Temblor rolls through North Lake Tahoe

People on the North Shore of Lake Tahoe were shaking Friday night when a 4.2 earthquake was recorded at 8:42pm.

The epicenter was near Incline Village.

Six aftershocks ranging from 1.4 to 2.1 had been recorded by the U.S. Geological Service as of 10:46pm June 22.

People as far away as Sacramento felt the quake.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Husband of deceased S. Tahoe woman commits suicide

A death in South Lake Tahoe on Friday is related to the homicide on Wednesday.

South Tahoe officers found Aaron Fisher, 41, hanging from a tree behind the Raley’s near Stateline. He is the husband of Lyar Fisher-Bomediano, 43, of South Lake Tahoe who was found dead in the Lone Pine Lodge near the state line on June 20.

An autopsy on June 22 revealed her death was a homicide. Police Chief Brian Uhler told *Lake Tahoe News* it looks like asphyxiation was the cause.

How long she may have been dead is not being released, though it’s possible it could have been at least 36 hours.

Officers discovered Fisher-Bomediano’s body when the hotel manager asked for a welfare check because they heard a baby crying. The 2-year-old was reported dehydrated and lying next to his mother. The child is in the care of Child Protective Services. His parents are now both dead.

Fisher, according to reports, may have tried to take his life on the morning before his wife’s body was found. He drove off the road near Emerald Bay the morning of June 19, but survived. He was arrested on driving under the influence charges, but was released about 90 minutes after his wife’s body was discovered.

— Kathryn Reed

Study: Nevada pension plan receives low marks

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – The financial health of Nevada’s public employee pension plan is cause for serious concern because it is only 70 percent funded as of fiscal year 2010 with a $10 billion gap, a national organization reported this week.

The Pew Center on the States said the funding ratio in Nevada is below the 80 percent benchmark that fiscal experts recommend for a sustainable program.

In 2010, Nevada paid 92 percent of the recommended contribution to its pension plans and just 21 percent of what the state should have paid to fund retiree health benefits, the study found.

Nevada’s “serious concerns” grade for its pension plan is the lowest of three in the new Pew report released Monday, which examines the solvency of public pension plans across the nation. The state received a better “needs improvement” grade on the retiree health care issue. The top ranking is “solid performer.”

Dana Bilyeu, executive officer of Nevada’s Public Employees’ Retirement System, said that while she respects the Pew center’s efforts to calculate the national pension liability, the heavy reliance on the funding ratio for the state scores presents an incomplete picture.

“Nevada has always made its payments,” she said. “Both the employers and the public employees themselves. And to me that is the single best measure for determining if a pension plan is in trouble.”

Nevada’s contribution rates are based on an analysis by an independent actuary, and are fully paid each year despite the Pew report findings, Bilyeu said. Some other states take “pension holidays” where they defer contributions to their pensions, yet they have better grades in the study because of higher funding ratios, she said.

“I just disagree that the single driver of the score is the funding ratio,” Bilyeu said. “I have made this comment to Pew in the past but it has not made it into their methodology.”

The new report notes that the Nevada Legislature in 2009 made some reforms to the plan, which covers nearly all state and local government public sector workers, including raising the retirement age for newly hired workers to 62.

Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval has advocated for a change to the pension plan for future workers from a defined benefit to a 401(k)-style defined contribution plan. Defined contribution plans eliminate any unfunded fiscal liability for states. The 2011 Legislature took no action on the issue but it is expected to resurface in 2013.

Nationally public pension plans lost more ground in the new study, called “The Widening Gap Update.”

“States continue to lose ground in their efforts to cover the long-term costs of their employees’ pensions and retiree health care due to continued investment losses from the financial crisis of 2008 and states’ inability to set aside enough each year to adequately fund their retirement promises,” the report said.

“States have responded with an unprecedented number of reforms that, with strong investment gains, may improve the funding situation they face going forward, but continued fiscal discipline and additional reforms will be needed to put states back on a firm footing,” the report said.

In fiscal year 2010, the gap between states’ assets and their obligations for public sector retirement benefits was $1.38 trillion, up nearly 9 percent from fiscal year 2009. Of that figure, $757 billion was for pension promises, and $627 billion was for retiree health care.

The Pew report said that more than half the states’ pension plans were fully funded in 2000. By 2010 only Wisconsin was fully funded, and 34 were below the 80 percent threshold – up from 31 in 2009 and just 22 in 2008.

Another group is questioning, however, whether the Pew study is actually understating the financial risk facing taxpayers because of the underfunded public pension plans.

Bob Williams, president of State Budget Solutions (SBS), a nonprofit organization advocating for fundamental reform of state budgets, said the Pew Center report understates the real funding gap for public pension plans.

The actual number for unfunded state and municipal pensions is greater than $4 trillion, he said in a statement issued today.

“The most dangerous deception in the Pew report is the failure to not recognize that public pension funds are putting more taxpayer and worker money into riskier investments,” Williams said. “Ignoring this will set taxpayers up for a bigger catastrophe in the future.”

“State Budget Solutions urges elected officials to understand the full scope of our nation’s pension crisis,” he said. “It is vital that pension reform be based on actual numbers instead of Pew’s optimistic outlook.”

Other analyses of the country’s public pension plans, including those by the American Enterprise Institute, put the unfunded liability at much higher levels than the Pew report.

Williams said in a telephone interview that the last time Nevada’s pension liability was calculated by the organization, it was closer to $33.5 billion, not the $10 billion reported by Pew.

The public pension crisis will be worse than Enron, he said.

“Most of the reforms in the states have addressed new hires,” he said. “They should end the defined benefit program for everyone and switch to defined contribution. It’s the only way out of the system. When you’re in a hole you have to stop digging, and most states aren’t willing to do that.”

South Lake Tahoe attorney going to prison for 3 years

South Lake Tahoe attorney Alfred Nash Villalobos was sentenced Thursday to three years in prison.

The 46-year-old could have been sent away for 30 years after being convicted in August 2011 on federal extortion and obstruction of justice charges.

Villalobos is the son of Alfred J.R. Villalobos of Stateline, a former director on the board of the California Public Employees' Retirement System. The elder Villalobos faces his own legal troubles involving CalPERS and bribery.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

California may change rules for fire retardants

By David Siders, Sacramento Bee

Gov. Jerry Brown urged state regulators this week to reduce the prevalence of chemical flame retardants in household furniture, joining a growing number of critics who argue the chemicals are toxic and unnecessary.

"Toxic flame retardants are found in everything from high chairs to couches and a growing body of evidence suggests that these chemicals harm human health and the environment," the Democratic governor said in a prepared statement. "We must find better ways to meet fire safety standards by reducing and eliminating – wherever possible – dangerous chemicals."

The directive follows the defeat last year of legislation that would have let furniture manufacturers avoid using chemical flame retardants in their products by providing an alternative test for meeting state fire prevention standards.

Opponents of the legislation, including the chemical industry-backed Citizens for Fire Safety Institute, said the bill would increase the risk of fire and weaken safety standards they characterize as among the strongest in the United States.

On Monday, the group issued a statement saying its members "welcome any public stakeholder review process of such an important issue."

The author of last year's failed bill, Sen. Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, said Brown's intervention "definitely shifts the debate."

Read the whole story

Report: Replanting in Angora on CTC property a success

By Kathryn Reed

With some areas of the Angora burn having lost 100 percent of its trees, human assistance was needed to restore what a human was ultimately responsible for destroying.

Replanting of mostly Jeffery pines was what the California Tahoe Conservancy chose. The state agency owns about 90 acres of the nearly 3,100 acres that burned in the June 2007 fire. Of those, 40 acres had nothing left.

Mastication of trees like what the USFS did is also the approach the CTC took on some of its land in the Angora burn area. Photo/LTN file

Susie Kocher with the UC Cooperative Extension gave an update June 20 to the California Tahoe Conservancy board about the 40 acres that endured the high intensity fire.

Kocher explained how the loss was much greater than what a natural fire would have left behind. The Angora Fire whipped through the North Upper Truckee area on June 24 five years ago after an illegal campfire was not properly extinguished at Seneca Pond. Ultimately, it destroyed 254 houses.

While the forest is showing resiliency, Kocher informed the board that it would be 60 years before the forest returns to what the average person would call a forest. For now, the seedlings that were planted are just a few inches tall.

About 130 trees have been planted per acre. In addition to the Jeffery, sugar pines are the other primary species. Some incense cedar has been planted, but they are not thriving.

This is because they prefer shade and right now it's direct sunlight in the burn.

Kocher has been studying the recovery process on the CTC acreage since the first analysis of the burn was conducted in July 2007. A report was released this year about the restoration, with Wednesday's meeting at Inn by the Lake being the first time the board heard the information.

"Where there has not been planting, there are very (few) trees coming back," Kocher told the board.

Larry Sevison, chairman of the CTC board and Placer County supervisor, questioned whether the 86 tons of fuel load per acre was going to create a fire hazard.

Kocher said even though mulch from the masticated trees along with limbs are on the forest floor, the alternative would be leave the charred trees standing. Those would eventually fall, be in larger pieces and create more of a fire threat.

"Though the fire risk cannot be calculated at this time as computer models do not accurately predict wildfire behavior in masticated fuels, it is generally accepted that masticated fuels burn with lower flame lengths than natural fuels and are more difficult to ignite because compaction impedes the fire's access to oxygen," according to the preliminary assessment report of restoring CTC lands post-Angora that was prepared by Kocher and Daylin Wade of the CTC.

Kocher told the board when it comes to leaving the mulch, "It's a trade off between erosion control and fire risk, but I can't tell you how much."

Norma Santiago, CTC board member and El Dorado County supervisor, questioned the threat of the white thorn growing in the burn area.

While Kocher called it a "fire adaptive species", she said there is less of the prickly bush in the treated areas.

Overall, Kocher said the treatments applied to the Conservancy land have been effective. She said the ultimate goal of creating a healthy forest is on track five years after the flames whipped through the area.

Underemployed, underpaid lost in recession

By Michael Cooper, New York Times

Throughout the Great Recession and the not-so-great recovery, the most commonly discussed measure of misery has been unemployment. But many middle-class and working-class people who are fortunate enough to have work are struggling as well, which is why Sherry Woods, a 59-year-old van driver from Atlanta, found herself standing in line at a jobs fair this month, with her résumé tucked inside a Bible.

She opened it occasionally to reread a favorite verse from Philippians: “And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ.”

Woods’s current job has not been meeting her needs. When she began driving a passenger van last year, she earned $9 an hour and worked 40 hours a week. Then her wage was cut to $8 an hour, and her hours were drastically scaled back. Last month she earned just $233. So Ms. Woods, who said that she had been threatened with eviction for missing rent payments and had been postponing an appointment with the eye doctor because she lacks insurance, has been looking for another, better job. It has not been easy.

“I’m looking for something else, anything else,” she said. “More hours. Better pay. Actual benefits.”

These are anxious days for American workers. Many, like Woods, are underemployed. Others find pay that is simply not keeping up with their expenses: adjusted for inflation, the median hourly wage was lower in 2011 than it was a decade earlier, according to data from a forthcoming book by the Economic Policy Institute, “The State of Working America, 12th Edition.” Good benefits are harder to come by, and people are staying longer in jobs that they want to leave, afraid that they will not be able to find something better. Only 2.1 million people quit their jobs in March, down from the 2.9 million people who quit in December 2007, the first month of the recession.

“Unfortunately, the wage problems brought on by the recession pile on top of a three-decade stagnation of wages for low- and middle-wage workers,” said Lawrence Mishel, the president of the Economic Policy Institute, a research group in Washington that studies the labor market. “In the aftermath of the financial crisis, there has been persistent high unemployment as households reduced debt and scaled back purchases. The consequence for wages has been substantially slower growth across the board, including white-collar and college-educated workers.”

Now, with the economy shaping up as the central issue of the presidential election, both President Obama and Mitt Romney have been relentlessly trying to make the case that their policies would bring prosperity back. The unease of voters is striking: in a New York Times/CBS News poll in April, half of the respondents said they thought the next generation of Americans would be worse off, while only about a quarter said it would have a better future.

Read the whole story

Former Placerville mayor resigns from City Council

By Carlos Alcalá, Sacramento Bee

Former Placerville Mayor Dave Machado has resigned his seat on the City Council, effective immediately.

Machado has been under a legal cloud since the El Dorado County District Attorney filed felony and misdemeanor charges against him in August, when he was still mayor.

Machado submitted his resignation Tuesday, addressed to City Manager Cleve Morris. It became public Wednesday.

The resignation is not at all related to the charges he faces, Machado said Wednesday by phone.

“The district attorney thinks I’ve done something wrong,” he said, “not the city.”

In his resignation letter, Machado referred to his real estate activities.

Read the whole story

Leaders recognize importance of tourism on global economy

By Travel News

World leaders at the G20 summit in Mexico have for the first time recognised the importance of tourism as a driver of jobs, growth and economic recovery.

The Leaders' Declaration from the annual meeting, this year held in Los Cabos, stated: "We recognise the role of travel and tourism as a vehicle for job creation, economic growth and development, and, while recognising the sovereign right of States to control the entry of foreign nationals, we will work towards developing travel facilitation initiatives in support of job creation, quality work, poverty reduction and global growth."

Paddleboarding is a growing draw for tourists and locals in Lake Tahoe. Photo/LTN

This is the first time that tourism has been included in the G20 Leaders' Declaration and is the culmination of long-term efforts by the industry, led by WTTC and UNWTO, to encourage world leaders to see the potential of tourism to create millions of new jobs and billions of dollars of GDP.

According to WTTC the industry directly will contribute $2 trillion in GDP and 100 million jobs to the global economy in 2012.

When the wider economic impacts of the industry are taken into account, tourism is forecast to contribute some $6.5 trillion to the global economy and generate 260 million jobs – or one in 12 of all jobs on the planet.

Research by UNWTO and WTTC, released at the T20 Ministers Meeting last May, showed that the G20 could boost their international tourist numbers by an additional 122 million, generate an extra US$ 206 billion in tourism exports and create over five million additional jobs by 2015 by improving visa processes and entry formalities.

Read the whole story

Second home buyers finding deals

By Sarah Max, CNN Money

This winter, when temperatures outside his home in upstate New York were dipping into the single digits, Larry Posselt, a small-business owner and father of three, paid $99,000 in cash for a three-bedroom, three-bath Florida townhouse eight miles from Disney World.

After years of decline, “prices in the area were starting to trend up," says Posselt. His new vacation home, which sold for $270,000 in 2006, should earn enough rent to pay for itself in less than five years.

While the real estate market as a whole is still weak, realtors in vacation-home hotspots say that many people, like Posselt, can no longer resist the lure of a second-home deal.

"Buyers who were on the fence are going for it," says Lake Tahoe area agent Brandon Yee.

With rates and prices still low, jumping in can make sense as long as you know the place is one you'll want to return to year after year and you can collect the amount of rental income you need. Take these steps to make sure.

Some vacation-home markets are on the cusp of recovery, which may not yet be reflected in sales prices. Ask a local realtor to calculate the supply of homes available now and six months ago by dividing the number of listings by the average number sold in the previous 12 months. If that number has shrunk, prices are likely to head up soon, says Ketchum, Idaho, real estate broker Dan Gorham.

Also keep in mind that home prices in vacation destinations often rise and fall alongside their nearby major markets. If the economy is improving in San Francisco, for example, that bodes well for Lake Tahoe.

Read the whole story