that, though, is access to government information a fundamental human right? And if so,

do journalists need to do a better job informing the public about the importance of it?

The right to free expression and information is seen as a fundamental human right, listed alongside other rights such as fair public trial and freedom from arbitrary arrest and slavery.

Although free speech and access to information may not seem to fit with other human rights laws, its existence in a sense ensures the existence of other laws, according to Frank LoMonte, executive director of the Student Press Law Center. He said citizens cannot really be informed without access to government-held information.

Freedom of information laws have been spreading rapidly across the world, and people are beginning to more fully understand the importance of gaining access to government-held information.

Cheryl Ann Bishop, author of "Access to Information as a Human Right," said there has long been agreement among government about the right of citizens to speak freely and to access information.

However, access to government-held information has only recently been recognized as a fundamental human right. Access to government-held information is trending across nations, with recent rulings in the European Court of Human Rights and Inter- American Courts helping establish its legitimacy.

One reason access to government-held information is so important, Bishop says, is that other disclosure laws are essentially meaningless without it. If citizens do not know how their government is functioning, they cannot fully experience freedom of expression.

Despite the basic need for transparency, government officials often fail to place citizen access to information as a

national priority.

“I really think it is grounded in distrust for the sophistication of the public,” LoMonte said. “There is a sense among many in government that they can’t level with the public. “

LoMonte said he senses government officials assume the public would react poorly to information, which is a cynical view of the public. As a result, government officials often think they have the right to take a different position in public than behind closed doors. They give incomplete information about the quality of their services and their business dealings because they think it is their private business.

“It’s almost like government officials believe there’s a right to lie,” LoMonte said.

The change, he said, needs to begin when government officials take office. They should be trained to know there is no such thing as “private business” when it comes to governing a country. They need to realize that what they call “their” filing cabinet, computer or notes are not theirs, and mentally adjust to being the public’s employee.

In turn, citizens need to realize the power they have in the relationship. They also need to be involved in learning about public record laws.

“The public is not going to get excited about freedom of information if they think of it as something that only benefits reporters. They have to start thinking of it as something that benefits them as taxpayers,” LoMonte said. “The more people feel an ownership of those laws, the harder it will be for government officials to ignore that.”

Thus, it’s incumbent upon journalists and news outlets to explain FOI laws and citizens’ rights to the public.

United States: Not so good

The Associated Press published a study last year looking into the global state of freedom of information. What the AP found was that many new democracies did better with compliance to the law than more established democracies.

As part of the study, freedom of information requests were sent to the European Union and to 105 countries with known constitutional provisions or laws for freedom of information. They found newer democracies to be more proactive and responsive than older, more established countries.

For instance, Guatemala acknowledged receipt of the request within 72 hours and had the information to the press within 10 days; Turkey sent information within seven days, and Mexico fully responded and posted documents online within two months. Conversely, the United States responded only partially, and six months late, along with England and Wales responding 80 days late and only in part.

Nathaniel Heller, executive director of non-profit transparency and accountability researchers Global Integrity, gave one possible explanation: Newer democracies tend to be more innovative with their technologies relating to transparency because in general they have a fresh starting point. They don’t have to worry about grafting in various parts of an older law to make changes. Conversely, he described the U.S. Freedom of Information Act as “entrenched,” “crusty” and “old.”

Because of this, it will take more than legal reform to effect meaningful change in making freedom of information a national priority. It will take public action to spark meaningful change, LoMonte said, because government officials have little incentive: Informed citizens are not the ideal of incumbent elected officials.

At this point, he said, even in the worst non-compliant

situations, city or county taxpayers end up paying the fees. Instead, government officials must be given the motivation to respond.

“We need real teeth in these disclosure laws so that people who disobey them get removed from public service,” LoMonte said.

Short of citizen initiatives and voter referendums, this may not happen.

“It’s going to have to be forced upon the government by the public,” LoMonte said.

In the face of apparent indifference from both the government and public at times, the push for greater access to information may seem like a fruitless cause. In comes the question of what journalists in the U.S. can do to help encourage citizens to take advantage of access to information as a fundamental human right.

“The worst thing reporters can do is use the term access to information,” Heller said.

If citizens are to understand and use their right to government-held information, people need to see why it’s important for them to understand. Especially in our fast-paced, sound-bite culture, it is important to present this information to them in a way that applies to their everyday lives.

Instead of extolling the importance and position of access to government information as a right affecting all other human rights, he said, journalists should make the information relevant to citizens. Journalists have a responsibility to act as translators. If parents are presented with the right to see teacher performance scores, scores of the class and school information, for instance, it becomes something they can get behind.

LoMonte agrees. He said individually outrageous cases tap into people's emotions and motivate them to act. As an example, he said, journalists can use the Jerry Sandusky and Penn State scandal as an example to inform the public about what could have been prevented with greater disclosure. Citizens are then left with no question about a direct link between a culture of secrecy and the atrocious behaviors that were left unchecked.

Whiney Evans was the summer 2012 Pulliam-Kilgore Freedom of Information intern for Society of Professional Journalists and Quill. She is a 2012 graduate of Brigham Young University.

Prescribed burns to begin in Tunnel Creek area

The Nevada Division of Forestry will be conducting prescribed burns at Tunnel Creek in the Lake Tahoe Nevada State Park backcountry during October and November, weather permitting.

The Tunnel Creek road, from Highway 28 to Tunnel Creek Station, may be closed in order to conduct the burns. Signs will be posted throughout the area when burns are being conducted. Nearly 75 acres will be treated in 12 treatment units.

The burns are part of ongoing fuels treatment and forest restoration efforts being conducted by the Nevada Tahoe Resource Team in the Lake Tahoe area. The goal of the project is to create a healthier forest and to make the area more resistant to catastrophic wildfire.

The Tunnel Creek burns are being conducted by the Nevada Division of Forestry in cooperation with the Division of State

Parks, the Division of State Lands and the North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District.

Weather patterns will be monitored for smoke management prior to and during burns. The timing of the burns depends on optimum weather conditions and steps will be made to minimize impacts to park visitors.

For more information, call (775) 684.2500.

Evening forum to focus on South Shore's economy

A group of partners has come together to present a State of the South Shore Economy forum on Oct. 23 at Embassy Suites in South Lake Tahoe.

The event will kick off at 5pm with a social hour, followed by the forum from 6-8pm.

Speakers and topics feature: Tahoe Prosperity Center Chairman, Thomas Greene; Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce board Chairman Casey Blann; Strategic Marketing Group President Carl Ribaudo; Tahoe Resource Conservation District Executive Director John Skeel; and chamber President B Gorman.

Ribaudo will present an overview of the South Shore's economy from the perspective of tourism, while Gorman will present a video from the June Chamber Trek to Monterey, Livermore, and Sacramento. Skeel and Greene will facilitate the evening's activities and will ask participants and speakers to explore where our competitors may have had to overcome challenges similar to those our community faces.

Additionally, the facilitators will guide participants through a process whereby residents, business people and community leaders will describe and diagram their concepts for economic revitalization implementation for the South Shore.

For more information, call (775) 588.1728.