Seizure of pot operations on the decline in California

By Andrew Becker, California Watch

As California's outdoor marijuana growing season nears its end for 2012, drug officials are reporting a sharp decline in crop seizures for the second year in a row.

The latest figures show that local, state and federal law enforcement agencies are on track to eradicate an estimated 1.5 million plants from outdoor gardens — mostly on public land — down from a decade high of about 7.3 million plants in 2009. This year's seizure total would be the lowest since 2004, when a little more than 1.1 million plants were eradicated, according to federal Drug Enforcement Administration statistics.

Some attribute the drop to a federal crackdown on medical marijuana dispensaries and illegal cultivation on public land, along with political losses in California such as the defeat in 2010 of pro-legalization Proposition 19. At the same time, fewer counter-narcotics teams hunted for California pot this year because of the elimination of a 3-decade-old state eradication program.

Others say growers have retreated to smaller plots on private land and gone back underground. They also point to a glut of marijuana that depressed wholesale prices and burst the state's "green rush" to capitalize on relaxed attitudes toward the drug.

Tommy LaNier, director of the National Marijuana Initiative, a program funded by the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy, said law enforcement officers and agents had a hard time locating marijuana patches this season, even though they spent the same amount of flight time as in years past searching for plants.

“There’s a significant down trend in cultivation activities,” LaNier said. “There’s been a huge impact because of what we’ve been doing the last six years.”

A confluence of other factors might have contributed to fewer plants this year, including improved intelligence gathering and investigative efforts, more tips about illicit marijuana gardens from the public, and concerted efforts to prosecute growers, LaNier said.

He also highlighted the use of intelligence analysts and informants to find marijuana gardens on public land. The U.S. intelligence community has helped track money that moves across the southern border and people who are entering the United States from Mexico who are involved in cultivation, he said.

While more federal attention has turned toward California’s pot industry, the state’s 28-year-old Campaign Against Marijuana Planting did not operate this year. Funding for the program was slashed in 2011, and Gov. Jerry Brown effectively shuttered the state Department of Justice’s Bureau of Narcotic Enforcement, which oversaw the effort and eradication teams in five regions in the state.

In the absence of state funding, a consortium of federal agencies banded together to support the Cannabis Eradication and Reclamation Team, as the new program is known. State Justice Department spokeswoman Michelle Gregory said that as of last week, the program had destroyed 959,144 plants from 215 sites, more than half of which were found on national forestland.

Dale Gieringer, the California coordinator of the National Organization for the Reform of Marijuana Laws, said that other than for a brief period in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the annual eradication campaign didn’t have a huge effect on marijuana production. The same might be true of recent efforts, he said.

Growers have improved their techniques to avoid detection, with some turning to smaller patches and even using Google Earth as a tool to help improve concealment, Gieringer said.

“All I can look at are prices and availability on the ground, and I really haven’t seen any impact,” he said.

As law enforcement has squeezed growers on public land, officials have seen them migrate elsewhere, often to where they can exploit the state’s permissive medical marijuana law, officials said.

“There is other stuff that is happening,” said William Ruzzamenti, who directs the federally funded Central Valley High Intensity Drug Trafficking Area. “My honest opinion is that there was just as much growing this year as last year. But we’re just not getting it.”

Increasingly, growers are moving out of state, to places such as Nevada, southern Utah, Wisconsin and North Carolina, often growing closer to drug markets, he said.

In California, Ruzzamenti said, there’s been a transition from illicit gardens on public land in the Sierra to the valley floor in Fresno and Tulare counties and remote plots on private land in Northern California, where growers operate “under the pretenses of medical marijuana.”

For years, Trinity County, Humboldt County’s eastern neighbor, has attracted growers because of its sparse population and amenable climate. Local law enforcement says the region has seen a recent explosion in marijuana gardens on private land.

“The number of private grows we have is astronomical. It’s a huge problem,” said Chris Compton, a detective with the Trinity County Sheriff’s Department. “It’s not a secret what we have going up here."

Consumers throughout U.S. paying more for water

By Kevin McCoy, USA Today

While most Americans worry about gas and heating oil prices, water rates have surged in the past dozen years, according to a *USA Today* study of 100 municipalities. Prices at least doubled in more than a quarter of the locations and even tripled in a few.

Consumers could easily overlook the steady drip, drip, drip of water rate hikes, yet the cost of this necessity of life has outpaced the percentage increases of some of these other utilities, carving a larger slice of household budgets in the process.

"I don't know how they expect people to keep paying more for water with the cost of gas and day care and everything else going up," complains Jacquelyn Moncrief, 60, a Philadelphia homeowner who says the price hikes would force her to make food-or-water decisions. She gathered signatures on a petition opposing a proposed water rate increase in her city this year.

USA Today's study of residential water rates over the past 12 years for large and small water agencies nationwide found that monthly costs doubled for more in 29 localities. The unique look at costs for a diverse mix of water suppliers representing every state and Washington, D.C. found that a resource long taken for granted will continue to become more costly for millions of Americans. Indeed, rates haven't crested yet because huge costs to upgrade or repair pipes, reservoirs and treatment plants loom nationwide.

Read the whole story

Most Nevadans vote before Election Day

By Suzy Khimm, Washington Post

The first presidential debate hasn't even happened, but voters have already started to cast their ballots this week in Iowa. Thirty-two states and the District of Columbia allow early voting in person without any excuse required, and over the course of October, polls will beginning opening in Ohio, North Carolina, Nevada, and elsewhere, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. In addition, 27 states allow absentee voting by mail before election day without having to provide an excuse. I talked to Paul Gronke, a political scientist at Reed College and early-voting expert, to understand what we can glean from the first ballots cast.

First, Gronke stresses that it's a misconception that most early voters will miss out on all of the debates: In Florida, for instance, early voting doesn't start until Oct. 27, just a week before the election. So while early voting is extremely popular in certain states—in Nevada and Colorado, it accounts for more than two-thirds of the ballots cast—many of these voters will actually be waiting until late October to cast their ballots. Right now, "very few people are actually casting ballots," Gronke says.

What’s more, there are certain voters who are more likely to vote early than others: those who are older and more highly educated, and who tend to be more set in their political beliefs, he adds. So early voters are more likely to be Republican, given the demographic make-up of the GOP’s base, regardless of who will ultimately win the election.

Read the whole story

Douglas County shines light on Vail Resorts as example of public-private partnership

By Anne Knowles

MINDEN — Public-private partnerships, including the commercial use of public lands, dominated the discussion at the 18th annual Critical Issues Conference hosted by the Business Council of Douglas County.

Speakers from both sides of the equation talked about a federal lands bill stuck in the U.S. Senate and the bill passed last year allowing ski resorts to use public lands in the summer, as well as efforts to make Lake Tahoe a ski destination on par with Colorado and Utah.

“We need the private sector to invest and take risks. And we need the public sector to balance regulations and its public service role,” Steve Mokrohisky, Douglas County manager, said at the Sept. 27 event at the Carson Valley Inn in Minden.

Vail Resorts is making a splash at Lake Tahoe, including Northstar COO Bill Rock in 2011 opening Zephyr Lodge. Photo/LTN file

"Vail hasn't succeeded in a vacuum. It's partnered with other public and private entities to make progress," he said, also citing South Shore's other large corporate presence, Edgewood Companies, as a model of cooperation between business and government.

Bill Rock, vice president and chief operating officer of Northstar in Truckee, one of three Tahoe-area ski resorts now owned by Vail Resorts Inc., spoke about plans for Kirkwood, Heavenly and Northstar.

"Kirkwood has been a great addition for us. It's not our typical resort. It's smaller, authentic, has a lot of character," Rock said.

He said the company plans to operate the resort for a year before determining how it will invest in the property. When Vail purchased Kirkwood in February, Blaise Carrig, president of the company's Mountain Division, said Vail liked its existing master plan calling for new lifts and a restaurant at the top of Chair 2.

Investments made at its other Tahoe resorts over the years include the 16,000-square-foot Tamarack Lodge at Heavenly, the 700-seat Zephyr Lodge at Northstar and additional lifts and beefed up snowmaking capabilities. Rock said the company is also known for outspending its competitors on maintenance.

Vail said sales of season passes for the upcoming season were up 17 percent during its year-end financial results announcement on Tuesday. The company doesn't release data on specific resorts or of its two Tahoe passes, the $439 Tahoe Local Pass and the $399 Tahoe Value Pass, which give holders access to all three resorts. Skier visits at its Tahoe resorts during the 2011-12 season were down 22 percent, and down 9 percent at its Colorado venues, due to the dry winter.

Rock also talked about the Ski Area Recreational Opportunity Enhancement Act enacted last year that lets ski resorts located on public lands operate summer commercial enterprises with U.S. Forest Service approval. Vail applied to the USFS two months ago for summer operations at its Vail Mountain resort in Colorado. The plan is called Epic Discovery and includes ziplines, rope swings, an education center, an alpine slide, hiking and mountain bike trails and a guided Segway tour on trails.

Vail is planning something similar for Heavenly including hiking trails.

Rock told *Lake Tahoe News* the company wants to bring more events to Heavenly like the U.S. Freestyle Championships, announced in April, and a yet-to-be announced or scheduled high-roller event that would couple card games with a snowboard competition.

All of this is part of an effort to make Lake Tahoe a ski destination to rival Colorado and Utah, said Rock. He said more work needs to be done to accomplish that, including improving transportation to and from the Reno Tahoe International Airport and inside the basin, and adding more internationally-branded lodging like the Ritz-Carlton at Northstar.

The business council event also included Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., via a recorded video, and Pam Robinson, Heller's state policy director, as well as Rep. Mark Amodei, R-Reno, on a conference call.

Both Nevada officials talked about the need for more availability of public lands for commercial use, citing the so-called Yerington lands bill, which would allow for expanded copper mining in Yerington, resulting in an estimated 800 jobs. The bill passed the House, but has yet to have a hearing in the Senate.

Robinson also said the federal government, which she said creates nine new regulations a day, needs to ease up on business restrictions to help the economy. She also said the senator, who is in a heated campaign to keep his seat and who hosted the recent Lake Tahoe Environmental Summit, is encouraged by changes happening at the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

"One example," said Robinson "is the unanimous vote on the Edgewood project."

Young adult painkiller useage

lowest in a decade

By Donna Leinwand Leger, USA Today

Prescription-drug abuse in the United States declined last year year to the lowest rate since 2002 amid federal and state crackdowns on drug-seeking patients and over-prescribing doctors.

Young adults drove the drop. The number of people 18 to 25 who regularly abuse prescription drugs fell 14 percent to 1.7 million, the National Survey on Drug Use and Health reported Monday. In 2011, 3.6 percent of young adults abused pain relievers, the lowest rate in a decade.

The survey, sponsored by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, collects data from interviews with 67,500 people age 12 and older.

Administrator Pamela Hyde said the decrease in abuse indicates that public health and law enforcement efforts to curb abuse of prescription drugs, such as the powerful painkillers oxycodone and hydrocodone, work.

In 2011, 6.1 million people abused narcotic pain pills, tranquilizers, stimulants and sedatives, down from 7 million people in 2010, the survey found. Pain pill abuse dropped from 2.1 percent of the population in 2009 to 1.7 percent in 2011.

Still, the number of people addicted to pain relievers grew from 936,000 in 2002 to 1.4 million in 2011. About a third of the addicts are 18 to 25, the survey found.

Most states operate prescription-drug monitoring programs, which can identify doctors who prescribe excessive doses of the drugs and patients who seek multiple prescriptions from different doctors, said Gil Kerlikowske, director of the White House Office of Drug Control Policy.

In 2011, 22.5 million Americans 12 or older, nearly 9 percent of the population, said they regularly used illicit drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, heroin, hallucinogens and inhalants or abused prescription drugs, including pain relievers, tranquilizers, stimulants and sedatives. While cocaine abuse has dropped from 2.4 million regular users in 2006 to 1.4 million last year, heroin abuse is rising, the survey found. The number of people who reported regular heroin use grew from 161,000 in 2007 to 281,000 in 2011, the survey found.

Marijuana remains the most commonly abused drug at all ages. Among youth, while drinking and smoking declined, marijuana use grew steadily since 2008, the survey found. Another study, Monitoring the Future, which surveys students in eighth and 10th grades, has also noted increasing marijuana use. That study found that 12.4% of eighth- and 10th-graders had used marijuana in the previous month, the highest rate since 2003.

“Marijuana is still bad news,” Kerlikowske said.

Just 44.8 percent of teens think smoking marijuana is risky, down from 54.6 percent in 2007, he said. Voter initiatives to legalize and regulate marijuana send a message that marijuana is medicine, Kerlikowske said.

“I think they are getting a bad message on marijuana,” he said. “I think that the message that it’s medicine and should be legalized is a bad message.

Ethan Nadelmann, executive director of the Drug Policy Alliance, which advocates legalizing marijuana and treatment over incarceration, says the U.S. should focus on public health initiatives to curb drug use, reduce overdoses and halt the spread of HIV and hepatitis.

“It’s good to see problematic use of alcohol and tobacco among young people continuing to decline – and worth noting that this good news has little to do with arrests, incarceration or mandatory drug testing,” Nadelmann said.

“Contrast this with marijuana use, which has increased somewhat notwithstanding the fact that almost 800,000 people are arrested each year for marijuana possession.”

State Air Resources Board will include El Dorado, Placer counties

By Jim Sanders, Sacramento Bee

The Sacramento region will get a seat on the California Air Resources Board under legislation signed into law by Gov. Jerry Brown this week.

Assembly Bill 146 will expand the ARB from 11 to 12 members, with the new seat reserved for a representative from the Sacramento, Placer, Yolo-Solano, El Dorado or Feather River air districts.

Sacramento Democratic Assemblyman Roger Dickinson, who proposed AB146, noted that the Sacramento region had been the largest major metropolitan area in California not assured a seat on the state air board.

Key duties of the Air Resources Board include controlling vehicle emissions and reducing greenhouse gas emissions as required under landmark legislation passed in 2006.

As part of that mission, the board is about to launch a controversial carbon trading market for allowances to emit greenhouse gases in California.

The Sacramento region has struggled for years to meet federal air quality standards for ozone and particulates, so the issue of representation on the ARB has been particularly acute to local officials.

All ARB members are appointed by the governor and are confirmed by the Senate. Board members serve part time, except for the chair.

Rural counties had opposed Dickinson’s bill, arguing that giving the Sacramento region an ARB seat would exacerbate an imbalance giving urban air districts far more power than rural districts on the board.

Volatile weather changing how California farmers grow food

By Mark Shapiro, California Watch

Ten miles outside of Modesto, in the farming town of Hughson just off Highway 99, the Duarte Nursery is at the front line of dramatic changes now under way in California’s immense agriculture industry.

The family-run nursery, founded in 1976, is one of the largest in the United States, and there’s a good chance the berries, nuts and citrus fruits eaten across the West began their journey to market as seedlings in Duarte’s 30 acres of greenhouses, labs and breeding stations.

The nusery’s owners have built a thriving business using state-of-the-art techniques to develop varieties adapted to the particular conditions and pests California farmers face.

These days, according to John Duarte, president of the nursery, that means breeding for elevated levels of heat and salt, which researchers say are symptoms of climate change – even if Duarte doesn't necessarily see it that way.

"Whether it's carbon built up in the atmosphere or just friggin' bad luck," he said, "the conditions are straining us."

The cause of Duarte's woes might be in dispute among farmers in California's $31 billion agriculture industry. But the symptoms are clear. From the vast fields of fruits and nuts in the Central Valley to the wineries of Napa and Sonoma, the increasingly volatile weather is altering the fundamental conditions for growing food, California's largest industry.

Farmers are in many ways at the front line of climate change. They conjure food from soil, sunlight and water – all of which are profoundly affected, scientists say, by climate change. Stresses have emerged across the state as water supplies tighten. Rain is coming at unexpected times. Winters aren't getting cold enough. And salt from the rising ocean is making its way into Central Valley water.

Climate change already has cost farmers money. In the Central Valley, some growers are paying more for seeds designed to withstand the new extremes.

At the nurseries and colleges in what Duarte calls "the Silicon Valley of agricultural innovation," these changing conditions have forced botanists to look for varieties of almond, pepper, citrus, cherry and other crops resistant to drought and salt.

Other interests also are bracing for dramatic change. The crop insurance industry is calculating potential billion-dollar losses from extreme weather conditions, as well as the floods and fires that occur in their wake. Climate change could join the ranks of earthquake and hurricane insurance as a special – and hugely expensive – problem for insurers.

Over the past 20 years, there has been more than $500 million in crop losses from heat waves, floods and ill-timed rainstorms in the heavily agricultural counties of San Joaquin, Merced, Kings, Kern, Napa and Sonoma, according to a study last year by a team of Stanford University researchers.

“Compared to 20 or 30 years ago, farmers are recognizing a lot more risk factors in climate events,” said Jeff Yasui, director of the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Risk Management Agency office in California, which handles crop insurance in the state.

Climate and agriculture scientists predicted much of this. Charles Kolstad, an environmental economist at UC Santa Barbara, said California agriculture is being hit with a trifecta of converging forces prompted by climate change: longer seasons of extreme heat, shorter cold seasons and dwindling water supplies.

Yields of key crops are expected to drop significantly over the coming decades as climate change alters these growing conditions, according to a report Kolstad co-wrote for the state Environmental Protection Agency and Energy Commission and published last fall in the peer-reviewed journal Climatic Change.

Climate scientists believe the Earth’s average temperature will rise at least 2 degrees in the next four decades – their most conservative estimate. Along the way, the yields of citrus crops in the San Joaquin Valley are expected to drop about 18 percent, grapes about 6 percent, and cherries and other orchard crops about 9 percent.

Those crops – accustomed to the cooler edges of California’s climate – are showing declining yields already, according to the USDA's National Agricultural Statistics Service. That could mean higher prices for consumers as the supply shrinks. This summer's record droughts in the Midwest also prompted the USDA to predict a similar rise in prices driven by devastated yields for corn and soybeans, the primary food for chicken and cattle nationwide.

Kolstad and other scientists have focused on tree-based perennial crops because they are fixed in 25- to 30-year cycles and cannot easily be adapted to changing conditions. Switching a tree orchard from cherries, for example, to more heat-tolerant pistachios, avocados or tangerines can cost millions of dollars before the trees start bearing marketable fruit.

If California's water crisis persists, seasonal vegetables and fruits also will be dramatically affected. Some already are.

Much of the southern Central Valley, spreading along either side of Interstate 5, is now a patchwork of fallow fields, according to Gayle Holman with the Westlands Water District in Fresno. Thousands of acres that once grew onions, tomatoes, melons and other crops have been set aside by farmers because they can no longer obtain, or afford, water – a scarcity, scientists say, that is significantly due to the dramatic shifts in the timing of rainfalls in the state.

Those grower cutbacks are felt most acutely in Central Valley towns like Mendota, where farm workers can no longer find the seasonal fieldwork upon which they once relied. Official unemployment in the area ranges between 15 and 20 percent. Studies by the state's Employment Development Department show an inverse correlation between water allocations and unemployment in the valley: The water supply goes down, and the unemployment rate goes up.

One problem, then another

Like just about everything having to do with climate change, the consequences unfold like a sequence of trapdoors. First, there’s the temperature, a jagged progression over the past decade of unusual highs and lows occurring at times of the year that can debilitate growing crops.

Then there’s the water. California’s water sources are caught in a pincer: More water is needed at a time when less water is being delivered into the network of canals carrying it from the north to the agricultural regions in the south.

A precipitous drop in snowfall has led to declining water runoff in the San Joaquin and Sacramento rivers in the spring and summer months, when it’s central to irrigation in the valley. Over the past century, the state Department of Water Resources has measured a steady 10 percent decline in runoff from April to July. In recent years, however, the rate has accelerated to as much as 20 percent during those critical months.

For the three years between 2006 and 2009, the runoff amounted to the equivalent of two “normal” years, according to John Leahigh, chief of operations planning for the California State Water Project.

In fact, such calculations appear to be the new normal. This year, Sacramento Delta water supplies are not expected to come anywhere close to filling the irrigation needs of Central Valley farmers.

In February, the Department of Water Resources cut the delivery of water to valley farmers from 60 to 50 percent of their allotment – a practically unprecedented reduction that late in the growing season, according to Leahigh.

Parts of the valley supplied by the federal water project have been cut even more severely, to 30 percent of their normal allotment.

Farmers in the valley generally blame the drop-off in water on the 2007 state Supreme Court decision affirming the need for water to preserve Pacific smelt and other endangered species.

A study by the Public Policy Institute of California, however, concludes that the roughly 300,000 acre-feet of water diverted to comply with the Endangered Species Act constitutes no more than 15 to 20 percent of the reduced water flow to the valley.

Rather, the overall pool of water is shrinking.

“There’s less water coming into the system,” said Francis Chung, chief of the Modeling Support Branch for the Department of Water Resources. “The water that used to exist is now coming earlier in the year. So there’s less water to distribute (to the valley) during the summer.”

Rising sea levels threaten water supply

Another growing problem has been rising sea levels associated with climate change. The San Francisco Bay, according to a recent assessment by the National Academies of Sciences, is projected to rise by as much as 18 inches, and potentially triple that by the end of the century. Those inches translate into waves of new salt sources lapping into the delta.

Less water channeled into the delta from the Sierra means less available freshwater to dilute the onrush of salt, which has been pushing steadily eastward.

For each foot in sea level, 200,000 acre-feet of freshwater, known as “carriage water,” is needed to hold the line on the saltwater. That amounts to one-fifth the volume of Folsom Lake each year, according to Chung, and the diversions will only increase as the sea level rises.

A study by UC Davis estimates that if salinity continues to rise at the current rate, by 2030, the financial costs to the Central Valley could be huge: as much as $1 billion to $1.5

billion a year in decreased agricultural activity, amounting to some 27,000 to 53,000 jobs lost.

Over the next 40 years, salinity is expected to increase by 4 to 26 percent, depending on the time of year, at the two water-pumping stations outside of Tracy. From there, most of the water destined for the valley is sent southward, according to a study by the Public Policy Institute of California and the Center for Watershed Sciences at UC Davis.

Ellen Hanak, senior policy fellow at the institute, explained that inside the delta, the network of waterways helps to dilute the salt content. But in the Central Valley, she said, there’s not enough freshwater to reduce the salt’s impact. That’s partly the result of farmers using more targeted irrigation to reduce waste; they no longer have the excess spillover to mix with the salt.

“There’s no drainage,” she said. “They can’t get rid of it.”

As freshwater supplies decrease, the decisions over how to use it are likely to become even more difficult.

“Water used to push the ocean back is water not used for agriculture,” said Tara Smith, an analyst and water modeling expert for the Department of Water Resources.

In other words, the liquid barricade needed to hold back the ocean is drawn from a dwindling amount of freshwater. The reduction in allocations issued by the water board in February means that more water is necessary to hold back the advancing Pacific Ocean and push the saltwater intrusion westward.

“We’re going to have to keep reducing the volume of exports from the delta because of the increased volume needed of carriage water,” said Chung at the Department of Water Resources.

Nevertheless, 40 railroad cars’ worth of salt — about 500,000 tons a year – flow daily out of the delta into the fields of the Central Valley. That adds extra salt to valley soils already made salty by the intensive pumping of groundwater from what millions of years ago was the ocean floor.

Daniel Cozad, executive director of the Central Valley Salinity Coalition, a group of local farmers, businessmen and government officials, said some farmers in the western valley are being forced to adapt by switching from salt-sensitive crops like strawberries and avocados to less sensitive – and less profitable – crops like alfalfa and wheat.

“Unfortunately,” Cozad said, “the higher the value of the crop, the more sensitive it is to salt.”

Tahoe City visionaries talking about overhauling the town

By Kathryn Reed

TAHOE CITY – A hotel where Safeway is as well as one along the golf course. Residences above street level businesses. Side streets with commercial offerings instead of just along the highway. Expanded recreation. Improved public transit.

Those are some of the visions a group of business owners and others have for Tahoe City. Their vision was unveiled at a standing-room-only meeting of more than 80 people on Sept. 27 at Granlibakken resort.

“For me, things have changed a lot,” Douglas Dale, who has owned Wolfdale’s restaurant for 34 years, said. Mostly the change is in the winter. “I can barely break even, if I do. The mousetraps of Squaw Valley and Northstar have done us in.”

This is one vision for a section of Tahoe City. Rendering/Design Workshop

Skiers are staying at those resorts in the winter and no longer venture into Tahoe City.

It also didn’t help that when the villages opened they lured Tahoe City businesses to their locations with the promise of free rent — some for a year. Then when the rents were established they kept going up and many of those original Tahoe City businesses are nowhere to be found. But what can be found are empty storefronts in the villages and in town.

Some of the visuals that were presented on easels Thursday night portrayed a Tahoe City larger and more developed than what exists now. A connectivity, though, between the sectors, with more open space and access to Lake Tahoe were also illustrated.

One of the goals would be to tap into what is expected to be an overhaul of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency’s Regional Plan — which is expected to be adopted later this year — to allow for mixed uses and increased building height.

“What gets our dander up is high-rises on the lake. That is the difference between us and the South Shore,” Mary Cushing said.

Sue Daniels, a Realtor in Tahoe City, told the group, “There is a myth in society that bigger is better. It’s important to keep that in mind. Our population is much, much larger than it was in the 1960s. Yes, it’s gone down since the 1980s. This has happened across the nation. We can fix this town without five stories on the lake.”

She was one of several people who took issue with the speakers saying more lake access is crucial, but then said it might be for the tourists via a hotel room.

Richard Shaw, who works out of the Aspen office of Design Workshop, was at the meeting to explain some of the concepts that have been developed. (He is also the main man at Design Workshop behind the South Shore vision process.)

He said the primary challenges facing Tahoe City are:

• Almost the whole downtown is built on a stream environmental zone;

• Decline in full-time residents;

• No hotel rooms in the prime areas where tourists want to be;

• Decline in market share;

• Small parcels have multiple owners.

Dale, along with Roger Kahn whose family ran Porters Sports for years, Brendan Madigan of Alpenglow Sports, Gary Davis of Gary Davis Engineers, Wally Auerbach of Auerbach Engineers and Steve Hoch, executive director of the Tahoe City Downtown Association, were the primary speakers during the more than two-hour high-energy gathering.

Business owners, TCDA, Tahoe City Public Utility District and North Lake Tahoe Resort Association hired Design Workshop for about $35,000 to help develop a vision for the North Shore community.

Business reps pointed to the large amount of public money spent on improving aspects of town – like Commons Beach, bike trails and other infrastructure, but admitted the private sector has not done its part to reinvest in the community.

It was said many times at the Thursday meeting how Tahoe City does not want to resemble present day South Shore, or either of the villages at Squaw or Northstar. But it was also clear that a consensus on what the future of this town of 1,557 should look like was not going to be decided at one meeting. (The population, according the U.S. Census Bureau dropped 11.6 percent from the 1,761 in 2000 to the 2010 figure.)

It was also stressed that what was being talked about was a vision, not a plan. And it was reiterated that more meetings, discussions, input and other visions are being sought.

The North Lake Tahoe Resort Association expects to have information about the vision on its website.

Nevada lawmaker who wanted TRPA disbanded changes mind

By Ed Vogel, Las Vegas Review Journal

CARSON CITY – A state legislator who helped lead the effort to pull Nevada out of the bi-state agency that controls planning and growth at the pristine Lake Tahoe has changed his mind.

After meeting with California legislators, state Sen. John

Lee, D-North Las Vegas, said he does not believe that it is necessary for Nevada to drop out of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

“I see no reason pulling out of TRPA if we continue in the fashion we now have,” Lee said in a telephone conversation Thursday.

During the 2011 session, Lee and Sen. James Settelmeyer, R-Minden, authored Senate Bill 271, which calls for the governor to pull Nevada out of the TRPA in 2015 unless the planning agency revises its regional plan, ends a supermajority voting requirement, and considers the effects of changing economic conditions at the lake.

A legislative committee was appointed to meet with their counterparts in California and prepare a report for the governor. Gov. Brian Sandoval, a former TRPA member, signed the bill.

Lee said he was concerned that decisions by the TRPA and the threat of lawsuits from the League to Save Lake Tahoe were blocking any type of development at the lake.

“People were blocked even from putting in new asphalt in their driveways,” Lee said. “We want to do things that make the lake economically vibrant.”

Lee said local government agencies were not asserting any control over housing and commercial development at the lake.

“Every time the TRPA did something, the league threatened to sue so they abandoned their powers. The TRPA should not be the building department for the lake,” he said.

He said California legislators were not entirely aware of the problems Nevada faced in economic development at Lake Tahoe, but now they have put together a bi-state group to iron out concerns.

Lee was defeated in the June primary election by Patricia Spearman. Since he won't be in the Legislature in 2013, he said Settelmeyer will take the report to Sandoval that Nevada should remain in the TRPA, the bi-state agency that oversees much of the land use and environmental matters involving property surrounding Lake Tahoe.

Lee served as chairman of the legislative committee dealing with Lake Tahoe matters, while Settelmeyer was the chair of the three-member delegation assigned to meet with California.

Although the Tahoe pullout bill was approved by nine of the 11 state senators and passed the Assembly 28-14, Lee came under fire from environmental groups during his re-election battle for backing it.

Emails between Reid, Heller reveal how poker efforts deteriorated

By Karoun Demirjian, Las Vegas Sun

WASHINGTON — The online poker bill-making process has never been pretty. But a collection of emails released by Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid's chief of staff Friday reveals an especially brambled picture of what has kept legislation crucial for Nevada's biggest industry on ice for so long.

The story framed by the emails is one of missed opportunities and broken promises. At its heart, it's also a story of a tenuous partnership between the Senate's top dog and its freshest pup, Reid and Republican Sen. Dean Heller.

The pair also are at each other's throats over a Nevada election that could determine who controls the Senate next year.

Reid's adversaries contend the account Reid's staff has put forward is at best incomplete and designed to be politically misleading.

The emails were released Friday when Reid's chief of staff, David Krone, summoned Las Vegas media to his office in the Capitol to, as he put it, show them what is really going on with the long-stalled legislation that would both legalize online poker and halt a proliferation of other kinds of Internet gambling being considered by other states.

Krone's decision to share the emails comes during an increasingly bitter finger-pointing feud in which Reid has accused Heller of failing to deliver Republican votes he had promised and Heller has accused Reid of contorting facts and irresponsibly politicizing an issue of vital importance to Nevada.

"I am not going to let Dean Heller go out there and call Harry Reid a liar," said Krone, who has never spoken about poker publicly. "I want to tell my side of the story."

To make his case, Krone shared a raft of emails detailing exchanges between him and Mac Abrams, Heller's former chief of staff, who has been running Heller's Senate campaign since May 1. The emails were sent between May and September.

Read the whole story