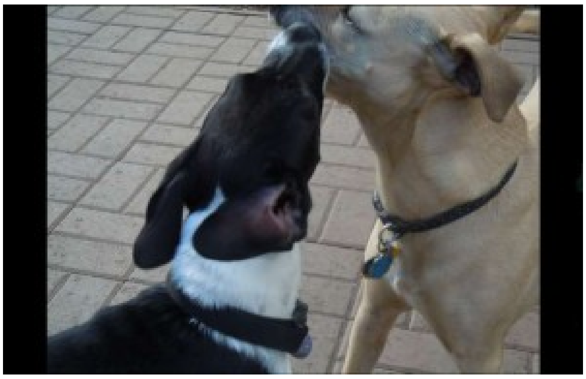
S. Tahoe puts some teeth into dog ordinance

By Kathryn Reed

Less than four months after South Lake Tahoe's less restrictive vicious dog ordinance became the law of the land, the council on Tuesday unanimously agreed to make tweaks to it.

No longer will a hearing officer resolve matters. All dog bite cases will be heard in Superior Court.

"We believe the hearings are too contentious for city staff to hear," Michael Eng in the South Lake Tahoe City Attorney's Office told the council April 2. (Eng has been an intern for the last 15 months and April 3 is his last day with the city.) "People are passionate about their animals. I believe a formal court hearing is the proper venue."



Dogs play at the South Lake Tahoe Dog Park. Photo/LTN file

Dog-on-dog attacks will be labeled as a vicious dog attack. Eng said the community and county were dismayed this had been changed.

While staff recommended the vicious dog designation be made after two unprovoked dog-on-dog attacks in a 24-month period, the council changed that to one attack in 24 months.

Karen Kuentz, president of Animal Coalition Tahoe and nine-year volunteer at the shelter in Meyers, told the council she would like vicious dogs to have to wear a muzzle off their property. The council did not agree to that.

The ordinance gives judges leeway in making decisions. For instance, with the county ordinance it treats all dog bites as equal. The city ordinance would allow a judge not to punish a dog and its owner if the bite were accidental; for instance if someone is playing tug-of-rope with a dog and the dog in play bites a person. If that person goes the hospital for a dog bite, animal control is called and it becomes a court case. The judge, per city ordinance, can see the gray area of the case and not work in a black and white vacuum.

The city attorney will also no longer have authority in determining when a dog can be released to its owner. The reasoning is that person is no dog expert.

The passage of the original ordinance in November was in large part initiated by then Councilman Bruce Grego. According to an El Dorado County Animal Control officer, his office was not contacted by the city prior to last fall’s passage of the ordinance or while it was being crafted.

There has been much contact in the last four months between the city and Animal Control.

Henry Brzezinski, who heads the county Animal Control, told the council, “This is a step in the right direction to deal with some of the issues we’ve encountered with the new ordinance. The dog on dog is quite important. Our mantra is public safety.”

Brzezinski also believes the county dog ordinance is effective and didn’t see a need for the city to loosen what was in place.

College students teach LTUSD kids environmental lessons

By Aaron Hussmann

Students in Lake Tahoe Unified School District are getting a course in energy and resource efficiency this week from a group of college students who have eschewed normal spring break shenanigans to spread the word on environmentalism.

Members of the San Diego State University student group CALPIRG Energy Service Corps kicked off their alternative spring break by teaching youngsters about energy and how best to conserve it. Older children in the district got a more rigorous curriculum examining specific kinds of resource-conserving technologies and the origins and consequences of fossil fuels.

LTUSD youngsters learn about the environment from college students. Photo/Provided

“This is a perfect tie-in to get them started,” Beth Quandt, science outreach coordinator for LTUSD, said while at the environmental elementary school. “We’ve been teaching environmental science education here for years and what we’ve found is that when you present to kids, they take it home to their parents. So it spreads. It’s part of the idea of the founding of this school.”

The effort is one of five trips run through the Energy Service Corps, a project of the California Public Interest Research Group — better known as CALPIRG — and AmeriCorps, a service organization that sends teams around America to complete community projects.

Ten students from San Diego State University will reach 1,700 children in LTUSD this week, teaching them how to save energy and cut down on home bills through simple swaps and practices. Those include making buildings, which account for roughly 30 percent of U.S. energy use, more efficient by making repairs to better insulate walls and windows, installing more efficient light bulbs and unplugging appliances when not in use.

That last one is a hidden power suck, which can account for between 5 and 10 percent of residential electricity used in developed countries and may account for 1 percent of global carbon dioxide emissions, according to the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory.

That’s because many devices — including televisions, audio receivers and even CD players — use standby energy, which means they’re constantly drawing power even when they’ve been turned off. The only way to bring their energy use to zero is to unplug. While it might not seem like much savings for all the hassle, consider this: The typical American has 40 such devices plugged in at any given time.

“Knowing now that you can save lots of money on electricity tends to inspire," said Rafael Guerrero, a student AmeriCorps member with CALPIRG Energy Service Corps. "Numbers like that can really resonate."

It's important to reach children early because it's more difficult to change those habits when they reach adulthood, she said.

The week of education kicked off at Bijou Community School and the Lake Tahoe Environmental Science Magnet School.

The Energy Service Corps volunteers will spend the rest of their time teaching classes in South Tahoe High School, Tahoe Valley Elementary, LTESMS, and Bijou. They'll also be weatherizing local nonprofits and residences, including the League to Save Lake Tahoe and Tahoe Youth & Family Services. That process involves simple fixes that may seem overwhelming or expensive to families and nonprofits, but will, in the end, save them money on their energy bills.

Aaron Hussmann is the campus organizer for CALPIRG at San Diego State University. He was born and raised in South Lake Tahoe.

CalFire fee backlash gains momentum

By Kathryn Reed

This year's rural fire bills have been delayed because CalFire is still trying to figure out who should receive them.

“CalFire found a number of problems with addresses that should no longer be in state responsibility areas,” George Runner, who is a member of the state Board of Equalization, said April 2 during a teleconference. His agency sends the bills based on the addresses provided by CalFire.

Runner is a strong opponent of the fee that charges people $115 for living in an area serviced by CalFire. Last month the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association formally served the California Board of Equalization, CalFire and state Department of Justice with a lawsuit challenging the constitutionality of the state’s Fire Prevention Fee. Runner plans to join the lawsuit by filing an amicus brief on behalf of the California taxpayers he represents.

CalFire at times has a truck at the Lake Valley station on Lake Tahoe Boulevard. Photo/CalFire

Besides the lawsuit, there are six bills in the Legislature that would either alter who pays, how much is paid or repeal the fee completely. Three of those bills are sponsored by state Sen. Ted Gaines, R-Roseville, who represents Lake Tahoe.

On Tuesday night Runner said, “The problem is state responsibility areas were never well defined. They were never meant to be as an overlay for taxing. That is why (CalFire is) backing off a bit as they are doing this year's review."

In El Dorado County, Runner said 1,300 properties are supposed to be removed from the fee list.

Runner said the plan by CalFire is to clean up the list, but a removal does not mean a refund is forthcoming. It means no bill will come in future years.

The fee was initiated last year as a way for the state to backfill CalFire's coffers. The $85 million that was supposed to be raised was never designed for new programs or fire prevention. The governor and Legislature took that sum to balance the state budget and used the fee to keep CalFire whole.

To date, $73.8 million has been collected. About $1 million of that has been refunded to people who protested.

Runner is hosting a series of meetings with constituents throughout the state, with a particular area's lawmaker to be on the line as well.

In the inaugural call people from one end of the state to the other complained about how the fee is really a tax – which becomes taxation without representation.

Another issue brought up is how owners of dwellings are charged, not property owners. This has impacted mobile home owners and those with more than one structure on a parcel.

Susan, a disabled senior from Grass Valley, told Runner a collection agency came after her because she was paying the fee in installments and the money drastically cut into her food allowance.

Ronny lives on 40 acres in Cottonwood. He said he has no idea why he should be charged the fee when he uses a tractor to cut his own fire lines and has been taking care of his property for years.

Janelle in Santa Cruz said CalFire does nothing for her, which frustrates her considering she had to pay the fire fee.

Robert, a truck driver, called from the road. He spoke about how he pays a fee for the volunteer fire department that is less than a quarter mile from his house. He called it silly to pay the CalFire fee when the state services his area three or four months a year, and then it can take 90 minutes for crews to arrive in an emergency.

While Runner agrees with the callers believing the fee is absurd, he recommends everyone pay it because otherwise it could get messy. He also says everyone should protest it.

"There is a view in the Legislature that folks in rural areas are responsible for fire. I like to remind people about the whole concept of conservation," Runner said. He said CalFire wasn't set up to protect properties, but instead to protect watersheds – that's why CalFire will go into the backcountry. "Watersheds are primarily for people who live in the cities, not for the people paying the fee."

David, who lives in the town of El Dorado, said then he didn't understand why he was being billed instead of others farther west of him in more metropolitan areas. Plus, he added, he has a fire hydrant on his street, lives six doors from a fire station, and pays for fire protection via other taxes.

"I don't think the average legislator down the street understands watersheds," Runner said from his Sacramento office. "They don't understand the relationship of fire protection and watersheds. They just turn on the tap."

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Notes:

- More info about the fire fee is online.

- State Sen. Ted Gaines will participate in a tele-townhall

May 7 from 6-7pm with Runner. To register, call (916) 324.4970.

• Runner's number: (916) 445.2181.

Sandoval not ready to commit to TRPA

By Sandra Chereb, AP

Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval favors keeping alive the threat to leave the bi-state Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Compact, a decades-old agreement that has governed environmental controls and development in the basin , a legislative committee was told Tuesday.

But conservation groups said given more cooperation with California, environmental groups and business interests, repealing Nevada's threat would show the state's commitment to collaboration and tackling the lake's environmental challenges.

Gov. Brian Sandoval wants to

keep Nevada's options open
regarding inclusion in TRPA.
Photo/LTN file

No action was taken April 2 by the Senate Committee on Natural Resources on SB229, which would repeal the 2011 withdrawal legislation.

Steve Robinson, Sandoval's designee to the TRPA, said SB271 passed by the 2011 Legislature authorizing possible withdrawal from TRPA was "essential" to jumpstarting negotiations and updating a regional plan for the first time since the late 1980s.

But he cautioned that a lawsuit filed in federal court in Sacramento by two environmental groups over the Regional Plan adopted in December "could be stopped in its tracks," depending on how the court rules.

Additionally, the regional plan has yet to be fully implemented, and local governments now must come up with their own guidelines for overseeing some development activities.

"Looming over all of these … are the threat of litigation," Robinson said.

SB229 would repeal a law passed in 2011 that paved the way for Nevada to leave TRPA and instead regulate environmental protections and development within its boundaries.

Nevada lawmakers blamed their California counterparts for favoring tough environmental standards that they said were hindering development and the economy.

TRPA in December approved an updated Regional Plan that gives local governments more control over some decisions.

Sen. David Parks, D-Las Vegas and sponsor of the latest measure, said last year's law was successful in bringing all parties to the table and an updated plan. But leaving it in effect would be a mistake.

“For this collaboration to continue … it’s essential that Nevada recommit to the compact” by passing legislation this session repealing it, he said.

Kyle Davis with the Nevada Conservation League agreed, saying repeal of the withdrawal bill is “the top priority” of the state’s conservation community.

“I think lack of action by Nevada during this session will have a negative effect,” Davis said.

He said a perception that Nevada still wants to hold back would send “a pretty bad message” about its willingness to continue talks and work collaboratively.

Leo Drozdoff, director of the Nevada Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, reiterated Sandoval’s opposition to repeal – a sign committee chairman, Sen. Aaron Ford, D-Las Vegas, acknowledged was a hurdle for bill sponsors.

“We believe this bill is premature,” Drozdoff said, adding existing law sets a 2015 timeline for withdrawal and gives the governor the option to extend that deadline for another two years.

Business groups, including Tahoe resorts, also opposed the bill and urged the committee to allow more time, keeping the hammer of withdrawal in place.

But Parks disagreed.

“I think the important thing to bear in mind is time is of the essence,” he said. Given that Nevada lawmakers meet every two years, they won’t be able to consider repeal again until 2015.

“We’ll be at the eleventh hour,” he said.

1,000-home development proposed for Shingle Springs

By Richard Chang, Sacramento Bee

Shingle Springs residents are gearing up for a showdown over a proposed 1,000-home mega development off Mother Lode Drive.

The project, named San Stino, will have 1.6 units per acre over a 645-acre tract. Developer Joel Korotkin of San Stino LLP estimates the build-out could take several years, depending on market conditions.

But neighbors are launching a grass-roots effort to stop the proposal. They say the project is too dense and will threaten their rural lifestyle.

“The development is so large it will affect almost all Shingle Springs residents,” said Frank Verdin, an organizer for No San Stino, one of two grass-roots groups opposing the development.

No San Stino and the Shingle Springs Community Alliance are asking the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors to halt review of the plan and for the developer to go back to the drawing board.

The county is in the process of preparing an environmental impact review, which will assess the project in terms of traffic, infrastructure and other factors. But officials caution that final approval is still far away.

“For this many lots, you’re looking at 10 years or more before you achieve a full build-out,” said Pierre Rivas, the county’s principal planner.

The stiff opposition from the community has the developer on the defensive.

“We’ve been very open from the beginning,” Korotkin said, noting that San Stino has already been scaled down from the original 1,300 houses proposed two years ago.

“If you think this is going to affect you, we want you to write a comment setting forth your concerns,” he said.

El Dorado County’s elected leaders are taking note of the growing chorus of criticism.

Supervisor Ray Nutting, who represents Shingle Springs, said he is “very aware” of the constituent backlash against the project.

“I’m very skeptical of the numbers,” Nutting said. “My hope is that those numbers come way down. The developer needs to build trust with the community.”

Korotkin said that he has followed the application process from the beginning and that the county had previously designated the land as an area for growth in the 2004 General Plan.

The site has historically been a grazing ground for farm animals and is currently zoned as one home for every 5 acres.

Many in Shingle Springs live on plots of 1 acre or more, according to data from the county planning department. Community leaders have expressed concern that the large influx of people could upend the area’s rural lifestyle.

“If you take 1,000 homes and multiply that by two, you’re looking at 2,000 cars,” said Verdin, whose home sits on 8 acres and is 400 feet from the development site. “Traffic is a huge concern. People have to drive because it’s rural.”

But Korotkin contends that he has made ample provisions to allow San Stino to fit in with the community, including creating a new road to minimize traffic and setting aside 42 percent of the land, or 270 acres, toward open space.

"It's a challenge, but I believe we can do this in a way that doesn't hurt Shingle Springs," he said.

The 30-day public comment period for the environmental impact report ended Friday.

The report is likely to be released by next spring.

Rivas, the county planner, doesn't expect the Board of Supervisors to vote on the project until mid-2014.

"You're looking at years off into the future," he said. "But the project tells me there is a positive outlook in the future of the economy."

Guard takes role in Drug Store Project seriously

Publisher's note: ***This is the 10th anniversary of the Drug Store Project. Today's event at Lake Tahoe Community College is designed to teach sixth-graders that they have choices and what can happen if they choose to use drugs.***

By John K. Holihan Jr.

The California National Guard's Drug Demand Reduction Team mission is to coordinate statewide the utilization of National Guard resources and personnel in direct support of community based organizations, law enforcement agencies, and educational institutions in their illegal drug awareness and prevention efforts-programs, such as the Drug Store Project in South Lake Tahoe.

California National Guard's DDR members act as role models, mentors, student guides, and setup and tear down crew for the Drug Store Project.

The California National Guard's Drug Demand Reduction members are a part of the community. Our children face the same challenges that all California youth face with bullying, self-esteem and alcohol and drugs.

The California National Guard DDR has been partnering with Lisa Huard's Drug Store Project for the past 10 years. The Tahoe program has been the model that other cities and Arizona's National Guard's DDR program has used to develop their own Drug Store Project.

Some of the youth who attended Tahoe's first Drug Store Project are now volunteers who help with the Drug Store Project. They talk to the youth about how the project has impacted their life.

The students who participate in the Drug Store Project are given a pre-test and post-test to document the effect the Drug Store message and what valuable information the youth have gained. The goal is for the youth to remember what they have learned and put it into practice should they be faced with a similar situation.

With the lack of funding for drug awareness and with state budget issues, things like this are threatened in terms of potentially not being able to participate in the future.

John K. Holihan Jr. is a master sergeant with the California National Guard.

More states want in on the sports betting game

By Joe Drape, New York Times

It is a lucrative time of year for Nevada, where more than $200 million will be wagered in sports books on the men’s college basketball tournament, a pot of money that has budget-crunched states across the country pushing for a piece of the action despite strong opposition from the NCAA and professional sports leagues.

Voters in New Jersey passed a referendum by a 2-to-1 margin making sports betting legal, and last year Gov. Chris Christie signed a law legalizing it at Atlantic City’s 12 casinos and the state’s four horse racing tracks. Illinois is considering allowing sports betting, and California lawmakers are looking to reintroduce a sports gambling bill that the state Senate passed last year.

All this has the sports’ governing bodies on high alert. The NCAA has filed a lawsuit with the NFL, the NHL, the NBA and Major League Baseball claiming that sports betting in New Jersey would “irreparably” corrupt sports in the United States. This year they were joined by the Justice Department, which defended the constitutionality of a 1992 law banning sports betting outside Nevada and a handful of other states that had long allowed gambling.

The NCAA also canceled several tournaments and sporting events in the state and said it would bar New Jersey from hosting events in the future if sports betting was put into effect.

Last month, a federal judge ruled against New Jersey and upheld the ban on sports betting. The state is appealing, and legal experts expect that the case will reach the Supreme Court.

As gamblers poured into Las Vegas in anticipation of three weeks of betting on unpredictable tournament action, the NCAA sounded this warning on its official Twitter account: “Student-athletes, coaches & admins: A reminder that betting on #MarchMadness isn’t worth the risks,” with a link to a release detailing the arguments against wagering on sports.

In a statement, the organization was concise in explaining its opposition. “The NCAA maintains that the spread of legalized sports wagering is a threat to the integrity of athletic competition and student-athlete well-being,” it said.

Nevertheless, the money being wagered on the tournament will more than double the record $98.9 million bet on this year’s Super Bowl.

The federal law on sports betting, which was championed by then-Sen. Bill Bradley of New Jersey, a former professional basketball player for the New York Knicks, was intended to limit its expansion beyond Nevada, Delaware, Oregon and Montana. But New Jersey and advocates in other states say there are too many dollars at stake for that policy to continue to make sense.

Nevada took in more than $3.4 billion in bets on sports last year, generating $15 million to $20 million in tax revenue. The FBI estimates that $2.6 billion is bet illegally on the college basketball tournament, while the National Gambling Impact Study Commission says $380 billion is bet annually with bookies or offshore betting operations, often controlled by organized crime, on all sporting events together.

Last March, Nevada sports books handled $288.5 million in bets on basketball, an estimated 70 percent of them — or $201 million — on college games, according to the Gaming Commission.

In Britain, where bookmaking shops are ubiquitous and online wagering is readily available, bookmakers paid 900 million pounds in taxes (about $1.36 billion), 24 percent of it, or roughly $343 million, on sports and horse racing, according to a study by Deloitte on behalf of the Association of British Bookmakers.

The predawn scene at LVH last week served as a vivid illustration of Nevada's special lure. At 4:30 a.m., a group had claimed a table in the sports book area of the casino, and within three hours, hundreds of people were in a line that snaked through slot machines and onto the casino floor.

"This is the only place to be during the tournament," said Laurie Moss, a Denver software architect who has made the pilgrimage here for 13 years to bet on college games.

The growing acceptance of legalized sports betting has been reflected in an array of polls. Most recently, one from Fairleigh Dickinson University's PublicMind in December 2012 found that 51 percent of registered voters favor legalizing sports betting in states where it is not currently legal. That was up from its March 2010 poll, which showed 39 percent of voters supported expanding sports betting.

In court, the NCAA and sports leagues have argued that wider sports betting would compromise their image and offer a powerful temptation for their athletes to fix games. It is an argument advocates of sports betting claim is disingenuous, considering the leagues have coexisted with gambling in Nevada since 1949.

Dennis Drazin, a lawyer who advises Monmouth Park racetrack, which has announced plans to set up a sports book, said the leagues long ago made gambling part of their enterprise.

"If gambling is really hurting the leagues, why does every sports show talk about point spreads and favorites and underdogs? And why does every office in America have a pool on the NCAA tournament?" Drazin said.

A.G. Burnett, chairman of the Nevada Gaming Control Board, said perhaps the best way for sports leagues to protect themselves was to allow betting to expand in legal and regulated fashion.

"We have been in this business for decades and haven't had any problems with … any of our universities," Burnett said. "The game-fixing scandals have happened in other states where gambling is illegal. What we have here is a regulatory process specifically to monitor what happens on both sides of the counter. This is all we do, and we're good at it."

Cocking pulling the plug at South Tahoe PUD

By Kathryn Reed

Think South Tahoe Public Utility and Dennis Cocking is probably the first name that comes to mind.

Even his boss admits Cocking is the face of the district.

"People go to him when they want to know what is going on with the district," South Tahoe PUD General Manager Richard Solbrig said.

But after May 1 people will have to go to someone else.

Cocking is retiring.

Dennis Cocking with retire from South Tahoe PUD on May 1. Photo/Kathryn Reed

While his job title is public information officer, the job duties go well beyond being a spokesman.

"PIOs as a whole have evolved into legislative affairs. It's legislative and public affairs," Cocking said.

In a lengthy interview with *Lake Tahoe News* in his office, which is full of family photographs and certificates of recognition, Cocking spoke of how his life at the district evolved from working part time in the summers in the field starting in 1988, to getting hired full time in the mid-1990s in customer service. He's had the PIO job since 1997.

Cocking has effectively put his business administration degree with an emphasis in marketing and public relations to work.

"As a board member, I can say Dennis has been an invaluable resource in terms of preparing me for understanding the community and understanding the issues and providing a bridge between the community and the board," board President Eric Schafer told *Lake Tahoe News*.

MTBE in Tahoe's drinking water

It was in 1998 that the district filed the lawsuit against the oil companies for contaminating the wells with the fuel additive MTBE. Then the legislative affairs aspect of the job kicked in and to this day has never let up.

It’s talking about the legislative affairs side of things that brings out a sparkle in Cocking’s eyes.

Shell was the last hold out in the MTBE suit. The British company wanted to settle for $26 million. That wasn’t good enough for the district. Their belief was the ratepayers should not have to pay a dime.

From 1998 to 2001, for three days a week, one of five district employees was in the San Francisco courtroom. Cocking was in that rotation.

“This small, little water district in the mountains took on big oil,” Cocking said. “(MTBE) was elevated from a local problem to a national problem.”

He said it was tricky to manage the media because saying the wrong thing could affect the trial.

And then he and board member Jim Jones faced contempt of court charges – which added more stress to the situation. Those charges were dropped in the final settlement negotiations.

“The lawsuit said the oil companies should have known the contaminants that were in it,” Cocking said. “We got money to pay for the costs incurred and attorneys. We netted $35 million.”

The money could only be spent on the district’s water supply. The last of those dollars will be used this summer on projects.

“We have recovered all the lost capacity,” Cocking said of the wells that had been contaminated.

Working on Tahoe issues

Securing money for the district has been a primary goal of some of Cocking’s legislative activity. He is a regular in Sacramento and Washington. He says it’s all about developing relationships.

“His written skills are such that he can get across with clarity complicated issues and have it make sense to people,” Solbrig said.

While the 2007 Angora Fire is hard for most locals to forget, it’s often the firefighters who are heralded for containing the inferno in a matter of days. But it was South Tahoe PUD that was supplying that water.

“We were singled out by the incident commander. He said it was rare to go to a fire of this magnitude and not run out of water,” Cocking said.

But it was close.

The 254 houses that burned then created active leaks. Foundations were flooding. Water pressure was decreasing and the threat of running out was very real.

STPUD crews scoured the burn area to try to turn off the valves. And, this, at a time when some of their own had lost their homes.

Cocking said the ability to keep supplying water demonstrated that the district’s priority of replacing infrastructure proved to be prudent.

Going forward

A scare when Cocking was 37 had him and his wife come to the realization that when they could retire they would, the 60-year-old said. He was diagnosed with stage 4 melanoma and told he had six months to live. They had three kids all younger than 4 at the time.

Kathy Cocking will retire April 5 after spending 35 years with Barton Health. She is currently vice president of operations.

They sold the house Dennis Cocking grew up in, which had been in his family since 1965. (Cocking is a South Tahoe High grad.) Their new home is on 5 acres near the Pine Nuts.

Their first trip will be up the Oregon coast. RVing has been a passion of the Cockings for years. Now there will be more time to explore.

Plus, their first grandchild is on the way.

But neither one expects to stop being involved in the community. But what exactly the next chapter entails, well, that remains to be written.

With the district on a mission to not replace every person who quits or retires, the initial plan is for Cocking's duties to be divided between three members of upper management.

"I've always enjoyed his witticisms. He would be a difficult person to replace, which is probably why we aren't," Schafer said.

Spring allergy season could be a doozie

By Cathy Payne, USA Today

This year's spring allergy season is nothing to sniff at: The season may be longer and stronger, allergists say.

Blooming trees have been releasing pollen into the air, triggering allergic reactions in some people. The start of tree pollination varies across the country.

Increased mean temperatures from climate change affect tree pollination, says Richard Weber, president of the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology. “We are seeing trees not only pollinate earlier but also produce more pollen,” he says.

Some people who are sensitive to tree pollen also may feel the effects of grass pollen as spring gives way to summer. They may get a break before ragweed pollen hits in the fall.

Many people with spring and summer allergies may not get relief until July, when it gets very hot and pollen counts go down, says William Berger, an adviser for the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America.

The higher pollen levels may worsen symptoms for some people, but effects vary among individuals, says Weber, an allergist in Denver.

With an allergy, the immune system overreacts to a trigger substance, or allergen. Outdoor allergies (also known as seasonal allergic rhinitis or hay fever) occur when allergens found outdoors are inhaled into the nose and lungs.

Common allergens are tree pollen in the spring, grass pollen in the summer and weed pollen in the fall, as well as mold spores. Outdoor mold spores peak in July in warmer states and in October in colder states.

A study in the September issue of the journal Annals of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology echoed the impact of climate change on allergies. The study linked increased pollen concentrations and lengthened allergy seasons to warmer temperatures.

The ragweed pollen season has grown as much as 13 to 27 days longer since 1995, found a 2011 study from the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It linked the later end of the season to higher temperatures from climate change.

Weber says that with increased exposure to allergens because of longer pollen seasons, more people may become sensitized. “Older patients are coming in with new onset of hay fever,” he says.

About 16.9 million U.S. adults were diagnosed with hay fever in 2011, according to the 2011 National Health Interview Survey. About 6.7 million U.S. children were reported to have hay fever.

Pollen and mold are among the allergens that can trigger asthma attacks.

Asthma, a chronic disease affecting the lungs, causes breathlessness, chest tightness, coughing and wheezing. In 2010, about 18.7 million adults and 7 million children had asthma in the USA, according to the CDC’s National Asthma Control Program.

To find out if you have symptoms of allergies or allergic asthma, you can start with an online self-test from the American College of Allergy, Asthma and Immunology.

If you have allergies, treatment includes avoidance of allergens, medication and immunotherapy, such as allergy shots.

Berger, an allergist in Mission Viejo, says it is important to see a board-certified allergist for diagnosis and treatment. He says having allergies is “a common problem but has a huge impact on quality of life.”

Tips for people with allergies:

- Watch the pollen count. If pollen counts are high, you may want to avoid outdoor activities during early morning hours. (You can find pollen levels on allergy relief and weather sites and the National Allergy Bureau.)

- When driving, keep your car windows closed.
- When you’re home, keep your bedroom windows closed.
- Clean your air-conditioning filters regularly.
- If you’ve been outdoors, take a shower and wash your hair to get rid of any pollen.

Chocolate makers adjusting recipes for success

By Tiffany Hsu, Los Angeles Times

In 92 years, See’s Candies has never shied away from being old-fashioned.

At the factory on La Cienega Boulevard, some octogenarian workers measure their decades of employment in hip replacements. Quaint floral details are still hand-piped onto chocolate eggs.

An inexorable march of candies heads through tubes the length of a football field, where they’re drenched in layers of chocolate — a traditional practice known as enrobing. Like cars merging out of highway toll lanes, they appear from cooling tunnels into employees’ waiting hands.

“Old Time” is part of See’s slogan. But the South San Francisco company is evolving along with the rest of the chocolate industry, forced by predicaments far more severe than “I Love Lucy” conveyor-belt hijinks.

Chocolate is a huge business, pulling in $90 billion in global sales annually, $19 billion of it in the U.S., according to market research company Mintel Group Ltd. Price increases and product innovation helped the industry grow 16 percent from 2007 through 2012, the firm found.

But scientists predict a looming cocoa bean shortage, intensified by climate change and botanical disease.

The International Cocoa Organization said that global production in the last growing year fell 6.1 percent, and it forecasts a 1.8 percent slide this year. That would probably cause a cocoa shortfall of 45,000 metric tons in the current marketing year ending Sept. 30, the group said.

Tighter supplies as well as rising sugar and manufacturing costs are adding to the price of truffles and bonbons. Sugar prices have risen 11.6 percent on average each of the last five years, influencing Kit Kat maker Hershey Co.'s decision in 2011 to raise wholesale prices on most of its candy products 9.7 percent.

In addition, health-minded U.S. consumers, increasingly wary of sugary snacks, are nibbling on fresh fruit 10 times more over the course of a year than they do on chocolate, according to research firm NPD.

"Chocolate is an impulse item, an indulgence," said Marcia Mogelonsky, an analyst at Mintel. "But consumers have become price-sensitive to chocolate – the economy is so bad that people are actually cutting back on their consumption."

So what's an Oompa Loompa to do? Switch up the chocolate strategy.

Companies are looking to countries not known as major cocoa producers, such as Vietnam and China, to boost production. Mondelez International Inc., owner of brands such as Cadbury and Toblerone, said it would invest $400 million over the next decade to improve cocoa farming communities and help boost productivity; other massive candy sellers have taken similar steps.

In the U.S., advances in technology and equipment contributed to layoffs, causing chocolate employment to slide 2.2 percent a year on average since 2007, according to research firm IBISWorld. Simultaneously, chocolate companies are trimming wages to cut costs and boost profit, according to researchers.

Manufacturers also are creating innovative new chocolates and manufacturing methods to try to differentiate themselves from competitors.

British brand Cadbury last year unveiled a new form of the sweet that's resistant to melting, even at 104 degrees Fahrenheit. TCHO Ventures Inc., a San Francisco chocolate company, makes chocolate by controlling its machinery with an iPhone app.

Companies are also trying to entice body-conscious consumers, which IBISWorld believes will give organic and dark chocolates a boost in coming years. Brands such as Russell Stover have significant sugar-free chocolate selections; others are branching out into gluten-free and dairy-free offerings.

And candy sizes are shrinking.

By the end of this year, all of Mars Inc.'s chocolate brands – Snickers, Dove and M&M's among them – will be available only in 250-calorie pieces or less. That means smaller slabs of chocolate and multiple to-go portions where there once were single mega-bars.

Brands are adjusting their marketing efforts, especially during holidays.

This year, companies launched more seasonal products instead of holiday-specific candies, which usually head straight to discount racks once celebrations are over. Hershey introduced an array of candies in spring colors rather than wrapped kisses emblazoned with the word “Easter.”

“The move is to stretch the occasion beyond a day,” Mogelonsky said. “Companies have to extend the salability of the product or they’ll lose money.”

At the Los Angeles factory of See’s, the air is thick with the smells of chocolate and caramel.

Workers in hairnets, white coats and gloves prepare chocolates destined for the chain’s more than 200 company-owned stores, primarily in the West, as well as online and catalog customers. The company also operates a factory in the Bay Area and a packing facility in Carson.

For 41 years, See’s has been a tiny but reliable part of investment guru Warren Buffett’s Berkshire Hathaway Inc. The candy maker, which Buffett bought for $25 million in 1972, belongs to the Oracle of Omaha’s wide-ranging retail stable, which includes home furnishings, jewelry, cooking equipment and party supplies.

At its kitchens and stores, the company employs some 1,500 workers during its slower summer season, expanding to 8,000 workers during the holidays. It’s recently been adding to its stores outside its Western territory, venturing into Texas, Ohio and Indiana. It plans to move into other states as well. Licensees manage six shops in Asia.

See’s has done well enough for Buffett to praise it to shareholders as a “dream business.” In 2011, the company posted pretax profit of $83 million on sales of $376 million. See’s current annual sales are in the $400 million range, the company said.

Buffett has said that See’s has been such a steady performer that it has helped finance some of his other purchases over the years.

“‘Buy commodities, sell brands’ has long been a formula for business success,” Buffett wrote in 2011. “It has produced enormous and sustained profits for Coca-Cola since 1886 and Wrigley since 1891. On a smaller scale, we have enjoyed good fortune with this approach at See’s Candy since we purchased it.”

But even at a stalwart such as See’s, efforts are apparent to adapt to the less-than-sweet changes facing the industry — although not on public display because the candy maker rarely offers tours.

As with the company’s Bay Area kitchen, which rivals the L.A. factory in size, some tasks that once were performed manually are now delegated to machines to improve efficiency and cut costs. There’s a machine nicknamed after the Looney Tunes canary Tweety Bird because of its yellow mechanical arm, which slices and flips sheets of peanut brittle near vats of butter on the factory floor.

Managers said the new technologies have caused a gradual reduction over the years in the Los Angeles facility’s workforce, which currently numbers about 150 people — a tally that doubles around Christmas as the company adjusts for seasonal demand.

Plenty remains to be done by hand, such as the painstaking decoration of tender chocolates and the removal of imperfect candies from the production lines. The company still uses matriarch Mary See’s original recipes but has raised prices in recent years to offset soaring ingredient costs.

There’s also a rebranding effort under way at See’s. Internally, the effort is dubbed Polishing Our Gem.

The website underwent a face lift to draw more online shoppers. A new catalog, with less clutter and new fonts and images, debuted around Valentine’s Day.

And See's, which had focused on grandmothers and great-grandmothers, is now targeting young mothers in their 30s. The company says it needs the broader demographic to beat out intense competition.

"We just know that for growth, we need to onboard a new fan base," said Tracy Cioffi, See's vice president of marketing and advertising. "It's a difficult dance, but it's one we have to do."