DirecTV users lose Comedy Central, MTV in fee dispute

By Mark Glover, Sacramento Bee

Sacramento-area DirecTV customers missing programs this week on Nickelodeon, MTV, Comedy Central and more than a dozen other Viacom cable channels can at least take solace in the fact that they're not alone.

Nationwide, 20 million viewers are in the same boat.

Channels owned by Viacom went black on Wednesday, the byproduct of yet another dispute with DirecTV over so-called carriage fees – money paid for the right to retransmit content.

Both sides are blaming each other amid failed talks for a new carriage contract. The existing contract recently expired.

Denise Denson, Viacom's executive vice president of content distribution and marketing, said "the last proposal DirecTV had made was lower than anyone else pays in the industry, and a deal we said we would not do out of fairness to other distributors.

"DirecTV also refused to engage with us on any issues related to the deal beyond the rate increase. We are ready to talk at any time."

Read the whole story

TOCCATA mixes Mozart and Beatles

Maestro James Rawie and Friends, a soft rock band, and the singers of the TOCCATA chorus mix Beatles' music Mozart, madrigals and folk-rock music in a concert on Aug. 20 at 7:30pm at Sand Harbor State Park.

Tickets are $80, $42 and $25 and are only available through the Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival box office online or by calling (800) 74SHOWS (747.4697).

For more information, visit TOCCATA online or call (775) 313.9697.

More people than ever traveling with their pets

By Anne Kadet, SmartMoney

Karen Goldberg may be single, but when she hits the road, she's hardly lacking for travel companions. Every year she joins her extended family for a long cruise or grabs a friend to explore new cities like New Orleans. Last summer, however, the 39-year-old CPA took a gamble and turned to someone new: Riley, her 86-pound golden retriever.

The plan was to spend $1,100 on a four-night stay at Canine Camp Getaway, a Lake George, N.Y., retreat for pets and their owners. But retreat suggests quiet – in practice, the lodge in the Adirondacks was more like a madcap convention for the pet set. At night Goldberg and Riley shared a room, but each had a

double bed. By day, the two joined 40 other humans and 70 dogs for goofy bonding activities, from decorating homemade dog biscuits to making paw paintings and drinking beer at “yappy hour.” Just like at a human summer camp, Goldberg says, cliques formed; the labs and retrievers would congregate poolside, while the border collies hung out at the advanced agility course and the hounds gathered for a scent-detection workshop. The humans? They spent all day talking about dog training, dog nutrition and, of course, their pet-centric expeditions. Clearly, it wasn’t exactly the typical family vacation. “All the conversations revolved around dogs,” she says.



People bring their four-legged family members hiking in Tahoe. Photo/LTN

Tales of pet pampering gone wild are hardly surprising in the age of Swarovski crystal collars and air-conditioned dog mansions. But for anyone out and about this summer, with or without Fido, it’ll be hard to ignore the fact that dog mania has reached a tipping point. Upstanding citizens who might otherwise be considered perfectly lucid are taking the “animal companion” concept to a new level – bringing their pets to the movies, shopping and out for dinner in fancy bistros. And, in an economy where a four-legged customer is better than none, businesses are happy to accommodate them. Well-behaved canines are welcome at retailers like Apple, The Gap and Pottery Barn,

while some restaurants and hotels go a step further, offering pet menus and puppy-sitting. Even tourist agencies are boarding the gravy train. Washington state's Yakima Valley Visitors & Convention Bureau, for example, just launched a website listing the area's dog-friendly wineries, restaurants, museums and stores. "We want to be known as a very pet-friendly wine destination," says CEO John Cooper.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Non-believers as generous as people of faith

By Richard Dawkins, Washington Post

Freethinkers, atheists, agnostics, secular humanists – whatever name non-believers go under, are not America's most popular minority. They are also, not a small minority. According to Gallup, in 2011, and Pew in 2012, they comfortably outnumber Mormons, Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists all put together. One reason for our unpopularity is the widespread belief that you need God in order to be good. Going along with that misconception is further belief that atheists are less generous than religious people, less philanthropic, less likely to donate to charity. Even if that were the case it would, of course, have no bearing on the truth of religious beliefs.

I would hypothesize that the difference in giving between the religion and nonreligious is negligible if you only count donations to pure charity and discount donations to atheist advocacy organizations, or to churches (including tithes) and "charities" that unscrupulously use their resources to

proselytize rather than bestow real charitable benefits.

Incidentally, because churches are automatically classified as charities for taxation purposes is a disgrace. Nobody denies that some churches do charitable work. But that doesn't mean that any organization should automatically qualify for tax-free status simply by calling itself a church. Each church organization separately should make the case that it does charitable work, just as anybody else has to when seeking tax exemption.

Read the whole story

Poll: Californians remain gloomy on economy

By Dale Kasler, Sacramento Bee

The recession ended three years ago and unemployment is falling – but try telling that to most Californians.

Despite evidence of a recovery, a resounding 88 percent of California voters believe the state's economy is enduring "bad times," according to the latest Field Poll.

What's more, they generally don't expect a big improvement in the next 12 months. Just 31 percent foresee the economy improving, and 24 percent believe it will get worse. The rest expect the economy to simply tread water.

The results show that most Californians don't buy into "the official numbers about how the economy is performing," said poll director Mark DiCamillo. "Not much optimism there."

In the three years since the recovery officially started, the number of Californians who believe the state is in bad times has fallen from 96 percent to 88 percent. Pollsters, economists and citizens alike believe the gloomy sentiment is emblematic of the weak pace of economic recovery.

Read the whole story

Impossible to take the artist out of the art instructor

By Susan Wood

Despite being out of the public eye of college life, a longtime art instructor has remained rock solid in his commitment to sculpting.

Four years ago in June, David Foster left his post of 32 years at Lake Tahoe Community College. The fixture of the local institution began focusing much of his time on his own pieces – "steps away" from his log cabin home on Tahoe Mountain. The 1,600-square-foot studio is Foster's version of his man cave. The gallery is upstairs, but most of the action happens downstairs.

The studio is dotted with sculptures, mostly marble – his stone of choice since touring Pietra Santa, Italy, where artists go to work and follow in Michelangelo's footsteps. Foster, 69, gleams when he talks about the artists' haven, as if fantasizing about one day being one of the 90-plus-year-old sculptors who call the place home.



David Foster's attention to detail allows him to create impressive works of art. Photos/Susan Wood

After glancing around the studio, it’s easy to see that moving seems out of the question. Marble weighs 160 pounds per cubic foot, a reality that surfaced when his wife Joanne lifted one of the pieces while fleeing their home from a racing Angora Fire a year before he retired.

“That’s true love,” Foster said, referring to her selecting irreplaceable valuables to pack. She grabbed one bronze and one marble works of art.

Foster felt helpless that day. He came out of Scotty’s Hardware and noticed a huge plume of smoke from the North Upper Truckee area moving northeast toward his house.

“The sun looked red,” he recalled. He scrambled up to a rock outcropping off Echo View Estates, but by the time he drove to Sawmill Pond, an El Dorado County sheriff’s blockade was set up and he couldn’t get home. After a quick call and a carload of valuables, the Fosters met up at his LTCC office and waited patiently for their next move. Ash and cinders fell on the campus grounds.

Foster sighed.

“If the fire would have hit the studio, this marble piece

would have turned to white powder," he said, while running his hands through a pile.

Foster grew up in eastern Iowa where his father worked in a stone quarry. Taking over the business was his father's dream, but not David's. He wanted to do something else with stone.

"I told him: 'Dad, I gotta study art'," Foster said, with the conviction of a J.D. Salinger's "Catcher in the Rye" coming of age passion.

That he did. Then, he spent three decades teaching others – after a brief reprieve as a driver's education instructor. For that: "I have stories," Foster said of the job.

Foster misses some components of teaching. He often filled the figure sculpting classes, employing a slew of nude models. Some of the students still keep in contact. He had an incredible knack for teaching – sometimes reminding the wannabe sculptors to carve "realism, not idealism" when it comes to working with live nude models. The students made Foster and longtime colleague Phyllis Shafer proud every year during the annual student art competition.

His teaching methods may have come across as unconventional at times. He recalled holding up an art book one might keep on a coffee table and called it a "coloring book."

"If they were having a hard time, I could tell from the book (not being highlighted and written on)," he said.

Foster has kept ties with the college by bringing President Kindred Murillo to his home for a tour. The artist was commissioned by a college patron for a piece called "Discovery." The sculpture will sit near the library and stretch 12 feet to the sky. It's being created in honor of a patron Kit Barkley's husband because of his flying background.

"It's a wonderful opportunity for the college to have a

lasting piece of (Foster's) work publicly shown," said Melonie Guttry, who works for the LTCC Foundation.

The piece that has consumed him "for too long" he says represents a cross between a woman and cello. The aptly named "Donnacello" dominates the art studio as the centerpiece. Small shards of grinding rocks and other tools lay under the piece. After hours of "sanding," the shards take on the shape of the sculpture because the stone is usually harder.

He admits one must be in shape to take on this hobby. Foster is also a regular fixture at Sierra Athletic Club. His patience is satisfied by moving from one piece to another. The heavy pieces get moved around by a 1-ton crane he bought for $200 and later retrofitted for his own use for $800. There's a hatch between the two studio floors where a pulley system transports the pieces from one floor to another.

The studio came about in 2005 after his carving dropped white dust that floated into the house from the garage and settled on the grand piano. His wife's hands on her hips let it be known the art needed a new home.

Before Foster selects what to sculpt, he surveys the stone yards like a true shopper. Then he studies how the stone may be situated in such a way to give the piece motion – for example, balancing on a corner. The trick teaches the appreciative art eye to stare in an attempt to catch the piece moving. Think of the Mona Lisa.

He draws it then makes mini versions of the sculpture called "maquettes."

"I try to find something that's never been done before," he said.

With its Portugal marble crystals glowing in the light, the Donnacello serves as an ideal example.

“I wanted the relationship of the figure and cello to unite,” he said, while lightly stroking the smooth figure.

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Zoos struggle to breed endangered species in captivity

By Leslie Kaufman, New York Times

FRONT ROYAL, Va. — After cautiously sniffing the grass, three male cheetahs at the animal-breeding center here suddenly began running in frenzied circles. It was a sign that a female cheetah that normally lives in the yard was in heat.

Then one of the males let out a low, seal-like bark — a signal for an even higher state of arousal. The other males were excused.

To maximize the chances for successful breeding, scientists have learned to separate cheetahs by gender, even preventing them from seeing each other before they mate. It turns out that familiarity can be a turnoff for cheetahs, too.

Finally, it was time to bring in the female. She seemed mystified by the male cheetah's eagerness and failed to assume a mating position. The encounter fizzled.

With extinctions rising and habitats being destroyed, zoos are trying to breed about 160 endangered species in captivity. But while mating in the wild seems largely primal and effortless, in captivity it can be anything but.

Read the whole story

Mountain flower author to speak at Sierra Club meeting

The Tahoe Area Sierra Club and the Tahoe Institute of Natural Science are co-sponsoring the Sierra Club's community meeting in South Lake Tahoe on July 18 from 7-9pm.

Laird Blackwell, professor and leading author on mountain wildflowers, will speak. Blackwell will present his new book on California wildflowers, including a slide show highlighting the most beautiful flowers now blooming in the Lake Tahoe area. He will also be signing books, which are available at Hooligan's bookstore in Truckee.

The free public event is being held at Unity of the Lake Center, 1195 Rufus Allen Blvd.

USFS to hold public meetings on forest plan revision

The U.S. Forest Service Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit is hosting four information sessions for public review and comment on its Forest Plan revision.

Each session will provide an overview of the four plan alternatives detailed in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement.

The sessions are scheduled for July 17 at the Forest Supervisor’s Office, 35 College Drive, South Lake Tahoe, at 2-4pm with a second session from 6-8pm.

Two more sessions will be held July 18 at the North Tahoe Conference Center, 8318 North Lake Blvd., Kings Beach, from 2-4pm and 6-8pm.

A session will be held online on July 19 from 1-3pm. More information on how to participate in the webinar is available at the USFS web site.

For more details, contact Adrian Escobedo, Forest Civil Rights Officer, at (530) 543.2758 or by email at aescobedo02@fs.fed.us.

Snippets about Lake Tahoe

• The South Lake Tahoe City Council is holding a special meeting at the Bonanza Park, 1209 Bonanza Ave., July 14 at 10:30am. The park opening follows at 11am.

• The South Lake Tahoe Planning Commission granted the “locally unique” designation to signs at the Stardust and Tahoe Beach and Ski Club.

• Here is the Caltrans roadwork schedule for El Dorado-Tahoe and Sierra for next week.