Report: Nevada among states with highest per capita debt

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – Nevada is among the states with the highest amount of government debt per capita at $14,949, according to a report from State Budget Solutions, a non-partisan advocate for state budget reform.

The level of debt put Nevada at 37th highest among the states.

It was a slight improvement from 2011, when Nevada ranked 38th highest at $15,509.

The debt totals include budget gaps, outstanding unemployment trust fund loans, post-employment benefit liabilities such as health care coverage and unfunded public pension liabilities.

Nevada, for example, has borrowed about $680 million from the federal government to pay unemployment benefits during the current recession. The state is looking at increasing tax rates on businesses to repay the loan. The state's Public Employees' Retirement System was projected by the state to have a long-term unfunded liability of $11 billion as of June 30, 2011. Other analyses put the liability at much higher levels.

Hawaii, New Jersey and Alaska lead the nation with the highest debt per capita at $29,062, $29,252 and $31,141 respectively.

Debt among all the states amounts to $13,425 for each resident.

"Americans are sadly desensitized to the trillions of dollars in debt our states are facing," said Bob Williams, president of SBS. "This report brings the debt closer to home by demonstrating that a newborn arrives already more than $13,000 in debt and that a family of four owes their state government $53,700. It is the individuals and families who will ultimately bear this horrific financial burden if state governments do not get their budgets under control."

In a telephone interview, Williams said meaningful pension reform would go a long ways to reducing the per capita debt. But the looming costs of the federal health care law could become a significant contributing factor to the problem in the years to come, he said.

"States really need to address the pension problem," he said. "Currently the public sector salaries and benefits, particularly the pensions, are unsustainable for the taxpayers."

Gov. Brian Sandoval has advocated for changing Nevada's public pension plan to a defined contribution plan where there would be no long-term liability to taxpayers, but efforts to change the plan in the 2011 legislative session went nowhere.

Getting policymakers to act has been difficult, but recently some of the bond rating firms have begun to signal their concerns, Williams said. If states' bond ratings are lowered, it might finally force them to come to terms with their debt problems, he said.

Even Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel has acknowledged concerns over pension costs, Williams said.

Bill Gates has also expressed concerns about the cost of public pensions and the effect on funding for public and higher education.

"You cannot keep pushing the cost off to future generations," Williams said.

The report is an extension of State Budget Solutions' third annual State Debt Report, released in August showing that state governments face a crushing debt of more than $4.6 trillion. The analysis of debt per person looks at state debt per capita, per private sector employee, and the percentage of private sector gross state product. In each of the three categories, Hawaii, New Jersey, and Alaska are among states with the five largest debt figures. At the other end of the spectrum, Nebraska has the lowest total in each of the areas.

Nebraska has the lowest total debt per capita at just $4,249 for each resident. Tennessee, Indiana, Florida, and Idaho round out the lowest five debt levels per capita.

Private sector workers are at increased risk as they are the ultimate tax base for reducing state debt, the report says. Using figures from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, State Budget Solutions determined that Hawaii has the largest debt per private sector worker at $83,815, followed by Alaska, New Jersey, Connecticut, and New Mexico. Nebraska again has the lowest total, with $9,829 in debt for each private sector employee. Indiana, Tennessee, North Dakota, and South Dakota follow.

“Voters deserve to know how much debt their elected officials are saddling them with before they go to voting booth,” Williams said. “$13,425 per person is an unacceptable debt and immediate fiscal reform is desperately needed.”

USFS refuses to limit logging north of Truckee

By Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee

Standing amid a scattering of stumps last week, an official from the U.S. Forest Service acknowledged the agency made mistakes by logging too many pine trees, including majestic old-growth giants, in an effort to help another Tahoe species: the quaking aspen.

But he rejected calls from local residents that the Tahoe National Forest sharply scale back the cutting along Independence Creek north of Truckee.

“Are there places where there are some trees that I’ve seen out here — some live trees still standing and some stumps — that I would have preferred be marked for retention? Yes,” said Tom Quinn, supervisor of the Tahoe National Forest.

His comments came at a meeting on Friday in the field with local residents and environmentalists to discuss the Outback Aspen Restoration Project. The project, which aims to promote aspen groves by logging conifers that compete with them, was the subject of a Bee story in August.

It entails toppling conifers — large and small — as far as 150 feet away from aspen, leaving large swaths of the Tahoe forest looking as bare as a shorn sheep. The idea is to remove conifers that have grown thick over the past century of fire suppression, allowing aspen the chance to expand and thrive.

The extensive cutting has incensed residents and conservationists, who were out in force at Friday’s meeting.

“We are shocked at the situation, the catastrophic damage being done by our government with absolutely no care for public input,” said Mary Leavell, who grazes cattle in the national forest with her husband.

“We all ultimately want forest health,” said Lauren Ranz, who lives part-time on a former 450-acre ranch near the logging zone. “But I don’t think this is the way to get it.”

Despite his concerns about cutting too many large, old trees, Quinn defended the project.

“To hear words today like devastated, destroyed … I can’t accept those words,” Quinn said.

He said the agency’s decision to allow the cutting of old-growth trees was consistent with the goal of aspen restoration, even though it angered neighbors.

“They were probably social mistakes, more than ecological mistakes,” he said of the agency’s actions.

To try to quell criticism, Quinn announced that Forest Service officials have decided to halt logging of conifers 40 inches in diameter or greater on the remaining 190 acres of the 479-acre project. But he rejected suggestions to limit cutting to trees 30 inches in diameter or less.

“We will not sacrifice the ultimate goal of the aspen restoration for retaining trees that some perceive as old-growth,” Quinn said.

“I’m extremely disappointed,” said Fred Mitchell who lives on 80 acres near where the cutting is taking place. “There are so few trees 40 inches and above, anyway.

“They’re brushing off the public like we are a minor nuisance, like we don’t count for anything,” Mitchell added.

Mitchell is one of a group of residents who have marshaled opposition by handing out flyers, contacting lawyers, political representatives and environmentalists, even placing mock tombstones on the stumps of large trees – some more than 2 centuries old – that have been logged.

“It’s not what they told us it would be,” said Gary Risse, a part-time area resident who is among those opposed. “I can tell you without a doubt there was no mention of clear-cuts whatsoever. That would have stopped it.”

Quinn said there was no intent to mislead.

“Am I disappointed at what most of you perceive as lack of transparency on this project? Very much so,” he said. “I don’t know how that happened. I guarantee you it wasn’t to be sneaky, surreptitious, to sneak this under the radar.”

Forest Service officials said the logging is supported by abundant agency science. But Chad Hanson, director and staff ecologist for the John Muir Project, said other agency projects have succeeded with less intense cutting.

“Scientific studies … do not support the assumption that you need to clear-cut forests, especially 150 feet or more away from aspen stands, or that you need to remove old- growth trees,” he said. “That is not scientifically necessary.”

Residents fear erosion will sweep off heavily logged sites this winter, polluting streams, and that stands of quaking aspen – without the shelter of surrounding conifers – will be toppled by wind and snow.

“We don’t all have to be scientists to know that this is absolutely destructive,” said Mary Leavell, the rancher. “I am appalled.”

They said too many big trees have been cut.

“I’ve covered about 300 acres of this project looking for legacy (old-growth) trees,” Mitchell said. “From what I can gather, there has only been one legacy tree left for every four and a quarter acres, which is not a very good number.”

Quinn, standing in one heavily logged zone Friday, defended the heavy cutting, saying it would benefit aspen.

“This I do not apologize for, if anyone was looking for an apology. If we are going to get aspen on the landscape, this is the type of treatment we are going to be doing.”

But he did acknowledge the logging has been more far-reaching than he would have liked.

“To have a 479-acre project and aggressively pursue aspen restoration on all 479 acres perhaps is something we need to rethink, even though we do need more and more aspen,” Quinn said.

Drought concerns return as state remains parched

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

When Californians suffer under oppressive heat, as they have for weeks, another concern is sure to follow: drought.

Long-term weather outlooks for the Golden State do not provide much reassurance. Although the stubborn heat that gripped the state finally started to ease Thursday, there is zero rain in the forecast.

Drought conditions have worsened across California compared with one year ago and are expected to get more severe through December.

Sixty-nine percent of California is considered to be in moderate drought conditions or worse, according to the National Drought Mitigation Center. One year ago, none of the state was in that condition.

The national drought center bases its outlook largely on soil moisture measurements, but California officials look at drought a little differently, basing it on whether people’s water needs are being met.

The state Department of Water Resources is a long way from declaring a drought, saying it depends much more on local conditions and regional demand. But it acknowledges the potential is there.

For instance, most of the state's major reservoirs are at below-average storage levels. California avoided drought this summer because those reservoirs were filled to the brim by a wet winter in the early months of 2011. Such was not the case from January through March of this year, and the surplus is gone.

Growers in the Merced Irrigation District received a full allotment this season because of carryover in their reservoir. However, next growing season farmers will be relying heavily on runoff from the mountain snowpack.

"If it's going to be a dry year, it's going to be a concern," said Hicham Eltal, deputy general manager of water resources for the Merced Irrigation District. "It would take more water this year than last year to weather a drought."

Another example is Folsom Lake on the American River, which stood at less than half full this week, with capacity about 81 percent of average for this time of year.

"Groundwater levels are starting to go down a little in some places, and reservoir storage levels are starting to go down," said Jeanine Jones, interstate resources manager at the DWR. "If this winter is dry, we'll feel it more."

Less surface water means more groundwater pumping, which for many has become a way of life.

"In our area most of us have wells that we can depend on," said Gino Pedretti, Merced Irrigation District board member and El Nido farmer. "There's a few out here that don't have enough well water and if there's a drought, they'll have to grow a spring crop or just not farm it at all."

El Niño to return

It’s too early to tell what kind of winter California will have, but indications seem ominous.

During the summer, cities up and down the valley set records for high temperatures and numbers of days above 90 degrees.

Conditions have been so dry and hot that the National Interagency Fire Center announced this week it extended an “above average” fire warning across Northern California – all the way to the edge of the Pacific Ocean.

It also warned that warm, dry winds could blow across the state from inland deserts this week, rather than from the ocean as usual.

The National Weather Service has declared a weak El Niño to be in play this winter. That means the tropical Pacific Ocean is warmer than normal, a cycle that typically alters climate patterns to produce dry conditions in Northern California and wet conditions in the south part of the state.

In a long-range forecast issued Sept. 20, the weather service said odds favor just that: dry weather through December in Northern California, which happens to be where most of the state’s water supply is stored.

The situation is not preoccupying water managers in the state, said Tim Quinn, executive director of the Association of California Water Agencies. They are accustomed to uncertainty, especially this early in the season.

“I’m not hearing a lot of dread at the present time,” Quinn said. “I never paid a lot of attention to the long-term prognosticators. They’re wrong as often as they are right.

“And no matter what they say, you want to be prepared for the worst.”

Merced Sun-Star staff writer Joshua Emerson Smith contributed to this report.

Error and fraud at issue as absentee voting rises

By Adam Liptak, New York Times

TALLAHASSEE — On the morning of the primary here in August, the local elections board met to decide which absentee ballots to count. It was not an easy job.

The board tossed out some ballots because they arrived without the signature required on the outside of the return envelope. It rejected one that said “see inside” where the signature should have been. And it debated what to do with ballots in which the signature on the envelope did not quite match the one in the county’s files.

“This ‘r’ is not like that ‘r,’ ” Judge Augustus D. Aikens Jr. said, suggesting that a ballot should be rejected.

Ion Sancho, the elections supervisor here, disagreed. “This ‘k’ is like that ‘k,’ ” he replied, and he persuaded his colleagues to count the vote.

Scenes like this will play out in many elections next month, because Florida and other states are swiftly moving from voting at a polling place toward voting by mail. In the last general election in Florida, in 2010, 23 percent of voters cast absentee ballots, up from 15 percent in the midterm election four years before. Nationwide, the use of absentee ballots and other forms of voting by mail has more than tripled since 1980 and now accounts for almost 20 percent of all votes.

Yet votes cast by mail are less likely to be counted, more likely to be compromised and more likely to be contested than those cast in a voting booth, statistics show. Election officials reject almost 2 percent of ballots cast by mail, double the rate for in-person voting.

“The more people you force to vote by mail,” Sancho said, “the more invalid ballots you will generate.”

Election experts say the challenges created by mailed ballots could well affect outcomes this fall and beyond. If the contests next month are close enough to be within what election lawyers call the margin of litigation, the grounds on which they will be fought will not be hanging chads but ballots cast away from the voting booth.

In 2008, 18 percent of the votes in the nine states likely to decide this year’s presidential election were cast by mail. That number will almost certainly rise this year, and voters in two-thirds of the states have already begun casting absentee ballots. In four Western states, voting by mail is the exclusive or dominant way to cast a ballot.

The trend will probably result in more uncounted votes, and it increases the potential for fraud. While fraud in voting by mail is far less common than innocent errors, it is vastly more prevalent than the in-person voting fraud that has attracted far more attention, election administrators say.

In Florida, absentee-ballot scandals seem to arrive like clockwork around election time. Before this year’s primary, for example, a woman in Hialeah was charged with forging an elderly voter’s signature, a felony, and possessing 31 completed absentee ballots, 29 more than allowed under a local law.

The flaws of absentee voting raise questions about the most elementary promises of democracy. “The right to have one’s vote counted is as important as the act of voting itself,” Justice Paul H. Anderson of the Minnesota Supreme Court wrote while considering disputed absentee ballots in the close 2008 Senate election between Al Franken and Norm Coleman.

Voting by mail is now common enough and problematic enough that election experts say there have been multiple elections in which no one can say with confidence which candidate was the deserved winner. The list includes the 2000 presidential election, in which problems with absentee ballots in Florida were a little-noticed footnote to other issues.

In the last presidential election, 35.5 million voters requested absentee ballots, but only 27.9 million absentee votes were counted, according to a study by Charles Stewart III, a political scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He calculated that 3.9 million ballots requested by voters never reached them; that another 2.9 million ballots received by voters did not make it back to election officials; and that election officials rejected 800,000 ballots. That suggests an overall failure rate of as much as 21 percent.

Some voters presumably decided not to vote after receiving ballots, but Stewart said many others most likely tried to vote and were thwarted. “If 20 percent, or even 10 percent, of voters who stood in line on Election Day were turned away,” he wrote in the study, published in The Journal of Legislation and Public Policy, “there would be national outrage.”

The list of very close elections includes the 2008 Senate race in Minnesota, in which Franken’s victory over Coleman, the Republican incumbent, helped give Democrats the 60 votes in the Senate needed to pass President Obama’s health care bill. Franken won by 312 votes, while state officials rejected 12,000 absentee ballots. Recent primary elections in New York involving Republican state senators who had voted to allow same-sex marriage also hinged on absentee ballots.

There are, of course, significant advantages to voting by mail. It makes life easier for the harried, the disabled and the elderly. It is cheaper to administer, makes for shorter lines on election days and allows voters more time to think about ballots that list many races. By mailing ballots, those away from home can vote. Its availability may also increase turnout in local elections, though it does not seem to have had much impact on turnout in federal ones.

Still, voting in person is more reliable, particularly since election administrators made improvements to voting equipment after the 2000 presidential election.

Read the whole story

Expedia's billing changes would hit hoteliers in the bottom line

By Danny King, Travel Weekly

A recently launched Expedia program that enables travelers to pay for their hotel stays at the front desk at the end of their stays could cost hoteliers millions of dollars a year in the form of higher credit card and royalty fees, according to a recent report.

Traditionally, Expedia clients have paid in advance on the online travel agency's website.

But Expedia's Traveler Preference Program, which debuted this summer, lets the client pay at the end of a stay, which could result in about $20 million in collective annual profits being moved from hoteliers to Expedia, according to a report distributed last week by Providence, R.I.-based Hotel Asset Value Enhancement, which manages more than $2 billion worth of hotel assets.

In large part that is because participating hotels will have to pay the credit card fees that had previously been borne by Expedia. Additionally, branded hotels will pay higher royalty fees that will be calculated based on the gross revenue from the Expedia room sale and not on the revenue net of Expedia's commission.

"While the change in structure will not affect what the guest pays in rate, it will have a negative impact on U.S. hotel ownership to the tune of $500 million in real estate value unless concessions by Expedia, brands and managers occur," the report stated.

Expedia, No. 2 on Travel Weekly's 2012 Power List, disputed the report's findings.

The OTA asserted that the study overstated how many guests were likely to move their bookings to the hotel desk, noting that many travelers preferred the convenience and security of paying up front through Expedia.

In addition, said Adam Anderson, Expedia's director of industry relations, many hotels already incur Expedia-booked credit card fees by opting to receive immediate payment from Expedia upon guest checkout instead of waiting for the invoice from Expedia to be paid.

"When a traveler is presented with the choice of how they would like to pay, they are notably more likely to book when compared with travelers only presented with a single option," Anderson said. Bookings through the program "in our test markets show an increase in length of stay by approximately 5 percent," he said.

The report reflects what has long been an uneasy relationship between hoteliers and OTAs, which will account for about 15% of the $114 billion in U.S. hotel revenue generated this year, PhoCusWright estimated in a report late last year.

Hoteliers have said OTAs are the most expensive sales channel. By some estimates, OTAs take about a 25 percent cut in the form of wholesale room discounts and/or commissions, compared with about 10 percent for travel agent bookings through GDSs.

OTAs have countered that their presence boosts overall hotel bookings and that they incur much of the marketing and advertising costs that would otherwise have been borne by hotel operators.

Either way, the issue is especially relevant because Expedia accounts for about 40 percent of the U.S. travel bookings through OTAs, more than twice the next-largest OTA in the U.S., Orbitz.

PhoCusWright director of research Carroll Rheem said that there was some validity to Expedia's claim that some hotels would benefit from the program through additional business from travelers preferring to pay on the back end.

"Some consumers like being able to pay later and upon checkout," Rheem said, adding that hotels benefit further because the revenue is collected sooner and the accounting for the stay is simplified.

Cole: Get rid of blight, be less divisive, increase recreation

Publisher's note: ***This is the last of five Q&A profiles of a South Lake Tahoe City Council candidate running in the Nov. 6 election.***

Name: Hal Cole

Age: 63

How long have you lived in South Lake Tahoe?: 52 years


Hal Cole

Work/volunteer experience: I have owned and operated a successful construction company for over 35 years. I have also served on the City Council, Barton Hospital board of directors, Governing Board of the TRPA and CTC and sat on the city Planning Commission.

Why are you running for City Council?: I love this community and have dedicated the past 20 years to serving in any way I can. I believe my experience and institutional knowledge can be of great benefit as we face the challenges ahead.

What is your vision for South Lake Tahoe, the South Shore and the entire Lake Tahoe Basin?: To truly be a world-class destination resort. In order to accomplish that we must begin serious work on restoring the near shore waters, encourage private investment to help rebuild our infrastructure, make a concerted effort to improve and market our recreational opportunities and build a spirit of partnership within our community.

What are the three best things about South Lake Tahoe?: The sheer beauty of it all, the changing seasons and the feeling of community a small town affords.

What three things would you like to change in South Lake Tahoe and how will you go about changing them?:

1. Encourage the demolition of the blighted buildings lining Highway 50.

Solution: Offer more options for their use and consequently their value. This can be done by changing the restrictions put on the property by the TRPA. For example, if you own a motel and want to remodel or transfer its use to another property, your only option is to build another motel or apartment. If we want to encourage the development of our commercial centers such as the Y, we must allow the freedom to transfer existing development out of areas where they are not profitable and into areas we are trying to develop. Whether the new use is a motel or commercial should be determined by the market and not a document created by bureaucrats.

2. Reduce the divisiveness in our community.

Solution: I think we are making progress. There is more community outreach lately. The city is going into neighborhoods and holding local meetings to get more focused input. Our City Council meetings encourage participation and our council members are open to new ideas. We need less criticism and more participation.

3. I would like to see more emphasis put on recreation for our infrastructure development and our marketing.

Solution: Develop a recreation master plan as I elaborate later.

What would you do to balance the budget?: Probably a more pertinent question would be, “What have you done to balance the budget?” First, a little background. In 2002, when our economy was booming and our revenues were growing, our city had no money in reserve. I was part of the council that decided to build a cash reserve. By 2009 we had close to $14 million. On advice from economic advisors, we also adopted a policy that we would always retain at least 25 percent of our annual operating budget in reserve, enough to run the city for three months. 2008-09 was also the first budget year that the impact of the recession was fully felt. Prior to 2008, we were receiving approximately $30 million in general fund revenues. Today we are getting close to $28 million. To compound matters, our expenses were rising. Two years ago we were facing a $5 million deficit. Today that has been reduced to $500,000 and next budget year (2013-14) we expect to present a balanced budget. This was accomplished a number of ways. Over the past four years we have reduced our labor force by 30 percent (from management to line employees) while minimizing the impact on our core services (police, fire and snow removal). Our employees are now paying their full share of their retirement and we revamped our health insurance. This kind of downsizing is unheard of in the state and could not have been done without having a reserve in place to soften the blow to our community and employees. Property tax revenues have not yet bottomed out, but the slide has slowed and usually the property tax collected lags the economy in general. Our sales tax and TOT are above our projections; signaling what I believe to be the start of a long, slow recovery. While we were reducing expenses, we have been investing money into our infrastructure as seen by Lakeview Commons, the Bonanza Community Park, repaving of our streets and the planned improvements to Harrison Avenue – all of which should enhance our visitors’ experience and restore some of our residents’ faith in the future.

What would you like to see in a recreation master plan?: I would like to see both private and public providers from both states develop the plan with an emphasis on identifying unmet needs and creating recreation programs that can be bundled and marketed (i.e. skiing and ice skating, youth camps, canoeing and guided hiking, etc.)

Promoting recreation was touted two years as a means to stimulate the local economy. Nothing has been done in that time. What will you do so that same sentence can’t be said two years from now?: First of all I strongly disagree with the statement, “Nothing has been done”. The planning and construction of Lakeview Commons is arguably the single biggest recreation project the city has done since the ice rink. We are seeing locals and tourists alike flocking to the beach. Families are enjoying the water, we have hosted paddling events, we have boat launching and canoe rentals. We are in the process of using unspent recreation JPA funds to improve our bike trails and ball fields. I cannot think of a time when we were as focused as we are now on recreation. Recreation is what will define Tahoe’s future.

What types of recreation do you enjoy in Lake Tahoe?: Tennis in the summer, skiing in the winter.

How will South Lake Tahoe be different in four years after the end of your term?: The TRPA Regional Plan will have been adopted and the city will have an approved plan for the Y, incentivizing new investment. We will have continuous sidewalks and bike trail from the Y to Stateline. We will be well on our way for the development of the “56 acres” (the property across highway 50 from Lakeview Commons). Edgewood will be near completion of their project. Harrison Avenue will have a complete renovation complementing Lakeview Commons. Community pride is infectious. Business and homeowners alike will invest in their property.

Being on the council requires working with four others. Give readers an example of how you work well others in difficult situations with differing opinions: I have always prided myself in my ability to listen. I do not like to weigh in on issues until I have heard all sides. The most recent example is the Loop Road. The council heard hours of testimony and was divided on how to proceed. I proposed reopening the process and bringing forward other alternatives to be considered when preparing the environmental documents. Since then we have had a much more open dialogue and I do believe the final outcome will be embraced by a larger majority of our community.

What are your opinions about the following issues and/or entities?:

• **Loop road** – The option proposed was developed in a vacuum. The concern of affected businesses needs to be addressed. Other options need to be considered. Improvements to Highway 50 at Stateline are essential and we need to make sure the investment gives us the most benefit.

• **Hole at Stateline** – The City Council made a huge mistake when they approved the permit in 2007 and allowed the developer to go ahead with only the foundation, with no timetable or financing to complete the project. They also did not require that the property be consolidated into five parcels as required in the development agreement. The consequence has been catastrophic. The foundation now covers most of the 29 separate lots. Any potential buyers have to negotiate with separate lot owners making it impossible to make a single offer. The city has two potential options: take control of the property with eminent domain (something I don’t think any future council will ever do) and market the project or begin abatement action declaring the site a health and safety issue.

• **Tahoe Valley Plan** – This is a prime example of how the TRPA stifles our ability to plan our own community. We spent years on the process. We formed a committee of local businesses and residents and created a vision of what we wanted to see at the Y. I worked with our assistant city manager to codify the various elements of the plan. Our City Council formally approved it. The TRPA then told us that they would not consider any more community plans until they adopted the broader Regional Plan update. Three years later it still has not happened.

• **Giving money to any chamber or tourism bureau** — I have always felt that there is a partnership between the city and the chambers and LTVA. Our pledge was that we would invest in the infrastructure to attract visitors, fill our lodging and shop at our stores as evidenced by the Gondola Village, the ice rink, Lakeview Commons, etc. We have spent millions of dollars on these improvements, often in lieu of other services. In return, we hoped the tourist industry would invest in the marketing of our product. The city cannot afford to do both.

• **Benefits, including pensions, for city staff** — As I mentioned earlier, our employees have agreed through their bargaining units to pay their full share of the retirement (PERS) and have agreed, albeit not without much discomfort, to the revamping of our health insurance. We are one of the few cities in the state of California to achieve such concessions.

• **Tahoe Regional Planning Agency** — For me this issue is a double-edged sword. I was living here as a young child in the early '60s and saw how clear our waters and how unspoiled our beaches were. Left unchecked, unbridled development could have had an even more serious impact. On the other hand, the only way to improve our built and natural environment is to rebuild what is here. The TRPA has done a terrible job at recognizing this and reducing the barriers preventing the redevelopment of our town.

• **Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board** — Again, the goals are lofty, but the reality is slapping us with unfunded mandates that we will never be able to afford. I feel that many times environmental agencies take the "all or nothing" approach. Either comply with all their regulations or be hit with fines or barriers to development. I believe that a small step in the right direction is better than standing still.

• **South Shore Vision Plan** – I have seen many visions and plans presented over the years and they usually fall flat due to lack of financial resources. This plan is the most comprehensive I have seen and one that is likely to proceed. I support it. I vocally offered one suggestion at our joint meeting with Douglas County, and that was lake access is still not fully addressed. Shuttling people to a dropping off point and then having them board a waterborne shuttle to the beach is not the best answer. We need easy to ride shuttles to take them from their lodging to the water. We must realize that they are visiting "Lake Tahoe" and it needs to be all about the lake.

• **Lake Tahoe Airport** – This is one of our most underutilized assets. For certain an airport could not have been built post TRPA. It is here – let's take advantage of it. It has shown its value when our forests are on fire, and it offers an alternative for our visitors to travel here. It has also proven to be an effective alternative for housing our city offices.

Why should voters vote for you over someone else?: We are still in critical times. Running a city like ours requires many skill sets (i.e. police, fire, road maintenance, recreation, land use planning, budgeting, etc.). There are many people who are relatively new to the city and in very critical positions and I believe I offer the balance needed between new ideas and experience.

What is your relationship to Community Athletic Coordinating Council and is being on the recreation joint powers authority

a conflict of interest for you?: I have no affiliation with the C.A.C.C.

Four years ago you said the Tahoe Valley Plan would be done by now. It isn't. Any comment?: Yes, as I mentioned earlier, the city did its due diligence in preparing the plan. It was the TRPA that was unwilling to review it.

Is there a person or business you would not take a campaign contribution from?: I will not accept any contributions from anyone in return for any promises. I am fiercely independent and over the years I'm sure I have made some decisions that have disappointed people who are my most ardent supporters and at times have voted in support of my harshest critics. I have always voted my conscience and always will.

Tell readers something about yourself that they may not already know: Since my early adulthood I have been distrustful and critical of government. I still am. That is the main reason I entered politics.

Officials investigating shredded documents found at

state park

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

The California Department of Parks and Recreation is investigating whether crucial records were destroyed by officials at Ocotillo Wells State Vehicular Recreation Area, an off-roading park in the desert east of San Diego.

Richard Stapler, a spokesman for the California Natural Resources Agency, which oversees the state parks department, confirmed that an investigation is under way at Ocotillo Wells. He also said a new superintendent, Kent Gresham, was put in charge of Ocotillo Wells on Thursday.

“This has all happened just in the past 24 hours,” Stapler said Friday.

State officials declined to give further details Friday, citing the ongoing investigation.

But an administration official who was briefed on the Ocotillo investigation told the *Bee* that it concerned the unauthorized destruction of documents. The source spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to discuss the matter.

The official said that Kathy Dolinar, park superintendent at Ocotillo Wells, was placed on “administrative time off” as of Thursday. In addition, another employee, the park’s administrative officer, had been previously reassigned.

The *Bee* was unable to reach Dolinar for comment.

The investigation was reportedly sparked when, about two weeks ago, custodial staff at Ocotillo Wells found bags of shredded documents in a trash bin and alerted headquarters officials. Destruction of documents would violate a department-wide directive in July ordering parks employees to preserve all records for a larger investigation into financial misconduct.

The episode marks the latest fallout from a scandal in which the state parks department was found in July to have hidden $54 million in two park operating funds. For reasons that remain under investigation, the parks department kept the money secret for years by reporting false balances to the state Department of Finance.

Parks director Ruth Coleman resigned as the scandal unfolded. Numerous other parks officials were either fired or demoted. Separate investigations are under way by the state auditor and attorney general’s office.

Ocotillo Wells is the largest of eight off-roading parks operated by the state Department of Parks and Recreation. Over the past year, the park has also been the source of sexual harassment complaints filed by employees against park supervisors, and a whistle-blower complaint alleging supervisors refused to uphold environmental laws to protect wildlife and habitat.

Carson City woman dies in rollover accident

A Carson City woman died Saturday when she was ejected from her vehicle.

Lynette Lucille Cieri, 63, was traveling west on Mottsville Lane in Douglas County at 5:20pm Oct. 6 when for an unknown reason her Jeep Grand Cherokee entered the north dirt shoulder of Mottsville Lane before re-entering the westbound lane. The vehicle crossed over the double yellow lines before overturning, according to the Nevada Highway Patrol.

Cieri was not wearing her seat belt. Officers said speed appears to be a factor, but it is unknown if alcohol is a factor at this time.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Traditional slot machines likely to vanish from casinos

By Ron Sylvester, Las Vegas Sun

The slot machines you see in casinos today could soon be things of the past.

Not in 20 years, but in five.

Experts predict that the games themselves aren't likely to change. They'll just get more portable, as gaming tries to keep pace with customers used to being entertained by iPads and smartphones.

Instead of players sitting at big banks of slot machines, they'll gamble on iPads installed in restaurants, bars and other parts of the casino, much like video poker screens are today, but portable.

"If we're going to survive, we've got to change the way we do things," Deana Scott, marketing director for casino technology company Acres 4.0, told an audience at last week's Global Gaming Expo, where many of the ideas were discussed. "Over time, what we do now will become obsolete."

For casinos, it's a winning proposition.

First, a $500 iPad is far less expensive than a $22,000 slot cabinet. Second, customers are expected to increasingly demand the speed and convenience they get from their personal devices from casinos.

Casino iPad games already have proven viable in smaller test markets in Northern California, Oregon and Oklahoma. Boutique areas set up by Acres 4.0, such as tapas bars that offer iPad slots, have resulted in the average age of players dropping five years.

In Asia, areas devoted to e-gaming are thriving, casino architect Paul Heretakis said. There, players congregate in stadiums, making bets on iPads while real dealers shuffle and deal cards.

"The cost savings are tremendous," said Heretakis, of Westar Architects, which has designed more than 1,000 casinos, restaurants, retail centers and hotels.

Keno actually was one of the first mobile gaming devices, but it used a pencil and paper instead of a touch screen, said Brett Ewing, an architect who oversees resort design for the Cunningham.

"It allowed people to move around a casino," Ewing said.

That's what a growing segment of gamblers wants.

"No longer do they want to sit in a dark corner like a mushroom," said Steve Waither, vice president of marketing for Aruze Gaming.

In fact, players' feelings of seclusion helped drive people away from gaming in recent years and toward more social venues such as restaurants and nightclubs, which now bring in more revenue than gambling, the experts said.

Moving forward, casinos hope to integrate those types of amenities with gaming.

IGT, for example, used G2E to debut a new menu feature that allows players to bid on buffets and other perks and hotel amenities using players' points. WMS has designed platforms that let players carry over bonuses earned on their personal computers to the casino.

Casinos are developing ways to engage customers on their smartphones as soon as they walk in the door.

Future competition, meanwhile, may not come from gambling companies on the Strip but from technology companies worldwide.

"WMS, IGT and Ballys are seeing their biggest competition from (mobile phone app designer) Zynga and Facebook," said Kevin Parker, also of Acres 4.0.

FBI wants citizens to report government fraud

The FBI wants to help people who think there is public corruption and government fraud going on.

Gina Swankie, the FBI spokeswoman for the Lake Tahoe area who is based in Sacramento, said the alleged bribery involving South Lake Tahoe City Councilwoman Angela Swanson and former pot club owner Gino DiMatteo had nothing to do with issuing the press release.

“It’s more of an initiative because people don’t know where to report things they observe,” Swankie told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The Sacramento office includes 34 California counties: Alpine, Amador, Butte, Calaveras, Colusa, El Dorado, Fresno, Glenn, Inyo, Kern, Kings, Lassen, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, Modoc, Mono, Nevada, Placer, Plumas, Sacramento, San Joaquin, Shasta, Sierra, Siskiyou, Solano, Stanislaus, Sutter, Tehama, Trinity, Tulare, Tuolumne, Yolo and Yuba.

Public corruption, according to the FBI, includes bribery, extortion, embezzlement, racketeering, kickbacks, and money laundering, as well as wire, mail, bank, and tax fraud.

Anyone with information about such activities is urged to call toll free – 855.466.7243. Callers are asked to leave their name, telephone number and a brief description of their concerns and observations. Agents will review voicemail daily and contact individuals as needed.

“While the vast majority of public officials remain committed to the communities they serve, an extremely small minority of individuals usurp their public positions for personal or private gain,” the FBI said in a press release. “The FBI remains dedicated, along with our law enforcement partners, to ensuring this behavior is fully investigated and if necessary, prosecuted under the law.”

– Lake Tahoe News staff report