Study reveals the demographics of charitable giving

By Pam Fessler, NPR

Ever wonder how charitable the people are who live in your state or community? It turns out that lower-income people tend to donate a much bigger share of their discretionary incomes than wealthier people do. And rich people are more generous when they live among those who aren't so rich.

That's according to a new study by the Chronicle of Philanthropy, which breaks charitable giving down by ZIP code. It found that generosity varies greatly from one region of the country to another. (Explore charitable giving in your state, city and neighborhood using the Chronicle of Philanthropy's new interactive.)

Take the 20020 ZIP code area in Southeast Washington, D.C. It includes the Fairlawn and Anacostia neighborhoods, which are among the city's poorest. Many in the area turn to charity for help.

One of those charities is a nonprofit called Bread for the City, where people line up daily for help with housing, health care, legal aid and food. But in this neighborhood, where the need is so great, charitable giving is also relatively high. Using Internal Revenue Service data, the Chronicle of Philanthropy found that the median household contribution is almost 19 percent of discretionary income — that's money left over after taxes and living expenses. This rate of giving is four times the national average.

Kristin Valentine, Bread for the City's development director, says she's not surprised. Even their clients give when they can, though it’s often a few dollars at a time.

Read the whole story

Dry winter creating wicked fire season

By Max Ehrenfreund, Sacramento Bee

A dry winter has turned into a busy summer for firefighters in California’s wildlands, and the largest and most intense fires of the year may be yet to come.

According to data provided by the U.S. Forest Service, wildfires had already burned 276,252 acres across the state as of last week, excluding the large Rush fire on the Nevada border.

That fire, which started Aug. 12, had burned 270,684 acres of grass, sagebrush and juniper by Sunday evening.

Last weekend, the Ponderosa fire burning outside Shingletown east of Redding destroyed seven houses. The fire has charred 15,000 acres since it started Saturday morning.

This summer follows several wetter, cooler years with fewer fires. By the middle of August last year, fires had burned only 73,868 acres statewide.

Last week, 8,000 firefighters were battling wildfires in California, including the 47,000- acre Chips fire in Plumas County, the 28,000- acre Reading fire in Lassen Volcanic National Park and the Rush fire east of Susanville.

A similar number of firefighters were on the job this week, too.

“Though we’ve already seen an increase in fire activity, the busier parts of the year are still ahead of us,” said California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection spokesman Daniel Berlant.

Read the whole story

Opinion: FCC crossing the line trying to regulate news

By Corydon B. Dunham

While recent protests over proposed legislation addressing media entertainment piracy were loud and widespread, the public seems unaware of an even greater threat to our free speech and a free press.

People voiced concern about whether SOPA and PIPA (the House and Senate piracy bills) would limit free speech on the Internet. But the resurrection of television’s old Fairness Doctrine, so government could again edit and censor news is a far more ominous threat.

The Federal Communications Commission has drafted a policy for government control of news. And even though a special study last year recommended that such a censorship policy be scrapped, it’s still pending, with the potential for action. Frankly, I’m surprised there is no outcry or debate about this political threat to distort news and speech and suppress them.

The FCC’s proposed new Localism, Balance and Diversity

Doctrine mirrors many aspects of the long-dead Fairness Doctrine. That doctrine was revoked in 1987 when the FCC and the courts found that it had suppressed news, chilled speech, imposed censorship, prevented criticism of the administration then in office, and created an atmosphere of "timidity and fear."

The new localism doctrine is very similar. It would force television stations to provide government "localism" in news production and coverage – as well as revise news reports to comply with government dictates on news balance and viewpoint diversity. Failure to comply could mean loss of the station license to broadcast.

It may sound good to some people, but in the past, government investigations and regulation enforcement deterred news broadcasts about public and political issues. To keep their broadcast licenses, stations had to conform their news and political reports to what they believed FCC commissioners would approve or revise news reports to what the commissioners did approve.

The FCC finally revoked that doctrine as against the public interest. Since the FCC is planning to transfer to the Internet the broadcast spectrum now used by local TV, news websites ultimately could fall under the new Internet rules.

Here are some highlights of the old doctrine and the new one:

• The Fairness Doctrine ruled TV news broadcasters from 1949 to 1987. Believing that the communication power of this, at the time, new medium concentrated great power in few hands, the government mandated that broadcast stations provide what the FCC would decide and dictate as appropriate "contrasting view" coverage.

• Under the Localism Doctrine, enforcement would not only be the job of the FCC, but also of a local board added at each station to monitor programming, including news. The members of that board would be required to recommend against a station's license renewal if they thought station programming news was not complying with this new FCC policy on localism, balance and diversity.

• Under localism rules, a three-vote majority of five politically appointed FCC commissioners at a central government agency would make local news judgments. They would override independent, local TV reporters and editors to impose government agency views on what should be reported and how.

This new policy, if activated, would directly target news and speech on television and enable an administration to use news coverage to manipulate and influence public opinion about important public and political issues. The effect would inevitably be something quite different from independent news.

That isn't speculation. It's history.

Corydon B. Dunham is a former 25-year NBC-TV executive and author of "Government Control of News: A Constitutional Challenge".

Snippets about Lake Tahoe

• South Tahoe Association of Realtors will be hosting the third annual South Tahoe Government Agencies Forum and Certification Program on Aug. 22. For more information or to register, call (530) 541.7007 or email staor@staor.org.

• Genoa's David Walley's Hot Springs is one of 3,795 restaurants worldwide to receive *Wine Spectator* magazine's 2012 Award of Excellence for its wine list.

• Custom Learning Academy, the only Western Association of Schools and College-accredited, private K-12 school in the region is accepting students for the school year that starts Sept. 4. For more information, call (530) 587.5470.

• Climate Change: Just the Facts is a website launched this month by Gov. Jerry Brown.

TOCCATA commemorates 9/11 with 4 performances

Tahoe Symphony Orchestra and Chorus commemorates the 11th anniversary of the 9/11 tragedy with a concert series that features famed violinist Elizabeth Pitcairn performing Brahms Violin Concerto on the legendary Red Stradivarius Violin and features the TOCCATA Chorus in Brahms mighty German Requiem.

Performances are:

Sept. 12 at 7pm at St. Theresa Catholic Church in South Lake Tahoe;

Sept. 13 at 7pm at Assumption Catholic Church in Truckee.

Sept. 15 at 4pm at the North Tahoe Hebrew Center in Tahoe Vista.

Sept. 17 at 7pm at Trinity Episcopal Church in Reno.

Tickets are $30 adults, $25 seniors, $5 students (19–23), and free for youth 18 and under. Preferred seating is available for $40 and can be reserved online. Tickets can be purchased in advance by credit card online or at the door by cash or check.

For more information, call (775) 313.9697.

South Lake Tahoe close to defaulting on parking garage

By Kathryn Reed

It has been 10 years since the South Lake Tahoe parking garage at Heavenly Village opened. It’s been a financial boondoggle since Day 1. Today it is in technical default and the city is on course to default on the bond payments.

When the area near Stateline was redeveloped, the city of South Lake Tahoe opted to own the parking garage. Throughout the years it has lost various sums of money. Currently, it is operating at about an $80,000 a year loss.

South Lake Tahoe is running out of money to pay the debt on the parking garage at Heavenly Village. Photo/LTN file

The technical default is because revenues are less than expenses. Bondholders are aware of this. But when the fund balance reaches zero or is a negative number, then the whole garage is in default. It's possible this could occur in the next year if more money is not generated soon.

"Once all of the funds deposited with Bank of New York, Mellon have been depleted, a default on the bonds could occur if yearly parking garage revenue is less than yearly debt service (principal and interest)," Debbie McIntyre, South Lake Tahoe accounting manager, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The exact consequences and steps that would be taken if the city defaults on the payments is not known.

"The supplemental reserve is $76,513. The reserve fund is $817,933, which is used during yearly operations," McIntyre said.

As of July 31, the remaining principal payment was $7.54 million and the remaining interest payments total $5,232,500 for a total remaining balance of $12,772,500. The final payments are due in fiscal year 2027-28.

The original bond from 2002 was $9 million. The soonest the bonds could be refinanced is December 2013, which might be too late, even if it were to help restructure the debt payments.

With California getting rid of redevelopment agencies, this has further complicated the matter in terms of who actually owns the garage.

“The land the garage is on was owned by the [redevelopment agency] and now the successor agency, but the buildings are owned by the [joint powers authority] established for the issuance of the bonds. But regardless, the bondholders have title to the revenue until the debt is paid off, so although regardless of deed, the ownership is the bondholders’,” City Manager Nancy Kerry explained.

“In the case of this property, it is best to leave the ownership with the successor agency and bondholders until the debt is paid.”

To try to prevent complete default, the city is looking at ways to generate more income. But when free unlimited parking is in one direction at the casinos and two-hour free parking is at the center in the other direction, it is hard to convince people paying money for parking is worthwhile.

South Lake Tahoe and Heavenly Mountain Resort last week came to an agreement for people who have season passes to the resort to get a deal on parking. While there was a program in place last year, it did not get implemented until the snow had fallen.

Skiers who have an unlimited ski pass may buy an unrestricted parking pass for $299, while those with restricted ski passes may buy parking passes with blackout dates for $199.

Annual passes — which have nothing to do with the ski resort — are being lowered to $500.

City officials are also talking to PADMA to see if there are ways to get people to park at the garage and to have more of the Heavenly Village businesses be part of the validation program.

Park Avenue Development Maintenance Association is the organization formed in 2002 to maintain Heavenly Village. The two Marriott properties pay 55 percent collectively, Heavenly Mountain Resort 20 percent, South Lake Tahoe 20 percent, Trans Sierra Investments 2.5 percent, and Cecil’s 2.5 percent for the upkeep for the entire center.

Enviro groups to discuss forest plan alternatives

Local environmental groups are putting on two meetings this week about the Lake Tahoe Basin Forest Plan.

For the first time in more than two decades the Forest Service is redoing the management plan for nearly 80 percent of all the land in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Comments are being taken until Aug. 30.

Sierra Club officials will breakdown the four proposed alternatives in the plan and have local policy experts to answer questions.

The first gathering is Aug. 21 from 6-7pm at Lake Tahoe Community College, Aspen Room, South Lake Tahoe; the second is Aug. 23, 6-7pm, North Lake Tahoe Event Center, Kings Beach.

White House meal rewards kids for eating their veggies

By April Fulton, NPR

No one said it would be easy to sell kids on quinoa and kale, but an invitation to the White House's first Kids State Dinner today, complete with fresh fruit topiaries and balloon animals, turned out to be just the ticket for some.

The dinner – really, a luncheon – was the brainchild of first lady Michelle Obama and her partners in the "Let's Move" initiative to get kids to fight the fat by cooking and eating foods that meet U.S. Department of Agriculture guidelines.

"We're so proud of you," Obama told the 54 kids and parents whose recipes were chosen in a healthy recipe contest – one from each state and territory.

Not to be outshined, POTUS himself made an appearance, praising the first lady and waxing a bit nostalgic about his pre-White House efforts to cook toast, omelets and chili. Then he warned guests not to feed Bo – the family dog is apparently on a diet.

North Carolina's Marshall Reid, 12, who got to introduce the first lady, proudly announced that he loves quinoa. He also admitted he couldn't spell it, further endearing himself to the families eager to dig in to goodies created by some of the guests.

Read the whole story

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10 new owl species discovered in Philippines

By Jakarata Globe

Scientists and birdwatchers have discovered 10 new owl species in the Philippines, using advanced recording equipment that can distinguish between their hoots, a conservation official said.

Eight of the new species were previously considered sub-species while two are totally new, said Lisa Paguntalan, field director of Philippines Biodiversity Conservation Programme.

“There is no significant variation in their forms. It was the sound difference of their calls that was very significant in distinguishing between species,” she told AFP.

Paguntalan warned that many of these new species were possibly endangered because they were found only in small isolated islands or in tiny pockets of forests.

Ornithologists and birdwatchers from Michigan State University, Birdlife International and other groups used museum samples and high-quality photography and recording systems to show the owls were of different species.

Read the whole story

Documents show how state parks moved money around

By Kevin Yamamura, Sacramento Bee

The state Department of Parks and Recreation routinely searched for ways to spend extra money each June despite facing the threat of park closures and forgoing upkeep at its 278 properties, based on newly released transcripts from an internal investigation.

Testimony from 30 interviews with state employees portrays parks administrators who appeared to have the opposite problem from one long described by Gov. Jerry Brown – excess cash left over and not enough ways to spend it.

That was the case in June 2011, when the investigation found former parks administrator Manuel Thomas Lopez tapped some of the funds for a cash buyout of accumulated leave without authorization. The state Resources Agency made transcripts available late Friday from the completed report by Deputy Attorney General Corinne Murphy on Lopez's actions.

Brown's administration revealed last month that the parks department had long hidden $54 million without reporting it to the Department of Finance and state lawmakers, who have constitutional authority over spending in California. In the past year, private donors and other government agencies have contributed under the impression the parks department did not have a dime to spare. Longtime state parks director Ruth Coleman and other top officials resigned last month.

The documents depict a department that wanted to keep secret a reserve of its own special funds to hedge against future financial problems while securing — and spending — as much state general fund money each year as it could.

Department of Finance spokesman H.D. Palmer said his office was unaware that parks officials had hidden funds until July. Finance and the state Department of Justice are investigating further.

“I’m not going to get into what (our audit) is going to conclude, other than there was something very much awry in the way parks was working their budget operations,” Palmer said.

In the documents, Cheryl Taylor, a former state parks budget director, described a cat-and-mouse game that parks officials played with finance officials to protect their department’s share of general fund money.

The parks department is funded by fee revenues and taxpayer dollars. Taylor suggested parks officials kept a hidden surplus in the fee-based State Parks and Recreation Fund because they feared the Finance Department and lawmakers would cut the share of department funds that comes from taxpayers.

Read the whole story