How will legalized pot affect the gaming industry?

By Richard N. Velotta, Las Vegas Review-Journal

Depending on which side of Question 2 you sat, you're either embracing Jan. 1 or dreading its arrival.

How we treat the arrival of recreational marijuana is going to be the subject of continuing debate through 2017 as leaders sort out all the regulatory details of public policy. And it's not a debate restricted to Nevada. Other states that generate tourism and gaming revenue are fielding the same types of questions.

The Nevada Gaming Control Board and Gaming Commission got the ball rolling with a pair of public hearings last month and it was clear from those sessions that there will be some interesting twists and turns on the horizon.

The line in the sand drawn by gaming regulators is based on federal law. The control board and the commission say that because the federal government views marijuana use as illegal, so do state gaming regulators.

Read the whole story

On-site medics integral to

SnowGlobe’s survival

By Kathryn Reed

“We would not be able to have SnowGlobe if Rock Med was not here.”

Those are the words of South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Jeff Meston. For a department his size, when there are four patients it is considered a multi-casualty incident.

If everyone who was treated at the three-day music festival went via ambulance to Barton Memorial Hospital, it would overload that facility and cripple the ambulance service.

These are reasons why the volunteer medical team is so important to South Lake Tahoe’s annual music festival, which returns next week.

“There are more medical calls at SnowGlobe than we would have in several days in the city,” Meston told *Lake Tahoe News.* “They have had 30 people OD or some emergency situation at any time.”

Alcohol and harder drugs are the primary reasons people seek medical care.



Rock Medicine has been at every SnowGlobe concert in South Lake Tahoe. Photo Copyright 2016 Carolyn E. Wright

Even though the medical facility is onsite, every year concert-goers end up in the emergency room at Barton.

“For the last several years, the Barton Emergency Department has seen between five and 15 patients from SnowGlobe per day. Most patients seen in the Emergency Department come for adverse effects from alcohol intoxication and use of illegal substances. Approximately half of the intoxicated patients seen were under the age of 21,” Lance Orr, medical director for Barton’s ER, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “Patients under the influence require more monitoring and attention from emergency

staff and physicians. Occasionally we see patients originating from SnowGlobe who have sustained a minor traumatic injury. Such injuries are more common when the conditions are icy."

The concept of Rock Medicine was started in 1972 by legendary music promoter Bill Graham. Upon his request the Haight Ashbury Free Clinic in San Francisco provided medical care in a tent to Grateful Dead and Led Zeppelin concert-goers.

George "Skip" Gay was a doctor at the clinic at the time. In 1973, he founded Rock Medicine. The organization now provides medical care at concerts throughout Northern California, as well as being the primary caregivers for Levi Stadium – home of the San Francisco 49er football team.

Rock Med declined to be interviewed for this story.

Chad Donnelly, the promoter for SnowGlobe, said of Rock Med, "They do an incredible job of looking after attendees."

Even so, sometimes concert-goers need to be taken to the hospital.

"If someone using Rock Med services needs additional medical attention, Rock Med's medical staff sends patients by ambulance to the Barton Emergency Department. When Rock Med closes their medical facility for the day, patients not ready for discharge from medical care are directed to the Barton Emergency Department," Orr said.

Rock Med brings a small army of doctors, nurses and other support staff who are able to perform an array of medical procedures.

"They have more people on duty at SnowGlobe than we have firefighters and police officers in the city," Meston said.

Stormier times likely for Calif. water users

By Ellen Knickmeyer, AP

The first winter storm of 2017 to drop welcome rain over the rivers, pumps, pipes and canals that move California's water north to south likely will open a new era of tension over how much water goes to fish or farms under a new U.S law.

Legislation signed Friday by President Obama dictates that the federal portion of California's heavily engineered water systems gives agricultural districts and other human users the biggest possible share of the most fought-over resource in a state with a six-year drought.

Water experts and conservationists expect that new mandate to conflict with state and federal laws and court orders meant to ensure enough water stays in Northern California's Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers and delta for endangered native fish.

Dueling interpretations over what the new law means for water deliveries could foster tensions between the state and the incoming Trump administration and worsen the water wars among farmers, fishing industries and conservation interests.

"There's going to be fighting, and it is going to commence almost immediately," said Peter Moyle, a professor emeritus of biology at UC Davis.

Moyle has spent much of his career tracing the decline of the minute fish called the Delta smelt and dozens of other native species since operations at California's giant state and federal water projects started more than a half-century ago.

Paul Wenger, president of the California Farm Bureau Federation, is one of many, including farming groups and agricultural water districts with considerable political strength, that welcome the water bill.

As heavy winter rains ease the drought, “this bill is going to help us catch some of this water and move it down south,” Wenger said.

And if the state’s fishing groups and conservationists try to stop that, “shame on the environmentalists,” he said. “Lawsuits haven’t helped the fish.”

Law bringing some changes

The law includes new directions on how hard to run giant water pumps during the winter storms that bring much of California’s rain for the year.

Typically, the storms trigger recommendations from wildlife officials to ease up on pumping. That is meant to help keep the nearly extinct Delta smelt and waning native salmon on course as the fish take advantage of the storms to move up or downstream.

When Donald Trump visited California’s Central Valley during the presidential campaign, he cited complaints from water districts and farmers that easing pumping after heavy rains wastes storm water that could be captured for the heavily agricultural region.

Environmental groups say allowing winter rains to flow to the Pacific Ocean is essential to the health of the West Coast’s largest estuary, the San Francisco Bay.

Among other changes, the new law is expected to require biologists to show more hard data on endangered fish in real time when they ask for a reduction in pumping. Moyle, the Delta smelt expert, believes that’s possible because of “smelt

cams” and other monitoring systems already in place.

Jay Lund, longtime water policy expert at the UC Davis, expects the law to provide up to an additional half-million acre-feet of water for human users.

That’s roughly equal to enough water to supply a half-million homes for a year and would be worth several hundreds of millions of dollars to agricultural interests in drought years. Both fish and farms received less water during the worst of California’s drought.

Fish advocates were expected to go to court if the law takes away water from native species under the state and federal Endangered Species Acts and related court orders, said Doug Obegi with the Natural Resources Defense Council.

Groups fighting restrictions

Some agricultural interests hope to challenge the U.S. Endangered Species Act itself, loosening or doing away with its restrictions on pumping in California.

More pumping for farms and less water in the two rivers would be bad news not just for smelt but for other California fish listed as endangered, from salmon to sturgeon to steelhead, Moyle said.

All of that could bring the Trump administration and its supporters in Congress into conflict with California over the state’s protections for threatened wildlife.

“Dueling legislation between Congress and the state Legislature, and parallel legal battles in state and federal courts, and everyone’s paying attention to that instead of paying attention to making the system run better – that’s my worry,” Lund said.

Risk of deadly avalanche grows in Sierra

By Brad Branan, Sacramento Bee

The death of a 64-year-old Aptos man at Mount Rose Ski Resort this month punctuates the fact that the Sierra snow season, for the second year in a row, is starting out with dangerous avalanche conditions.

After four years of drought, last season featured similar conditions, with several avalanches reported by U.S. Forest Service officials and the death of a 23-year-old ski instructor who apparently wandered off course at Sugar Bowl Resort.

“This year has been a little more dramatic,” said Steve Reynaud, a forecaster at the Sierra Avalanche Center, noting that four “atmospheric river” storms have dumped heavy snow in the higher elevations this season.

As of Friday afternoon, the center had placed the Lake Tahoe region under a warning of “considerable” avalanche risk. The level 3 warning, in a system with 5 as the most dangerous, was in effect until Saturday morning.

Read the whole story

SLT trying to get a handle on vacation rentals



Large homes like this one being built near Heavenly Mountain Resort's Cal Lodge to be used as a vacation home rental is adding fuel to the heated issue in South Lake Tahoe. Photo/LTN

By Kathryn Reed

Of the 140 citations South Lake Tahoe has issued to vacation home owners, 68 were for renting without a permit.

The illegal operators are ordered to immediately stop advertising their rental. While they can go through the permit process to come into compliance, it's not a slam dunk to get approved. And once cited, the city keeps an eye on the property to monitor for repeat infractions.

In the last fiscal year the city conducted 24 audits to see if people were paying the amount of transient occupancy tax they

were supposed to. The city has collected $58,592 in the last year in previously unpaid TOT.

“We collect TOT on the honor system. We can audit them when it seems like they are underreporting,” Maureen Stuhlman, who handles vacation home rental enforcement for South Lake Tahoe, said.

Stuhlman and Kevin Fabino, who runs the Community Development department for the city, gave an update on the VHR situation to the City Council last week.

In July during the last VHR presentation, 1,858 VHR permits existed. Today, that number is 1,149. About 426 of those permits are for time shares. One-hundred and thirty have expired since the summer. The city expects another 150 to be considered expired in the next month.

When the new ordinance was enacted in October 2015 an inspection component was added. The criteria have scared some people.

The city has made a concerted effort in the last four months to address expired permits; trying to surmise if people are renting illegally or have gotten out of the business.

“I would say 95 percent of those inspections have been completed,” Fabino said. “It has been a huge undertaking to address expired permits. At one time there were 700 to 900.”

Fabino said his department is trying to gather better data, but that the city’s antiquated system has made it difficult to do so.

Another change in the permit process is allowing people to object to the house becoming a VHR. A zoning administrator reviews any challenges. Part of the criteria is looking at how the rental would impact the character of the neighborhood.

“For us it is a real balancing act,” Fabino said.

Jerry Goodman was the only member of the public who spoke at the Dec. 13 meeting. He has a number of vacation rentals on his street and has been a vocal opponent of VHRs. At Tuesday's meeting he stressed that the character of a residential neighborhood would always be changed because these are not residents staying the night.

Another aspect to the VHR is that High Sierra Patrol started working Dec. 16. Now the city is being proactive instead of reactive. Before it was all about responding when a complaint was called in. The people will now regularly patrol areas known to have problem houses. They won't interact with the guests, but instead will call an issue in to the community service officer who will respond to the residence.

Truckee's winter economy started with chicken wire, water



The first Ice Palace was next to the

Truckee Hotel. Photo/Truckee Donner Historical Society

By Abby Stevens, Moonshine Ink

In the autumn of 1894, snow came to Truckee earlier than usual. The temperatures dropped to sub-zero in the evenings, but despite the cold, one man stood over a pile of manmade ice while looking out over Truckee from the famed Rocking Stone and his mansion on the hillside.

For weeks following the snowfall he twisted chicken wire, shoveled snow, and each night watered his creation with tender loving care. Why was this man watering ice, you may ask? His son asked him the same question but the man wouldn't tell.

Charles McGlashan, the ice maker, wasn't just avoiding household chores – the giant icicle was his idea of economic expansion for Truckee.

At first, locals were skeptical about whether people living in the Bay Area would ever travel up to Truckee in the winter, even for a festival.

Read the whole story

A tale of two droughts in California

By Matt Stevens, Los Angeles Times

When California water officials assess the drought, the first place they look is the northern Sierra Nevada mountains.

Rain and snowmelt from the area feed into a complex system of rivers, canals and reservoirs that send water across the state. And by almost all measures, the drought picture in Northern California has dramatically improved over the last two months, as a series of storms have helped replenish the state's two major water projects. So far this season, rain levels in the northern Sierra are 180 percent of average, with 23.5 inches of rain falling – and more on the way this week.

But the story is more grim in Southern California, which remains historically dry. Now water officials must figure out how to deal with the disparity and its implications for managing the drought. While Southern California still gets some water from the Sierra, about 50 percent of its supply comes from local sources such as groundwater and reservoirs.

Read the whole story

Funding spurs Hwy. 50-Pioneer Trail roundabout



This is what the Pioneer Trail-Highway 50 roundabout in Meyers could look like.

By Kathryn Reed

El Dorado County is moving forward with plans to construct a roundabout at the intersection of Highway 50 and Pioneer Trail in Meyers.

The county was just awarded a grant for $2,932,840 from the Federal Highway Administration's Highway Safety Improvement Program. This was less than the requested amount of $3,450,400.

"Right now we need to find some more money before we really dig in on this project; and we have to find it pretty soon," John Kahling, the county's deputy director of engineering, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "The project will not move forward unless we are able to identify approximately $600,000 in additional funding."

The entire project is estimated to cost $4 million.

Other possible funding sources include state transportation block grant dollars, federal Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality funds, state maintenance funding, and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency mitigation funds.

The Board of Supervisors is expected to officially accept the federal grant after the first of the year. That will then start the three-year time clock for the county to have begun construction. If that deadline is not met, the money has to be returned.

While the bulk of the work affects the state highway, the county is taking the responsibility for the project.

“The county is the lead on this project because Caltrans does not currently have any plans for improving the intersection, and the county feels that improvements associated with safety, increased throughput, and pedestrian and bicycle use are appropriate,” Kahling said.

Caltrans, though, will be involved in this project. (The state agency is the lead for the roundabout going in just west of here at the intersection of highways 50 and 89.)

“Local agencies often take the lead in interchange projects, especially when they’re able to obtain funding. Caltrans will be the oversight agency on the project and ensure that the design plans meet our standards. Once construction begins, traffic management plans also will need to be approved by Caltrans,” Steve Nelson, spokesman for Caltrans, told *Lake Tahoe News.*

The exact number of lanes for the roundabout remains to be determined.

Today the crossing for pedestrians and bicyclists is dangerous based on where the crosswalks are, how trails connect and the lights. The roundabout will be designed to incorporate non-motorized travelers.

According to the Federal Highway Administration, “Roundabouts have fewer conflict points. A single lane roundabout has 50 percent fewer pedestrian-vehicle conflict points than a comparable stop or signal controlled intersection. Conflicts

between bicycles and vehicles are reduced as well.”

Environmentalists challenge Squaw’s expansion

By Brad Branan, Sacramento Bee

A Nevada City advocacy group has filed a legal challenge to Squaw Valley’s expansion plan, saying Placer County violated the California Environmental Quality Act by approving the development last month.

County supervisors approved construction of hotels, condominiums and housing of up to 1,500 rooms, up to 300,000 square feet of commercial space and a “mountain adventure center” of 90,000 square feet at the famed ski resort.

Sierra Watch, which was instrumental in organizing community opposition to the plan, filed the legal challenge Wednesday in Placer Superior Court.

Read the whole story

Ex-SLT firefighter pleads

guilty to child porn

By Kathryn Reed

Nearly two years after being arrested on child pornography charges, former South Lake Tahoe fire Capt. Mark Wygant was in federal court in Sacramento on Dec. 16 to plead guilty to one charge.



Mark Wygant

A plea deal brought the original six charges involving sexual exploitation and attempted sexual exploitation of minors down to one charge of transportation of child pornography.

He will be sentenced at a future date. Wygant faces between five and 20 years in prison. Since his arrest in January 2015 he has been held in the Sacramento County jail.

“I am pleased that Mr. Wygant pleaded guilty to his crime and the punishment will now be in the hands of the criminal justice system,” Fire Chief Jeff Meston told *Lake Tahoe News.*

A flash drive was found in an unassigned locker at a city fire station containing more than 5,000 images of children engaged in sexually explicit conduct and more than 50 video files depicting child pornography, according to court records.

The crimes began in March 2011 and were ongoing until at least December 2014.

The 46-year-old resigned from the department in February 2015.

During his employment with South Lake Tahoe he was living with his family in Chico.