Obama trying to lower the cost of college

By Tamar Lewin, New York Times

President Obama announced a set of ambitious proposals on Thursday aimed at making colleges more accountable and affordable by rating them and ultimately linking those ratings to financial aid.

A draft of the proposal, obtained by the New York Times and likely to cause some consternation among colleges, shows a plan to rate colleges before the 2015 school year based on measures like tuition, graduation rates, debt and earnings of graduates, and the percentage of lower-income students who attend. The ratings would compare colleges against their peer institutions. If the plan can win Congressional approval, the idea is to base federal financial aid to students attending the colleges partly on those rankings.

“All the things we’re measuring are important for students choosing a college,” a senior administration official said. “It’s important to us that colleges offer good value for their tuition dollars, and that higher education offer families a degree of security so students aren’t left with debt they can’t pay back.”

Obama hopes that starting in 2018, the ratings would be tied to financial aid, so that students at highly rated colleges might get larger federal grants and more affordable loans. But that would require new legislation.

Read the whole story

Brown receiving more cheers than jeers

By Adam Nagourney, New York Times

LOS ANGELES – When Jerry Brown became governor of California again, three years ago, this state was on a steep decline, crushed by budget deficits, deep spending cuts, governmental paralysis, high unemployment and a collapsing housing market. California, a place that once symbolized promise and opportunity, seemed caught in an intractable reversal of fortune.

But these days, Brown – who at 75 is the oldest governor in the nation and about to become the longest-serving governor in the history of California – is enjoying a degree of success and authority he and his opponents could scarcely have imagined when he returned to Sacramento to begin a second tour as governor in 2010.

The state's budget problems are largely resolved, at least for the short term. Brown is the dominant figure in Sacramento, strengthened by overwhelming Democratic control of the Legislature and the decline of the Republican Party. He has pushed through major initiatives on education financing and prison reorganization. Even Republicans say his re-election next year seems considerably more than likely.

"Some people were ridiculing California, and some were calling it a failed state," Brown, a Democrat, said in an interview. "The unemployment came down from 12.2 to 8.5. Real estate is rebounding. There's a lot of confidence out there. That's what happened."

Read the whole story

Children’s memorial caught in legal quagmire

By Kathryn Reed

It was a bit like a memorial service at the South Lake Tahoe City Council meeting this week. Somber faces, regret, apologies. And all because children died before their parents.

People who spearheaded and funded the replacement of the children’s memorial log made some mistakes. Mistakes that amount to thousands of dollars.

The council is involved because the five electeds are also the five board members of the Great Ideas For Tahoe nonprofit. GIFT is the nonprofit in which people were donating money to for the memorial log to be replaced. But the problem is that like with all nonprofits there are strict guidelines about how money can be spent.

However, the memorial committee, which was completely separate from the city, thought the ceremony for the re-dedication of the memorial could be paid for with the donations sent to GIFT. Not so. All that legally could be paid for was the replacement of the log.

South Lake Tahoe City Attorney Tom Watson on Aug. 20 told the council the other caveat is that no expenses could be paid that were not approved in advance. He said the board could face civil and criminal infractions if it were to approve the expenses that were submitted after the fact or for items that didn’t involve refurbishing the log.

The amount being questioned is $3,665.40. A third of that is

for the video that was produced. Some is for the program, some for the porta-potties.

“How could we have had the beautiful celebration without a podium and camera?” Sue Hrbacek-Miller asked the council.

It was her son Rory’s death on Feb. 2, 1991, that led her to create the memorial that is on Highway 50 at the corner of Wildwood Avenue. The initial tree was dedicated in 1994.

Ken Curtzwiler, Tom Incopero and Randy Mundt – all who have lost children – all spoke about the need to have compassion, understanding and to understand the intent of those involved.

Ultimately it was Councilwoman Angela Swanson who suggested a compromise. With the quick thinking of City Attorney Watson it was agreed that the money requested would not be paid out, but that staff would look at the possibility of refunding money donated to GIFT that is sitting in the account for the log replacement.

This idea will be refined and brought back to the council for a vote.

If money is refunded, no one who donated cash will be reimbursed because of legal reasons. And those who might be given back money could decide if they would want to give money directly to the children’s memorial committee so those who put out money for the Aug. 9 ceremony could be reimbursed.

Users of Western States Trail

in conflict

By Ed Fletcher, Sacramento Bee

As it turned out, it wasn’t just horseback riders and hikers who had something against the Tahoe Sierra 100 endurance mountain bike race: Mother Nature, in the form of a wildfire, also had something to say.

The race, using portions of the rugged Western States Trail over the Sierra, had been scheduled for Saturday.

The trail, once used by miners, is now the province of hikers, horsemen, runners, bikers and motorcycle riders. Connecting Squaw Valley to Auburn, it’s home to the Tevis Cup horse race and Western States 100 run. In both races, participants cover 100 miles in a single day.

Jim Northey, organizer of the bike race, envisioned the Tahoe Sierra 100 growing to the same stature as the horse and foot races and making Auburn the nation’s endurance race capital.

But in the face of opposition from a recently formed group called the Western States Safe Trails Alliance and without a permit to hold the race in hand, Northey canceled the event in early August.

Read the whole story

Tax assessor drops value of Harrah's Reno

By Cy Ryan, Las Vegas Sun

CARSON CITY – Harrah's in Reno is in bad shape and it won a reduction in its taxable value from the state Board of Equalization this week.

But it's far short of what the hotel-casino sought.

The Washoe County's Assessor's Office set the value at $20.5 million, and the board – after three deadlocked votes – put the taxable value at $16.2 million. Harrah's suggested the value at $8.8 million, said Mark Stafford of the assessor's office.

John Knott, a consultant for Harrah's, told the board the 928-room hotel was not in good condition and it would take $19 million to make needed improvements.

Read the whole story

Santiago travels extensively on taxpayers' dime

By Kathryn Reed

El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago likes to travel – at least based on the expenses she accrues.

For the 2012-13 fiscal year, Santiago had $12,755.99 worth of travel expenses that the county reimbursed her for.

The next highest figure was $1,509.33. That was for Supervisor Ron Mikulaco. However, only $637.80 was accrued after he was sworn in. He and Supervisor Brian Veerkamp have expenses for a conference that first-time supervisors attend after being elected but before being seated.

But these figures don't necessarily reflect anyone's total travel bills. Many elected officials sit on other boards where those agencies would foot the bill. And then sometimes special interest groups pick up some of the costs.



Norma Santiago travels more than any other El Dorado County supervisor. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The latter was the case for Santiago when she went on a trip in July 2012 to Santa Fe, N.M. Several West Slope chambers of commerce went to the Urban to Rural Connection conference. The cost was $2,100 per person just for the four-day seminar. On documentation from the July 30, 2013, Board of Supervisors meeting handwritten is "$1,000 previously paid by 3rd party sponsor."

But a sponsor or any monetary gift must be documented on what's called Form 700. Santiago has not done so.

Supervisor Ray Nutting had a criminal complaint filed against him by the district attorney in part for not filing a Form 700 for money he received. District Attorney Vern Pierson did not

return a phone call.

Santiago was not available for comment.

In addition to the questionable funds, Santiago violated county policy by asking for reimbursement after the fact and then months after the trip occurred.

On the July 30 Board of Supervisors' consent agenda was an item to reimburse Santiago for her July 2012 trip to Santa Fe and her March 2013 trip to the National Association of Counties meeting in Washington, D.C. The board approved them 5-0.

The 2013 trip had been preapproved by the board, while the 2012 one had not.

Santiago traveled on the county's dime to Washington a month later for the Capitol-to-Capitol event. That cost $4,104.10.

Judi McCallum, Santiago's assistant, defended her boss, saying that she is the most sought after supervisor in El Dorado County for study missions, especially economic ones.

"They are excited to have Norma along. It translates to opportunities and action here," McCallum told *Lake Tahoe News*.

She added, "Sometimes access is everything and she is always knocking on doors."

McCallum pointed out how access helped Meyers keep its speed limit below what Caltrans originally wanted it raised to.

But something like that would require a phone call, maybe a trip to Marysville where the Caltrans district office is, or at best a trip to Sacramento. It really had nothing to do with spending taxpayer dollars, but more to do with Santiago just doing her job as a county supervisor.

McCallum said Santiago has been able to bring back dollars to

the county – not just spend them. But she did not have specifics to share.

Poll: Half of Californians have difficulty paying health insurance

By David Siders, Sacramento Bee

Half of California voters say they are paying more for health care than they were a year ago, and the same percentage of voters say their health care costs are hard to afford, according to a new Field Poll.

Fifty percent of California voters say the amount they pay for their family's health care has increased in the past year, while 41 percent of voters say they are paying about the same, according to the poll. Just 5 percent of registered voters say their health care costs declined.

The poll, sponsored by the nonprofit California Wellness Foundation, comes as the state prepares for major changes under the federal health care overhaul next year, including a requirement that nearly all Americans have health insurance or pay a penalty.

Read the whole story

STHS grad to start for Jets

By Darryl Slater, Star-Ledger

South Lake Tahoe is a charming place. But it loses a great deal of appeal when you spend days pouring concrete, as Garrett McIntyre did six years ago.

McIntyre was still seeking his big break in professional football in 2007, after he finished his first season with the Arena Football League's San Jose SaberCats. He went undrafted in 2006, signed with Seattle, bounced in the preseason to Arizona, then Tennessee, and landed in the AFL, one of the sport's last stops before a player accepts a 9-to-5 life.



Garrett McIntyre should see plenty of playing time with the Jets this season. Photo/William Perlman/Star-Ledger

McIntyre majored in construction management at Fresno State, and as he began to ponder his real world options, he decided to pour foundations back home. He hated it.

"It made me not want to get a real job," he said. "Working with concrete is not fun, man. It is not."

The Jets gave McIntyre a chance in 2011, signing him to a three-year, $1.41 million contract, with a $15,000 signing

bonus. He made the team and has stuck, with three starts in 2011 and four in 2012, when he made 3½ sacks.

With rush outside linebacker Quinton Coples now sidelined indefinitely because of a right ankle injury, McIntyre is getting another chance in a career that he refused to let die.

Read the whole story

Climate change dominates Tahoe summit talks

By Kathryn Reed

INCLINE VILLAGE – Under skies as clear as the near shore, nearly 700 people gathered Monday at Sand Harbor for what was essentially a bipartisan rally to keep protecting Lake Tahoe.

Former Vice President Al Gore returned to the Lake Tahoe Environmental Summit after having launched the initial one in 1997 with then President Bill Clinton.



Former Vice President Al Gore talks climate change Aug. 19 at the Lake Tahoe

Environmental Summit.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

While speaker after speaker touted how the lake is clearer – having improved 11 feet since the first summit – what was not addressed was the near shore. Much of Tahoe's shoreline is murky. And the smoke in the air from the American Fire that is 30 miles away was adding to the degradation as particles filtered down.

Sudeep Chandra, professor at UNR, was on Capitol Public Radio the morning of the summit. He spoke of how clarity is measured in the middle of the lake, not at the water's edge.

He told CPR the health of the near shore has declined dramatically in the last 15 years.

"We are also talking about the dramatic loss of biodiversity at the bottom of the lake," Chandra told CPR. "It could be an early warning sign for the overall health of the lake."

He added, "We don't have good monitoring for the near shore."

Chandra told the radio station there has been a 72 percent decline of all native species on the bottom of Lake Tahoe. Reasons are related to climate change, less light coming through and more invasive species in the lake.

Climate and biological related projects are planned to get a better handle on the near shore problems.

He and others believe climate change is here to stay. And Gore believes it can be stopped.

"Today we will put 90 million tons of global warming pollution into the atmosphere as though it's an open sewer," Gore told the audience of nearly 700. (Usually a couple hundred people attend these summits.) "Here in Lake Tahoe an increase in air temperature means more precipitation that falls as rain and

not snow. Snowsports are threatened. Ski resorts all over the world are threatened."

He noted that the centerpiece of Lake Tahoe's economy is tourism and that without snow and a pristine lake, that economy evaporates along with the snow and clarity.

Scientists predict the air temperature in the basin could increase by as much as 10 degrees in this century.

Gore said as temps increase in the West the number of wildfires will dramatically rise.

"Eleven states are fighting 35 gigantic fires as we meet here today," he said.

While Gore said Tahoe should invite the world for a summit to show what it is doing, he never offered solutions for global warming. Nor did anyone else.

What the senators and governors from California and Nevada all pledged was to work together and keep spending money for the sake of Lake Tahoe. Nearly $2 billion has been spent in 15 years on projects to improve Lake Tahoe's clarity, with another $415 million sought through the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act.

Spate of bear attacks on humans

By CNN

Bears rarely attack humans unless they feel threatened or territorial. But a 12-year-old girl jogging in Michigan is

among the latest victims in a spate of bear attacks that has left seven people mauled in five states since Thursday.

Wildlife officials are running tests on a bear they killed to see if it’s the same one that mauled Abby Wetherell on Thursday evening. The girl from Cadillac, Mich., was out on her nightly jog when she was ambushed by a black bear.

“On her way back this time, a bear just kind of came out of nowhere and attacked her from behind, knocked her to the ground,” her mother, Elizabeth Wetherell, told CNN affiliate WXMI.

Abby tried to get up, but the bear kept charging.

“At that point, she didn’t know what to do because she had been injured severely and couldn’t get up, so she decided … to just lay there and play dead.”

Authorities also reported attacks in Alaska, Colorado, Wyoming and Idaho.

The Michigan incident was an anomaly, officials said.

Read the whole story