Lawmakers: Calif. should help pay for earthquake early warnings

By Rosanna Xia and Rong-Gong Lin II, Los Angeles Times

Hours after a magnitude 6.4 earthquake destroyed buildings and took lives in Taiwan, four state lawmakers said they want California to help fund an earthquake early warning system that has been stalled by a lack of money.

“There’s no valid reason not to make this relatively small investment in an early warning system that has the potential to save the lives of Californians,” state Sen. Jerry Hill (D-San Mateo) said in a statement. “I urge my colleagues and the governor to join us in fulfilling our primary responsibility of protecting the public.”

The voices of support that emerged for the warning system Friday mark a change in tone at the state Capitol, where outspoken backers of the system have been few in recent years. On Tuesday, H.D. Palmer, deputy director for the Department of Finance, said that California’s policy is to not use money from the general fund for the early warning system.

Read the whole story

Legislators call for overhaul

of Calif.’s utility regulator

By Melanie Mason and Jeff McDonald, Los Angeles Times

State legislators are calling for a major overhaul of California’s utilities regulator by striking it from the state Constitution and reassigning its sprawling portfolio in the wake of a series of controversies, including the natural gas leak in Aliso Canyon.

Assemblyman Mike Gatto, D-Los Angeles, said his measure would decentralize the California Public Utilities Commission’s oversight of myriad utilities, including electricity, railroad safety and ride-sharing companies such as Uber and Lyft.

“After hearing about how the clear warnings of the impending Aliso Canyon gas leak were lost in the shuffle, I concluded that we need to rethink the way we regulate utilities in the state,” Gatto said at a news conference Wednesday in Sacramento. “It’s the opposite of too big to fail. Our concern is that the CPUC is too big to succeed.”

Read the whole story

LT Hard Rock owners selling 50% stake

By Kathryn Reed

Lake Tahoe Hard Rock owners are selling half of their interest in the Stateline property to an organization out of Las Vegas.

Representatives were before the Gaming Control Board this week

regarding money issues, which comes days after having another lawsuit filed against the troubled Stateline casino.



Brothers David and Jon Park are struggling to make Lake Tahoe Hard Rock a viable entity. Photo/Denise Haerr

Tentative approval was given to Neva One, the parent company of the local Hard Rock, for a waiver on the escrow account and to enter an agreement with Paragon HRLT to manage the property. The final decision is expected Feb. 18 when the Gaming Commission meets in Las Vegas.

Neva One was formed by brothers Jon and David Park with the sole purpose of being the parent company of the Lake Tahoe Hard Rock. Park Heritage is Neva One's parent company. After a $60 million renovation, the old Horizon hotel-casino reopened Jan. 28, 2015, as the Hard Rock. There have only been troubles since then.

The escrow item pertains to the Parks selling 50 percent of the Hard Rock to an affiliate of Paragon. The exact name of the affiliate was never stated at the Feb. 3 meeting. A Gaming Control Board official told *Lake Tahoe News* the entity has been licensed before.

Only percentages were discussed, not dollar amounts at the hearing.

The Gaming Control Board requires escrow accounts when there is a transfer of interest and the board or commission has not yet acted. Neva One was granted a waiver for this because of the board's familiarity with the new partner.

During Wednesday's discussion, which lasted about 30 minutes, it was noted that Park Heritage has infused more cash to keep the hotel-casino afloat. The exact amount was not stated. The money from Paragon will assist with paying down the debt and resolving outstanding litigation issues.



The pool is has not had water since last summer. Photo/LTN

It was also brought up at the hearing that the leak in the 200,000-gallon pool must be resolved because that water would be used by Tahoe Douglas firefighters if there were a fire. Without the water, permits could be revoked and the hotel-casino shutdown.

A condition of approval was made at the Feb. 3 meeting stating Neva One and Paragon HRLT must have a management agreement in place within 10 days.

The change in management comes in the wake of Warner Hospitality having been fired last year by the brothers. The Parks have since filed a lawsuit against Warner.

Neither brother returned a call, nor did Jim Roets who with

Rick Stevens were tasked with bringing stability to the property after Warner was shown the door.

The latest lawsuit filed against the Park brothers is from Tahoe Specialty Flooring & Window Design of Tahoe City. The lawsuit filed in Douglas County District Court in Minden, where Neva One is based out of, alleges the flooring company is owed more than $68,000. Owner Coreen Serrano was not available for comment.

Still to be resolved is the $6.4 million lawsuit filed by SMC Contracting against the hotel-casino owners for failure to pay for most of the overruns associated with construction costs for the remodel. Savage & Sons, which did the plumbing at the property, has filed a lawsuit trying to recover $820,000 from Neva One.

Nevada awards $620,000 for STEM

By Jason Hidalgo, Reno Gazette-Journal

Nevada doubled down on diversification as the state awarded more than $620,000 dollars for workforce training that targets key industries, including jobs for Tesla Motors' Gigafactory.

The Governor's Office of Science, Innovation and Technology announced the second round of its challenge grants on Thursday, awarding six recipients a total of $626,206 for workforce training in industries geared toward science, technology, engineering and mathematics.

It’s a concept that’s also known as STEM, which is sometimes expanded as STEAM by including a focus in the arts as well. Nevada STEM industries include advanced manufacturing, energy, information technology, cyber security and agriculture. The jobs require less time for training than a four-year degree but their average wage of $50,000 is about 50 percent higher than other jobs with comparable education requirements, according to the Office of Science, Innovation and Technology.

Read the whole story

STPUD close to meeting state water cutbacks

By Kathryn Reed

Customers in South Tahoe Public Utility District have done a good job in conserving water, but cumulatively have not met the state’s 20 percent reduction goal.

This week officials announced that the restrictions would remain in effect through October. In April 2015, Gov. Jerry Brown said combined water districts in the state must reduce consumption by 25 percent from 2013, with the individual district cuts ranging from 4 to 36 percent.

STPUD started water rationing in 2007, so it was harder to make substantive inroads last year. Customers were already limited to three days a week for outdoor watering. This initially led to a usage reduction of 25 percent.

From June through December 2015 the district reduced water use by 18.4 percent from 2013 numbers. It was easier to make cuts

in the summer via irrigation, whereas in the winter in Tahoe it is harder to find ways to lessen what comes out of the spigot.

The change announced Feb. 2 gives the district a 3 percent credit for a drier climate than the coastal areas during the summer. This in turns lowers the target water use reduction compared to 2013 to 17 percent for 2016 instead of 20 percent.

Statewide, consumers have reduced water use by 25.5 percent since June. This equates to almost 1.1 million acre-feet of water saved. The goal was to save 1.2 million acre-feet through the end of this month.

In December, the statewide conservation rate was 18.3 percent, down from 20.4 percent in November, compared to the same months in 2013.

Districts can face fines if they don't meet the state rules. To date, South Tahoe PUD has not been fined, but a warning letter has been received from the state.

"Since cumulatively we're within a couple percent, the letter was more of an urging to step up our efforts. Since most of the suggestions had to do with outside watering, for us, it was rather meaningless," Richard Solbrig, STPUD general manager, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "Since we're trying, the next letter may require us to provide more detail on exactly what conservation efforts we have been pursuing."



Removing sod is one way South Tahoe PUD customers are saving water. Photo/LTN

Month-by-month STPUD data from 2015 compared to 2013:

- June – 24.6 percent reduction
- July – 27. 5 percent reduction
- August – 21 percent reduction
- September – 15.8 percent reduction
- October – 7.3 percent reduction
- November – 3.5 percent increase
- December – 14.4 percent reduction.

The increased use in water in November was from Heavenly Mountain Resort's snowmaking, according to Solbrig. December tapered off because of the cold temps not requiring as much of the fake stuff.

The district also has the authority to fine residential and

commercial customers. In 2015, STPUD fined Safeway and Shell gas station for excessive water use.

Free tuition proposed at Calif. community colleges

By Mike Luery, KCRA-TV

There’s a big push in California to offer free tuition to all community college students in the state.

But offering free tuition for California’s more than 1 million full-time community college students is expensive.

California community college tuition fees are in the $1,100 range per year – among the lowest in the nation. But, adding in housing, transportation and books can bring the bill to $18,000 or more.

Read the whole story

Group wants to break NV Energy’s monopoly

By Daniel Rothberg, Las Vegas Sun

A group filed a ballot measure Feb. 3 that would create a competitive electricity market in Nevada to effectively end NV Energy’s monopoly through a constitutional amendment.

The amendment would require the Legislature to create an open market for purchasing electricity and prohibit monopolies, according to language released by the Secretary of State's Office. Under the current structure, NV Energy operates as a regulated monopoly.

The measure is being supported by a newly formed political action committee, Nevadans for Affordable, Clean Energy Choices. Its backers have not yet identified themselves.

Read the whole story

EDC supes hope strategic plan is guiding light

By Joann Eisenbrandt

PLACERVILLE – Accountability. Integrity. Service excellence. Collaboration. These are the four organization core values that form the foundation of the three-year strategic plan El Dorado County is in the process of developing.

Work on the plan began in September 2014, when the Board of Supervisors had its first special workshop to discuss the county's mission, vision and value statements, and establish a framework for a county strategic plan. The county had attempted to craft strategic plans in the past, most recently in 2007 and 2010, but they were never fully implemented.

Sherman Fox, the county's training and organizational development specialist, has been facilitating the strategic plan process since December 2014. He told *Lake Tahoe News*, "My role is the process. I'm the keeper of the document. But this

wouldn’t have happened unless the board all wanted this. I believe we can have the change that everybody wants. This county wants to go in a different direction. We just have to develop the process to get there.”

Since then, the strategic plan has been taking shape. The county’s vision statement and mission statement were reviewed and revised, and strategic plan goals were developed and adopted by the board in March 2015. Five “goal-setting” groups were formed, comprised of members of the board, county department heads and other staff, members of other community organizations and members of the public. No one was assigned to a specific group, but all chose the group they wanted to serve on. Each group focused on one of the five defined county strategic goals: healthy communities, economic development, public safety, infrastructure, and good county governance. The groups then began developing objectives and measures to achieve these goals. So far, they have focused on “macro” measures at the board level, but eventually “micro” measures will follow from these with specific strategies and implementation plans at the department and staff levels.

Fox sees a difference between the current process and past failed attempts. “The county has attempted to develop a strategic plan other times, but this is the first time where we have the majority of the county leadership and public engaged in the process. It’s important to have as many major stakeholders involved as possible. It’s hard to implement a plan if you don’t have majority buy-in.”

But defining “majority buy-in” can be tricky. The views of government officials and prominent community leaders on key county issues are well known. They are visibly and vocally involved in the decision-making process, whether as proponents or opponents. Finding out what the “ordinary” El Dorado County resident believes can be more elusive.

In mid-summer 2015, Fox explained, the strategic plan process

came to a halt for this very reason. In order to gain broad-based input from residents on where they thought El Dorado County should go from here the county conducted a citizen engagement survey. An outside consultant, the Kiely Group, was hired to create the survey and then tabulate the results. It was posted on the county website, the city of Placerville website, in local newspapers and as a link from Facebook sites of relevant community groups. Town hall meetings were conducted by each supervisor to discuss the survey. Hard copies of the survey were also distributed throughout county communities.

Four focus groups were created and met in late 2015 in Placerville, Cameron Park and South Lake Tahoe. The goal was to get more insight into some key questions such as, "What is meant by rural when citizens refer to 'keeping the county rural?'" "How will we know El Dorado isn't run by a 'Good Ol' Boy' network?" "What evidence is needed to show that the Tahoe basin is included in county government planning/decisions/services?" Focus group findings were included in the final survey report.

Of El Dorado County's 183,087 residents as measured by the 2010 census, 2,228 responded to the survey. The 99-page final report includes quantitative data on the demographics of who responded, where they lived, their age, employment status and so on. It also included qualitative or narrative data where comments reflecting priorities and concerns of respondents in each of the five goal areas were recorded as well as their overall view of service priorities, how much and where they wanted the county to grow, and how well they felt county government reflected their values.

At the Jan 26, Board of Supervisors meeting, Kiely Group CEO Laree Kiely presented an overview of the survey's purpose and results. As the survey's executive summary states, the objective was to gather information about citizens' thoughts and priorities to include in the strategic plan, as well as to

test the most effective ways to reach out and engage citizens. “We did accomplish this,” Kiely told the board.

Kiely said the survey response rate “was impressive,” and explained that this was a representative sample, where the percentage of respondents in each category, such as age, match the actual percentage of that same category as shown in county census data. Random sampling, she noted, is not used because there is a bias in who answers and it is not a representative sample of the population demographics. The survey, Kiely told the board, has a confidence level of 95-99 percent with a 3 percent margin of error.

Ninety-five percent of respondents lived in El Dorado County full time, 62 percent were female, more than 68 percent were over the age of 50, most respondents were from Placerville and El Dorado Hills, a little more than half worked within county boundaries, and 7.33 percent considered themselves “actively” involved with county issues.

At the meeting, several questions about the validity of the survey’s results were brought up. First, was what some termed a disproportionate amount of responses from government employees. Of the 2,228 respondents, 435 were government employees. While Kiely said the survey didn’t ask respondents whether they were county, city, or federal government employees, the county had sent out two emails to its employees with a direct link to the survey. District 3 Supervisor Brian Veerkamp reminded the board, “Remember, all those government workers live here and the issues are relevant to them too.” Kiely said her group would pull out that data to check and see if it “skewed” the survey in any way.

Another concern was the fact that some people took the survey more than once, getting around the built-in IP address filtering by responding from different computers. Kiely said this would have had to have happened in very large numbers to affect the validity of the results. She added that they will

go back and address this issue, but added it may also indicate the surfacing of another issue—a trust issue. District 5 Supervisor Sue Novasel agreed, “There is a general lack of trust in the county and it needs to be addressed at a very high level.”

Survey results appear to bear this out. When asked how El Dorado County government reflects their values with regard to accountability, accessibility, transparency, integrity and trustworthiness, respondents generally gave the county low marks. They were asked to “grade” the degree to which the county lived up to these values on a scale ranging from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” The number of survey takers who together answered either “disagree” or “strongly disagree” for each category was: Accountability 548; Accessibility 396; Transparency 462; Integrity 611; and Trustworthiness 645. For each of the five categories, approximately 500 respondents indicated they were “neutral.”

Kiely noted that narrative data may be more important than the demographics. The survey included more than 40 pages of verbatim responses to questions. District 2 Supervisor Shiva Frentzen said she had read all of the comments, but also wanted to know what county districts they were coming from. This connection does not appear in the survey report. Kiely noted that the raw data belongs to the county and this can be pulled out.

District 4 Supervisor Michael Ranalli added, “There is much more to this exercise than science … it’s our willingness to reach out to the public and ask them … it’s about our willingness to learn what they want.”

Respondents identified the county’s top challenges as growth/development and roads/traffic, followed by water/drought, business development and jobs. Across all age groups, the majority wanted “moderate growth” in new housing and business development, with more growth preferred by the

younger age groups. As the survey noted, “The people appear to be accepting to some growth as long as it is done in alignment with the resources and values of the county.” Very few respondents knew what supervisorial district they lived in or all the services the county provides. Only 200 respondents self-identified their district, with the rest being identified by the consultant from the communities they said they lived in.

Novasel spoke with *Lake Tahoe News* about the importance to residents in the Tahoe basin that they are included in county decision-making. “I did a **town hall meeting**,” she said, “and we went over the survey and I think the biggest thing that struck me is how difficult it is because the county seat is so far away for the county to be responsive to the needs of Tahoe residents. It’s my job to make sure they are responsive. The basin has special needs and they are often different than those of the West Slope. For example, we have TRPA and that changes the dynamics. We need better two-way communication. My hope is that the county will consider hiring a public information officer during the next round of budget talks.”

When asked in a survey question what the county would look like if it functioned at its most effective and efficient levels, representative responses included:

“Ask the residents their opinions and then follow them.” “Easy to contact for information, questions and requests.” “More money spent on roads and replacing narrow bridges.” “A better flow of information and more transparency.” “A richly diverse community that is healthy, sustainable, economically viable, resource-rich with a highly engaged population that is aware of and involved with making these things happen.” “Good health services to meet the needs of youth, general population and the elderly.”

“El Dorado County needs a balanced, well-thought-out long range plan that acknowledges constraints (water, jobs);

preservation of a rural lifestyle is important. El Dorado County is on the brink of making decisions that will shape the face of the county; it's important to get this right." "The vocal minority should not be considered more in decisions than the silent majority."

The entire Citizen Engagement Survey including all the verbatim responses can be found online. www.edcgov.us.

On Feb. 2, the board had a workshop where each of the five "goal-setting" teams gave a presentation on their work to date on their specific strategic goal and explained the objectives and macro measures identified for reaching it. The discussion emphasized that none of these goals could be reached in isolation and that there were many overlapping areas where cooperation and coordination among county departments and community organizations will be key.

Sherman Fox coordinated the discussion and asked those present, "What does it take for El Dorado County to adopt a strategic plan and live by it and allow it to provide guidance?" Everyone agreed that previous strategic plans had failed because there was no firm commitment to follow-through. Veerkamp pointed to the fact that, "In the past, the county hasn't used the strategic plan document as an accountability document." Supervisor Ranalli added, "We are accountable by asking how what we consider relates to the priorities of the strategic plan … (it) also says what things are not a priority, so we don't get distracted and get into the weeds."

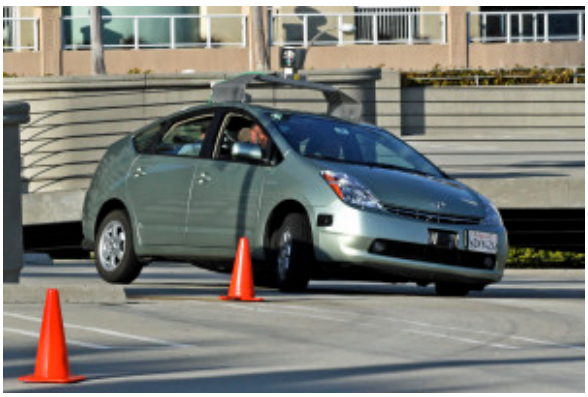
Kris Payne, a retired county engineer and member of the Infrastructure team, said he hadn't, "seen this level of team building in my 30 years of county employment."

The next step in the strategic plan process will occur in March or early April. There will be an all-day event at the county government center in Placerville. The five goal-setting teams will be assembled in individual rooms and each

supervisor will have a 45-minute session with each team to ask questions and get information. Members of the public will also be invited to attend. A second day will be set aside for the board to meet in a workshop format and discuss what they've learned, and go over any additional information provided. If the board is fully satisfied with the plan's final design, it will then be formally adopted. The goal is to have an adopted strategic plan in place before the county begins budget talks later in the spring so that the plan's priorities can be transferred over into actual budget allocations.

None of the participants at Tuesday's workshop expects change to happen overnight. They see it as a longer, five- to 10-year process. This latest strategic plan could meet the fate of previous ones and gather dust on some obscure county shelf. Or it could be the starting point for improved internal county communication, increased citizen input and an enhanced level of confidence that El Dorado County is moving forward in the direction desired by those who live here.

Group launched to help Nevada thrive in development of autonomous cars



Nevada wants to be a leader in driverless cars. Photo/Steve Jurvetson

By Daniel Rothberg, Las Vegas Sun

An economic development organization Tuesday approved the formation of the Center for Advanced Mobility, part of a state initiative to place Nevada on the cutting edge of automobile technology at a time when the industry is quickly pushing to develop autonomous vehicles.

The center will fall under the Nevada Institute for Autonomous Systems, a nonprofit group that currently coordinates with the Governor's Office of Economic Development to oversee the state's designation as a federal drone test site and help develop the state's unmanned aerial industry.

Read the whole story

Prop bets add twist to Super Bowl

By Case Keefer, Las Vegas Sun

The thing that makes the Super Bowl so entertaining for sports

bettors is also what makes it so profitable for sports books.

Gamblers love proposition wagers because they provide hundreds, if not thousands, of different ways to bet on the biggest game of the year. Bookmakers love proposition wagers because many of them have a high hold percentage to increase the house’s advantage.

That’s not to say it’s a hopeless endeavor to try to profit on the props. You just have to know where to look.

Read the whole story