California groundwater law stirs debate

By Amy Quinton, Capital Public Radio

Two years ago, California became one of the last states in the West to pass a law to manage groundwater. The political will to do so took decades. But the bigger battle may be putting the law into practice.

Paso Robles in San Luis Obispo County may be a perfect example of how hard it’s going to be.

The region is known mostly for it’s more than 200 wineries. But amidst the rolling hills full of vineyards, it’s not unusual to see tanker trucks delivering water to rural homeowners whose wells have run dry.

Stephen Johansen with Crocker Water is filling storage tanks for one rural homeowner. He says business is booming.

Right next door, Sue Luft, a retired environmental engineer, started to see her well fail before the drought even started.

Read the whole story

Bad omen for dangerous Calif. fire season

By Joseph Serna, Alexia Fernandez and Jason Song, Los Angeles Times

The fire started smoldering Wednesday afternoon off a curvy

mountain road in the coastal hills north of Santa Barbara.

Then, infamous “sundowner” winds started blowing fiercely, and the Sherpa Fire suddenly exploded. Authorities frantically shut down the 101 Freeway and evacuated hundreds of homes within a 15-mile path of the blaze, which was being pushed by 50-mph gusts.

The fire was able to move so far because it was racing through overgrown hillsides and canyons that had not burned in more than 60 years.

The state is in its fourth year of drought, and officials say the Sherpa blaze is a grim omen for what could be a summer and fall of fire.

So far this year, wildfires have burned more than 30,000 acres on state and federal land. That is about equal or slightly higher than the same period in 2015, a particularly destructive year of fire that burned 307,598 acres and hundreds of homes and left at least nine people dead.

Read the whole story

Douglas sewer conundrum in holding pattern



Douglas County commissioners are not all in agreement in how to handle the sewer district issue. Photo/Jessie Marchesseau

By Jessie Marchesseau

STATELINE – A possible ordinance dissolving the Douglas County Sewer Improvement District was by far the most popular item on the agenda for Thursday's Douglas County Board of County Commissioners meeting.

So much so, the fire marshal was actively turning people away at the door because attendance exceeded the maximum capacity, set at 98 people, for the two front rooms at the Tahoe Transportation Center in Stateline. An estimated 50 or so people were directed to the judicial court across the street where the meeting was streamed live on TVs.

The state of the DCSID has been a hot topic since May 23 when Douglas County District Attorney Mark Jackson brought to light a handful of questionable practices at an open meeting in Gardnerville of county commissioners.

At the May 23 meeting, Jackson alleged corruption, illegal collusion and political malfeasance on the part of DCSID board members. Jackson played audio recordings from recent DCSID board meetings to support his accusations. The meetings were supposedly open to the public; however, no citizens were present.

In these recordings, board members can reportedly be heard

discussing the need to find someone to file an ethics complaint against Planning Manager Hope Sullivan as part of their efforts to convince county commissioners to approve their plan for two lined effluent holding ponds, a gravel mining operation, and concrete and asphalt plants in the East Valley. The gravel mining, concrete and asphalt plants were included to subsidize the cost of building the ponds, board members said.

A few months later, the Ethics Commission received the aforementioned ethics complaint from Don Miner, a former Douglas County commissioner and personal friend of the DCSID engineer and one of the board members. DCSID board members said they were aware that Miner was filing the complaint, but it was not at their request.

The recordings were not played again at Thursday's meeting, and Jackson said his charges are not focused specifically on the gravel pit or holding pond issues. The tapes were used as an example of the conduct of the DCSID board, these just happened to be the topics the board was discussing last November through February.

He pointed out DCSID is a public entity, but has not had an election in more than 30 years. Something Jackson said is a violation of Nevada state law. He also accused the board members of not being qualified to run a sewer district.

The DCSID board currently consists of three board members who run some of the largest corporations in Stateline and none of who lives within the district he is serving. Chairman of the DCSID board is Mike Bradford, CEO of Lakeside Inn & Casino, also on the board are John Koster, chief of operations for Harrah's in Northern Nevada, and Steve Johnson who runs Edgewood and is overseeing the new Edgewood Lodge development.

Jackson cited Nevada statutes which outlawed local improvement districts like DCSID nearly 50 years ago, which require all

improvement districts to abide by state election laws and which also require board members to reside within the district.

Severin Carlson, attorney for the district, said DA Jackson is not reading his statutes correctly and these laws do not apply as Jackson is indicating. Carlson did not make a formal presentation during the meeting, but did make some remarks during the public comment portion.

Since the BOCC was only considering whether or not to introduce the ordinance to dissolve the DCSID on June 16, meaning they would start considering the issue, but not actually make a decision until later, the district attorney was only tasked with presenting them with sufficient reasons to look into the matter further.

He enlisted the assistance of Carl Ruschmeyer, Douglas County director of public works, to present to the commissioners an analysis of the current workings of DCSID and identify possible inefficiencies. He pointed out how Incline Village GID operates more facilities than DCSID, is subject to the same environmental issues, and runs with fewer full-time employees. IVGID also performs cleaning and maintenance of their systems in-house, something DCSID contracts out for hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Ruschmeyer also compared DCSID to Douglas County Sewer Utility. It also operates with fewer employees than DCSID. His calculations indicate DCSU spends an average of about $73,000 per full-time employee. DCSID, however, spends more than $130,000, he said.

Ruschmeyer concluded that by allowing Douglas County to run the DCSID for a period of time, they could restructure it to run more efficiently, reduce the number of employees, cut back on the number and cost of contracted services by using Douglas County engineers, and save DCSID about $900,000 per year.

“It’s not just about those that are in control or believe that they’re in control. It’s not about the directors or trustees of the districts up here at the lake, or about those staff members that may possibly not have a job in the future,” Jackson said. “At the end of the day, it’s about the ratepayers.”

Jackson indicated Douglas County running the district would not be for the long term. They would work to return control to more qualified lake residents as soon as possible.

After a question and answer session between Jackson and the commissioners, the room was opened to public comment, and ratepayers had their say.

Several stepped up in support of the board, mostly emphasizing how much they like their low rates and don’t want them to go up, something they fear will happen if Douglas County or another entity were to take over. Few, however, offered opinions as to whether or not they believed the board was lawful or ethical.

Some called it just another lake versus valley dispute.

Several expressed support for DA Jackson, disgruntled with the DCSID board for what they saw as conflicts of interest, willfully disobeying laws and unduly influencing the system for their own benefit.

Assemblyman Jim Wheeler, R-Minden, let everyone know the Legislature would likely be discussing the issue at their next meeting in August.

The DCSID board members also had a chance to say a few words.

Koster explained when he was transferred by Harrah’s to Lake Tahoe in 2007, he was told he must join the DCSID to replace the outgoing Harrah’s representative. He said he had no idea at the time what running an improvement district was even

about. He admitted their meetings are very informal and apologized for the off-color jokes he was heard making on the recordings.

Bradford, chairman of the DCSID board, said they are and always have been committed to their ratepayers. He took a moment to express how much he appreciated the friendship of some of the commissioners and other Douglas County political figures. One of the benefits of a small town, he said. He was disappointed the issues weren't brought to him on a personal level before it blew up in public.

Board member Steve Johnson was not able to attend, however he submitted a letter which Commissioner Doug Johnson read to the room. In it, he said DCSID ratepayers are happy, and dissolving the district is not necessary, nor is it beneficial to anyone.

All board members indicated a willingness to work with the county to correct the issues at hand.

After another short question and answer session between the BOCC and the district attorney, Commissioner Greg Lynn motioned to table the ordinance pending an opinion from Nevada Secretary of State Barbara Cegavske. He also added into the motion that all interested parties, including existing GIDs at the lake, DCSID and Douglas County Board of Commissioners, work together to resolve the issues in question.

Commissioner Johnson reiterated that voting to introduce the ordinance, did not mean they were taking one side or another, but simply agreeing to look into the issue further and would prevent it from dragging on too long.

In the end, after nearly four and a half hours of discussions, the BOCC voted 4-1 in favor of Lynn's motion, with Johnson in opposition. So DCSID returns to business as usual for the time being.

The BOCC plans to actively pursue an opinion from the secretary of state.

Dems bullish in efforts to regain Nev. Legislature

By Michelle Rindels, AP

Democrats have been itching to regain their majority in the Nevada Legislature since 2014's conservative red wave swept them out of power, and they say the results of Tuesday's primary gave them a bit more encouragement they'll succeed.

Three Republicans who last year voted for Gov. Brian Sandoval's tax package toppled in their primaries against anti-tax challengers. It was a better outcome than it could have been for moderate Republicans, with seven other tax-supporting incumbents surviving such challenges. But every seat matters for a GOP that holds a 25-17 Assembly majority and is already expected to lose ground in a presidential election cycle.

Republicans' inability to save tax-supporting incumbents P.K. O'Neill and Glenn Trowbridge in their primaries sent a message that their message and values aren't resonating with people, Democratic Assemblywoman Irene Bustamante Adams said.

"That gave me a boost of confidence that the majority is ours to take back," she said.

Democrats are well-poised to turn out their voters thanks to a new level of coordination between legislative and congressional campaign organizations, Bustamante Adams said.

And internal divisions among Republicans will weaken them in their quest to retain power, she said.

Republicans are fresh off a bitter primary season that pitted moderates against anti-tax purists led by freshman Assemblyman Brent Jones. Most Jones-backed candidates lost, but Jones narrowly won a primary – meaning Republican leaders will have to mend fences with him to have a chance at keeping that Democratic-leaning district.

“The path to the majority runs right through that district,” Assembly Majority Leader Paul Anderson said. “We’re going to have to figure out how he can appeal to a wider audience.”

Assembly Republicans already expect to lose three heavily Democratic districts that they won in 2014. But they’re fighting to avoid losing any more, including Democratic-leaning districts held by vulnerable freshmen David Gardner and Derek Armstrong.

That means being more organized and strategic than in years past.

“I think we’re still the underdog, but that plays into our favor,” Anderson said. “They may not see us coming or understand our strategies.”

On the Senate side, Democrats who were in a 10-11 minority last session hope to flip seats in their favor and get back in the driver’s seat. The breakdown will depend on a handful of Senate races in swing districts.

Democrats need to hold on to a Henderson-area district held by Joyce Woodhouse, a retired educator who breezed through her primary but faces a tougher challenge from Republican charter school principal Carrie Buck.

They’re also watching a Reno-area race between Democratic attorney Devon Reese and Republican former lawmaker Heidi

Gansert, who defeated anti-tax challenger Eugene Hoover; and one in Las Vegas between Republican incumbent Sen. Scott Hammond and Democratic challenger Alexander Marks.

But perhaps the most watched will be one in a Las Vegas-area Senate district that's held by Republican Mark Lipparelli, who's not seeking re-election. Republican Erv Nelson, who was backed by GOP Senate leaders and supported Sandoval's tax plan when he was in the Assembly, lost badly in a brutal race against anti-tax Assemblywoman Victoria Seaman.

Seaman painted Nelson as a carpetbagger and a liar, fighting back when his campaign put out literature that highlighted an obscure tax cut but didn't mention the more obvious tax hikes and extensions the Legislature approved.

"We take an aggressive posture … no issue is too small to respond to," said her campaign consultant, Ryan Hamilton, who called Seaman a vigorous campaigner and the strongest Republican for the general election. "She appeals to nonpartisans, she appeals to conservatives, and she's the hardest worker."

Seaman faces Democrat Nicole Cannizzaro, a Clark County prosecutor who didn't have a primary, in a district with a narrow Democratic registration advantage.

"I think the contrast is going to be readily apparent," Democratic Senate Minority Leader Aaron Ford said. "The people of District 6 are … more accustomed to interacting with someone like Nicole Cannizzaro who is thoughtful, who is cordial and who is interacting on issues that are important for them, and not bombastic and offensive."

Calstar to merge with rival air medical firm

By Mark Glover, Sacramento Bee

Calstar, the regional air ambulance service, and Santa Rosa's Reach Air Medical Services announced Thursday that they are entering into a merger agreement that will create the largest network of air ambulance bases in California.

Officials said the agreement will position Calstar within the same holding company as Reach.

In a joint announcement, Sean Russell, Reach president, and Calstar CEO Lynn Malmstrom, said Calstar will become a limited liability company and operate under the current Calstar brand as Calstar Air Medical Services LLC.

Read the whole story

Lakeside Inn ready to reincarnate itself



Lakeside Inn wants to become a bigger player on the South Shore. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

Driving into Stateline from the east there isn't anything to go "wow" about – at least not in a positive sense. Lakeside Inn wants to change that.

"We are the gateway from the Nevada side to South Lake Tahoe. Right now the welcome to South Lake Tahoe is not a pretty sight," Stacy Noyes, quality insurance and inn manager for the Stateline hotel-casino, said. "We have an opportunity to capitalize on Kahle Drive and Highway 50."

Lakeside has ideas about what it would like to do on the 7.5 acre parcel, but isn't ready to release renderings until a developer has been lined up.

It's likely the Kahle-50 corner will become a focal point, with the hotel moving there. Today the sales center for the Tahoe Beach Club occupies that land. Lakeside owns the first block of Kahle drive, which has three buildings on it.

“Our hotel is clearly past its useful life,” Noyes said. Owners are doing the minimum in upgrades right now – like replacing mattresses.

The new hotel will be about a 3.5 star level property that will have bike and ski rentals, and valet. Higher end lodging is in the works with Zalanta, Edgewood and Tahoe Beach Club, so that is why Lakeside wants to focus on the mid-level market.



In the future Lakeside expects to downplay the casino aspect of the property. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Today there are 124 hotel rooms. The market study to determine the best use for Lakeside said 150 rooms would be ideal. Zoning allows for 200. More tourist accommodation units would have to be acquired to add any rooms. (TAUs are a commodity Tahoe Regional Planning Agency created as a way to curb development.)

The casino has long been a favorite of locals. Going forward higher ups want it to remain so, but they do not intend for

gaming to be Lakeside's main draw. An all-inclusive resort – minus a spa – is more the thinking.

It is walking distance to Nevada Beach via Rabe Meadow, is a short shuttle ride to multiple access points for Heavenly Mountain Resort, has Edgewood Tahoe Golf Course practically as a neighbor, ties into the Stateline-to-Stateline bike trail, and is not too far from Heavenly Village.

"What we recognized and everyone recognized is the South Shore is not viable as a gaming market," Noyes told *Lake Tahoe News*. "It's transforming into a world class outdoor recreation area. We saw this eons ago."

The casino is likely to stay where it is, but with a face-lift. Everything else, though, could be demolished or gutted.

The goal is for the entire property to become more upscale and capture a greater portion of the tourists.

In addition to the study, the hotel-casino has been putting focus groups together to gauge how people would like Lakeside to evolve.



Latin Soul's relocation would mean a smoke-free dining experience. Photo/Kathryn Reed

There will also be a separate retail portion. The study said 10,000- to 20,000-square-feet would be do-able.

It’s anticipated that the popular Latin Soul restaurant would move to the hotel or retail area. Relocating it out of the casino could mean more business because right now it’s hard to avoid the smoke drifting into the eatery. Today it takes up 2,000 square feet.

Also new would be an outdoor special events space where weddings could be performed.

Zoning allows for a four-story structure (56 feet). Rooftop dining is a possibility, which would provide views of Lake Tahoe and Mount Tallac.

“We are just waiting to find the right development partner to do it with,” Noyes said of the entire overhaul of Lakeside.

Officials: Concerns about pro sports, casinos ‘widely overblown’

By J.D. Morris, Las Vegas Sun

The casino industry’s chief lobbying voice in Washington, D.C., sees an opportunity in reports this week that the NHL is ready to grant an expansion team to Las Vegas.

For Geoff Freeman, president of the American Gaming Association, a major league hockey franchise in Las Vegas will offer further proof of two things: broad acceptance of gambling and another reason to eliminate the federal ban on sports betting in most states.

Both causes are of great importance to his organization.

Freeman told reporters on a conference call today that the apparently impending arrival of Las Vegas' first major league sports franchise "reflects a rapidly evolving view of gaming as an important, mainstream segment of the broader economy."

Read the whole story

Calif. Legislature approves $171 billion budget

By Chris Megerian, Los Angeles Times

With concerns about the potential for another recession casting a shadow over this year's budget negotiations, California lawmakers approved a new $170.9-billion spending plan on Wednesday that increases some funding for social services but stashes more away in a rainy-day fund.

Although lawmakers are finishing their work on this year's budget, some of the most consequential decisions for the state's financial future may not be made until the November election. Voters will likely be asked whether to extend higher taxes on the wealthy, increase the levy on cigarettes or borrow billions of dollars to build and renovate schools.

It's a classic example of California's dual-track system for managing its finances, with some decisions made in the Capitol and others at the ballot box.

Read the whole story

Trying to stop spread of non-native species

By Linda Fine Conaboy

INCLINE VILLAGE – There are always chores to take care of before launching boats, kayaks, paddleboards and all the other warm-weather stuff at Lake Tahoe, but there's one more job to take care of that's just as important as tuning up the gear.

Now's the time to have everything inspected for the critters and weeds that may have wintered over—and that includes even the water wings.

Although any invasive varmints or weeds that spent the winter in storage attached to a rudder are probably dead and not capable of harming the lake (but they can survive up to 30 days), this is the time of year to clean up the gear and get it inspected before launching.

Zack Bradford, natural resources manager for the League to Save Lake Tahoe, was one of several speakers at the spring public forum June 14 at the Tahoe Center for Environmental Sciences at Sierra Nevada College, hosted jointly by Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, the League and Tahoe Resource Conservation District.



The Tahoe Keys is home to the bulk of the milfoil at Lake Tahoe. Photo/LTN file

Bradford described the various intruders into the lake's environment, including warm water fish, clams, Eurasian watermilfoil and curly pondweed, all of which have felt the full force of those driven to eradicate them before they can cause more damage.

Eurasian watermilfoil's introduction into U.S. waters happened sometime between the 1880s and the 1940s, possibly through the aquarium trade or the transport of watercraft. It crowds out "good" plants, the native species, sucking oxygen out of the water, and is now spreading from Tahoe's South Shore to other parts of the lake.

Curly pondweed, a lesser-known plant, is able to survive in open, more turbulent water as opposed to milfoil's preferred environment, quiet lagoons such as Tahoe Keys.

Even a small piece of an unwanted plant found floating in open

water is capable of creating another intrusion, said Rick Lind, a consultant for the Tahoe Keys Property Owners Association.

“Ninety percent of the Keys is infested with unwanted plants. The current methods have not been working,” Lind said. However, he listed other techniques that have been implemented that are helping to alleviate the problem.

They include: harvesting, water conservation, banning phosphorus-based fertilizers, turf conversion from grass to natural landscaping, bottom barriers, dog waste stations at convenient locations, homeowner education and labeling and monitoring all storm drains.

“With 1,500 home and 900 docks, a solution must happen,” he said.

To add to the woes, non-native warm water fish such as largemouth bass and bluegill have made their way to Tahoe’s waters.

Why care if these fish are happily integrating into the pristine lake?

According to the UNR’s College of Agriculture, they are breeding close to the shoreline in areas where native hatchlings live and grow. And because of the proliferation of invasive weeds and climate change warming the lake’s waters, they are able to thrive, preying on non-native crayfish among other tasty food sources.

UNR’s website said that warm water fish have been detected at 58 percent of the 16 locations monitored in various sites around the lake, leading to a continuing decline of native fish.

Although these aquatic invasive species are not exactly reeling from the full frontal attack, efforts to control them

are beginning to pay off.

Nicole Cartwright, AIS program coordinator for Tahoe RCD, an organization supporting all aspects of conservation issues, said that although quagga mussels have invaded Southern Nevada's Lake Mead, they have yet to find their way to Tahoe. She credits the diligence of the boat inspection program for keeping quaggas away as well as zebra mussels, also found in Lake Mead and other bodies of water.

In addition to Tahoe, boats launching at Echo and Fallen Leaf lakes are inspected.

"The program is proven; early detection is vital." Cartwright said. "There have been no new detections since it started. The fee charged has caused people to stay clean. Tahoe is helping to change Western boating habits."

Cartwright said since 2008, more than 50,000 watercraft have been inspected and 20,000 have been decontaminated using extremely hot water. She said the fees for inspection and possible decontamination vary according to boat size, although non-motorized craft, if they need inspection, are free.

She added that normally non-motorized craft don't need to be checked, unless they've recently been in suspect waters.

"With clams and weeds, the implementation programs are helping to cure the problem," Cartwright said, adding that slowly they are also getting the jump on warm water fish, with more than 9,000 of them electroshocked last year.

"We have a mechanism for management. We're not exactly winning now, but we're keeping them at bay and staying ahead of the game."

The use of herbicides to eliminate invasive weeds was discussed at the forum, causing an outcry from some members of the audience who wondered why potential poisons need to be a

part of the toolbox.

“Herbicides are a difficult topic for a lot of folks,” Cartwright said. “But we’re still in the analysis phase. We’re evaluating the effectiveness of herbicides as a potential method to kill plants, but it’s not been approved by regulatory agencies. We won’t know for another five years if it will be approved.”

The forum’s speakers all touted the implementation of various programs, which invite public participation, such as Eyes on the Lake, Tahoe Keepers, the Pipe Keepers programs and the Lake Tahoe citizens science app as effective methods to help in the invasion battle.

All of these programs are designed to engage citizens to care for the lake by keeping their eyes and ears open to new plant growths or other egregious encroachments by reporting what they find.

For more information on all of these subjects is available **online**.

Key Common Core test in Nevada rebounds

By Ian Whitaker, Las Vegas Sun

Around this time last year, Nevada’s new Common Core test had only succeeded at being broken.

Due to the testing company’s technical problems, schools were thrown into chaos for weeks as teachers and staff struggled to get the computer-based Smarter Balanced test to work for the

thousands of third- through eighth-graders required to take it.

Fast-forward to this year, and the situation has almost completely reversed.

The Smarter Balanced test assesses students’ mastery of English and math skills set out in the Common Core, and is mandated by the federal government to ensure schools are doing a good job of educating students. But due to last year’s issues, officials were unable to collect that information.

Read the whole story