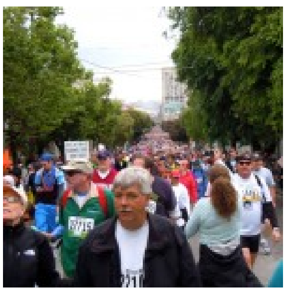
Study: Sweeping changes needed to deal with U.S. obesity problem

By Melissa Healy, Los Angeles Times

They sifted through about 800 programs to prevent and fight obesity—to find the ones most likely to counter the nation's growing girth. In the end, a panel of independent experts asserted that only by implementing many of those initiatives at once can the nation make real progress.

Reversing the nation's "obesogenic," or fat-promoting, culture will require sweeping changes across all aspects of daily life, "modifying factors that shape individual choices and incidental behaviors," the Institute of Medicine concluded in a report issued Tuesday. Changing circumstances in one sphere of an individual's life to counter the problem without instituting changes in all spheres of life will set the nation up for failure—and for a future of rising healthcare bills, shorter lifespans and sicker, unhappier people—the report said.



If more people participated in activities like the Bay to Breakers, maybe obesity

would be less
of a problem.
Photo/LTN file

The panel recommended that schools position themselves as gateways to obesity prevention, ensuring that children get at least an hour of physical activity daily, barring access to foods and beverages high in calories, and offering all students healthful, nutritious foods and instruction in the fundamentals of healthful eating and living.

Read the whole story

Nevada may be losing tourist dollars with anti-gay marriage law

By Mark Robison, Reno Gazette-Journal

Actions by Nevada voters in 2000 and 2002 are costing the state tourism dollars now and may for decades to come.

The state’s constitutional ban on marriage by same-sex couples may also cost Nevada its reputation as the marriage capital of the world.

It’s possible that Nevada’s voters find same-sex marriage a bigger threat than a faltering tourism industry, but if we prefer to strengthen our tourist trade, then time is running short.

For decades, Nevada has been ahead of the rest of the country on marriage and divorce.

Other states required blood tests, waiting periods or both before couples could marry. Nevada didn’t get in the way of love, however impulsive.

And divorce, too. Other states made divorce onerous and only doable for certain narrow reasons. Nevada said almost any excuse could be given for divorce – with no proof – if only you lived here for a few weeks.

Women and men took up temporary residence here, bringing money they spent at casinos, hotels, bars and “divorce ranches.” Arthur Miller famously stayed at Pyramid Lake Ranch until his divorce could be final so he could marry Marilyn Monroe.

The state moved away from its reputation as being more libertarian than the rest of the nation with regard to marriage when voters in 2000 and 2002 overwhelmingly approved adding a sentence to Nevada’s constitution: “Only a marriage between a male and female person shall be recognized and given effect in this state.”

At the time, supporters said they worried that someday schools might teach children that homosexual relationships are moral and that Nevada would have to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states – never mind that Nevada once benefited from other states having to recognize the unconventional, quickie marriages performed here.

Read the whole story

STPUD board expected to

increase sewer, water rates

By Kathryn Reed

With the percentage of protests to the proposed sewer and water hikes in single digits, the South Tahoe Public Utility District board can go forward with raising rates.

On the May 17 agenda is an item to raise sewer rates by 5 percent and water by 2 percent. At the May 10 budget hearing the board did not request staff to come up with another scenario. However, the board can vote for these rate increases, any lower percentage or for no increase.

About 15 people attended last week’s budget session, with a handful of people speaking and others asking questions from their seats. Several people were concerned about the changes for metered water customers. The proposal is to increase the base rate and decrease the rate based on usage.

“It is still less than the flat rate. We have never argued at all that this law is equitable. It is not,” South Tahoe PUD spokesman Dennis Cocking told *Lake Tahoe News*. “California is famous for the law of unintended consequences and this is one of them.”

The state is mandating water districts have meters in by 2025, but did not provide a funding mechanism to purchase them or get them installed. That means districts throughout the state have people on meters and some who aren’t. With this comes water rates that are not the same for all customers because the state mandates metered customers be billed with a usage component.

The entire 2012-13 STPUD budget, which takes effect July 1, is on Thursday’s agenda. For now, employees are not getting a salary increase or having a change to health benefits. This is because negotiations are ongoing.

"Our goal is to have a new contract by July 1. I don't know at this time if we will be able to hit that deadline," CFO Paul Hughes told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The board will have to approve any contract. If monetary issues were part of the contract, an addendum to the budget would have to be made.

The main reason staff wants the 5 percent sewer increase is to move forward with the Diamond Valley Ranch Irrigation Project.

The estimated cost of the project is $5.5 million. STPUD can secure a 2.7 percent loan through the state to pay for it. The rate increase would pay back the loan.

Treated wastewater in the Lake Tahoe Basin must be pumped off the hill per federal law. STPUD's goes to Alpine County where it irrigates hay and alfalfa fields.

With upgrades to Alpine County's electric grid in the past five years, it can now buy back power. South Tahoe PUD wants to create a hydroelectric facility that would be used to transport the water over Luther Pass and then be able to sell power to the grid.

Smaller sewer projects in the district's service area would also be funded by the rate increase.

The water rate increase – which is estimated to bring in an additional $180,000 per year – will also be used to pay back debt, as well as installation of water meters. Three projects in the next three years should amount to 1,000 meters being installed.

STPUD wants to borrow another $5 million for various water line projects.

Cocking said, while water meters are important, the district’s emphasis is on replacing old, small water lines that are not optimum for fire suppression.

“Our biggest threat is catastrophic wildfire,” Cocking said.

If any rate increase were approved, July 1 would be the start date for the new rate.

People will have an opportunity to comment at this week’s meeting as well as the ability to make a formal protest via Proposition 218 even though the mandated 45-day protest period is over. If 50 percent plus one ratepayers were to file a protest to the proposed rate increases, the district could not go forward no matter what the board wanted to do.

As of May 14, about 1,400 protests had been filed – or just more than 8 percent of ratepayers.

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Note: South Tahoe Public Utility District board meeting May 17 2pm, Meadow Crest Drive, South Lake Tahoe.

Nevada lawmakers pulling in money from PACs

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY – They have names like “A Better Nevada PAC”, “A Bolder Nevada” and “The Nevada Hispanic Legislative Caucus”.

They are all political action committees formed or renewed by state lawmakers this year to help promote their parties, push their candidates and protect their ranks in an effort to maintain and/or win control of the Assembly and Senate.

In all there are more than 20 PACs representing two dozen incumbent state senators and members of the Assembly filed with the Secretary of State's office for the 2012 election season. There are more than 260 PACs in total filed with the office this year.

The Better Nevada PAC was formed by former state Sen. Sheila Leslie, a Democrat who resigned her seat to run for the Senate 15 seat in Reno now held by Sen. Greg Brower, a Republican. The purpose of the PAC is "to support candidates working to better the quality of life indicators in the state of Nevada."

The Bolder Nevada PAC was formed by state Sen. Joe Hardy, R-Boulder City, "to promote good government at all levels." Hardy, in the middle of a four-year term in the state Senate, is not up for election this year. He is affiliated with several other PACs as well.

The Nevada Hispanic Legislative Caucus, newly formed in April to support the election of Hispanic candidates to state and local offices, has as its officers three Southern Nevada Democratic Assemblywomen: Irene Bustamante Adams, Lucy Flores and Olivia Diaz. All three are running for re-election this year.

The traditional process for candidates to win election is to receive contributions directly from donors, but there are limits on the amounts that can be accepted. The other standard process is for the Senate and Assembly GOP and Democratic caucuses to form PACs to accept funds for distribution to their candidates. Many of the PACs registered with the Secretary of State's office are these leadership groups.

But other PACs are being formed by individual lawmakers or groups of lawmakers such as the Battle Born Leadership Group formed by Assemblyman John Hambrick, R-Las Vegas, and the Lighthouse Leadership PAC formed by Assemblywoman Debbie Smith, D-Sparks, who is running for a seat in the state Senate.

The JOBS FIRST PAC was established by GOP Sens. Michael Roberson, Greg Brower and Ben Kieckhefer to “promote pro-business public policies in Nevada.” It has $10,000 so far, donated in turn by the Nevadans First PAC, which was run by former Assemblywoman Heidi Gansert, who is now Gov. Brian Sandoval’s chief of staff.

These PACs serve an important purpose for financing campaigns. They give state lawmakers the ability to bring in large donations than candidates cannot accept individually due to contribution limits. The money can then be distributed to party candidates in critical races. They also allow the individual officers of the PACS to wield more political influence by doling out the dough.

Another advantage is that PACs allow donors who may not want to be reported as having contributed to a specific candidate or candidates to do so through a third party.

The growing trend of such PACs was recently noted by *Las Vegas Sun* columnist Jon Ralston.

Republican political consultant Ryan Erwin said legislative leaders and caucuses from both parties have used PACs for a long time to help fund targeted races.

“As term limits and now redistricting create shorter term leaders we will continue to see more leadership PACs evolve,” he said. “In Nevada, which has lenient campaign finance and reporting laws, the emergence of additional vehicles to raise and spend money will continue to have a more prominent role in the process.”

There is a lot at stake in the 2012 election, with Senate Democrats trying to hold on to or even expand their razor-thin 11-10 majority while Republicans are seeking to regain control, and where Assembly Republicans are trying to make a dent in the 26-16 Democrat advantage in the 42-member house.

Hambrick, who has the luxury of not facing an opponent in his re-election bid this year, said a PAC provides more options to support party candidates than direct contributions can do. PACs are limited in the amount they can donate to a candidate, but there is no restriction on the use of the funds spent by a PAC directly for polling or other campaign related activities.

“It’s another avenue for particularly candidates that may not attract some of the deep pocket donors to at least get something to help pay for a mailer or to get some signs out,” Hambrick said. “If you look at my PAC compared to Joe Hardy’s you’ll see a significant difference. But I get a little bit of money that can help out.”

PACs are required to report donations and expenditures just like candidates, he said.

“Every dime has to be accounted for,” Hambrick said.

Hambrick reported just over $9,000 in donations to his PAC in 2011.

Leslie said she has not been actively seeking contributions to her PAC because she is focused on her own campaign.

“It is a way to collect additional funding outside the campaign limits in a legal way,” Leslie said in an email response. “It is also useful for some corporations who don’t want to be identified as supporting a particular candidate for various reasons. It also allows those in leadership to collect funds for other candidates and earn their loyalty and support.”

California high school grads bypassing CSU, UC systems

By Matt Krupnick, Contra Costa Times

An alarming number of California high school graduates are deciding not to attend the state's once-vaunted public universities, researchers have found.

From 2007 to 2010, the percentage of graduates attending University of California or California State University campuses fell by 20 percent, according to figures released Wednesday by the Public Policy Institute of California. The trend developed amid deepening budget problems that dramatically lifted university tuitions and forced schools to turn away qualified students.

"UC and CSU are increasingly unable to accommodate the demand by students," said Hans Johnson, the report's author.

Fewer than 18 percent of California high school graduates ended up at a Cal State or UC campus in 2010, down from 22 percent in 2007. And 55 percent of the most highly prepared students enroll there, down from 67 percent.

The figures underscore a recent migration by students who once would have attended California's public universities, which once were higher-education models admired by other states and countries. Private and public universities in California and throughout the country have seen a significant uptick in the number of California applicants since UC and Cal State tuition started ballooning in the past few years.

About one in 10 who reject admissions offers from the state universities choose not to go to college at all, Johnson found. California's economic woes are likely to deepen if students continue to pursue college degrees elsewhere or not at all, he said.

Read the whole story

Serious doubt placed on validity of magazine's high school rankings

By Paul Takahashi, Las Vegas Sun

U.S. News and World Report is looking into a local high school's ranking as the nation's 13th-best public high school after its principal questioned the data used by the national magazine.

U.S. News' Best High Schools rankings were released Tuesday, with Green Valley High School in Henderson earning a lofty ranking among the nation's top high schools.

But even before the school could celebrate, Green Valley Principal Jeff Horn questioned the validity of *U.S. News'* list of best schools, pointing to several incorrect data points that are key criteria in the methodology used in determining the rankings.

The *U.S. News* rankings showed that the Henderson school had 477 students and 111 teachers, making its student-teacher ratio 4-to-1. The school also had a 100 percent passing rate on the Advanced Placement exam, according to the rankings.

Green Valley actually has 2,850 students, a student-teacher ratio closer to 24-to-1 and a 64 percent AP passing rate, Horn said. He added that he believed the data for several other Las Vegas high schools were incorrect in the *U.S. News* rankings.

Furthermore, *U.S. News'* state profile of Nevada had several incorrect data points.

Read the whole story

Brown releases budget with significant cuts to health, welfare

By Nicholas Riccardi, Los Angeles Times

Gov. Jerry Brown today released a $91-billion budget proposal that sharply cuts health and welfare spending, reduces state payrolls by 5 percent and freezes construction of new courthouses.

Brown's revised budget reflects a steadily worsening fiscal picture for California. On Saturday, he announced via YouTube that the state's deficit had grown to $16 billion, nearly twice what he projected when he released his initial budget proposal in January.

The gap grew, the budget revision states, because Brown over-estimated tax revenues by $4.3 billion and the federal government and courts blocked $1.7 billion in cuts the state wanted to make. The remainder of the difference reflects an increase in the amount of money the state is mandated to spend on education under a complex voter-approved formula.

To close the wider gap, Brown has heightened the cuts he wants to make to Medi-Cal, to $1.2 billion, and maintained another $1.2 billion in welfare and child-care savings he proposed in January.

He also wants to slash payments to people who care for the disabled by 7 percent and reduce the state payroll through a shorter workweek or wage concessions. He proposed $500 million in cuts to the state's struggling court system, including a one-year freeze on all new construction projects.

Read the whole story

Carnelian Bay man identified as victim in fatal car accident

By Loretta Kalb, Sacramento Bee

The Placer County Sheriff's Department has identified the victim of a fatal head-on collision in a north Lake Tahoe community on Thursday as Thomas Heron, 67, of Carnelian Bay.

Heron died and a Tahoe City man was injured when their pickups collided at 11:43am near Ridgewood Drive on Highway 28.

According to a California Highway Patrol report, a Toyota Tacoma driven by Heron was headed eastbound when it drifted over a solid double-yellow line into oncoming traffic, striking the front of a westbound Toyota Tundra.

The 54-year-old driver of the Tundra was taken to Tahoe Forest Hospital in Truckee, where he underwent an operation Friday for a broken hand, said a CHP spokesman.

Placer County sheriff's Sgt. John Giovannini released Heron's name Sunday, noting that the man's family members had been notified.

Tough sell for tobacco tax on California ballot

By Kevin Yamamura, Sacramento Bee

In the past decade, red and blue states alike, from Mississippi to New York, have approved more than 100 tobacco tax hikes in a desperate hunt for budget revenue.

But not one has passed in California, whose 87-cent cigarette tax dropped from third-highest in the nation in 1999 to 33rd today despite the state's ongoing budget woes.

That confounds health advocates, who otherwise consider California to be a trailblazer when it comes to bans on smoking in bars and restaurants, and public campaigns urging tobacco users to quit.

But longtime state budget watchers are hardly surprised. They largely blame the state's supermajority requirement to pass tax hikes in the Legislature. That forces tobacco tax votes to the ballot, where industry can spend unlimited sums of money.

"Certainly the state has been looking in every place possible for new sources of revenues," said Mark Baldassare, president and CEO of the Public Policy Institute of California. “Most other places have a simple majority, and I think a two-thirds majority is a hurdle even for something seemingly as popular as a tobacco tax.”

The June ballot has a tobacco tax hike, Proposition 29, that would raise $735 million in its first full year, mostly for cancer and disease research. The Legislature could not tap the funds for 15 years, and even then not without meeting certain requirements.

Read the whole story

U.S. economy stronger than housing, job markets show

By Daniel Gross, Newsweek

On Aug. 5, 2011, when Standard & Poor’s stripped the United States of its AAA credit rating, it was the latest in a string of economic humiliations for the U.S. After the failure of Lehman Brothers in the fall of 2008, the globe’s longtime economic leader suffered its deepest and longest economic contraction in 80 years. Its markets were scythed in half, and Washington’s political paralysis spooked investors. Most distressing were the numbers: annual deficits over $1 trillion, 8.75 million jobs lost, $4-per-gallon gasoline.

Given the magnitude of the economic fall, it’s no surprise that declinism quickly emerged as the time’s chic intellectual pose. Left and right, highbrow and lowbrow, ideological and pragmatic, historians and futurists—all came to an agreement: the U.S. had a very slim hope of recovering from its selfinflicted blows. The lion was now a lamb, shorn of aggression and vitality, unable to compete with rivals like China. Much like Japan, which has endured two decades of stagnation and misery since its real-estate bubble popped in the late 1980s, the U.S. had fallen and couldn't get up.

As is frequently the case, however, the conventional wisdom is wrong. The U.S. economy suffered a wipeout in the Great Recession of 2008–09, much like 1970s icon Steve Austin. Austin, played by Lee Majors, was an astronaut who crashed to Earth and then was rebuilt with typical American optimism. "We can rebuild him," the voice-over for the opening of The Six Million Dollar Man intoned. "Better than he was before. Better, stronger, faster." Like the world's first bionic man, the U.S. economy has come back—better, stronger, and faster than most analysts expected, and than most of its peers.

In fact, the lows of March 2009 marked the beginning of an unexpected recovery—not the beginning of an era of irreversible stagnation. The U.S. economy went from shrinking at a 6.7 percent annual rate in the first quarter of 2009 to expanding at a 3.8 percent annual rate in the fourth quarter of that year—a turnaround unprecedented in modern history. The stock market has doubled since March 2009, while corporate profits and exports have surged to records. The U.S. economy has regained its 2007 peak, and is now growing at a 3 percent annual clip—a more rapid pace than any other developed economy. The crucible of the recession forged an economic structure that is more resistant to shocks than the brittle vessel that shattered in 2008. Meanwhile, Europe continues to grapple with insoluble banking and sovereign debt crises, and developing-economy juggernauts like China and Brazil are showing signs of cracking.

It's clear that the story of America's recovery—unsatisfying and problematic as it has been—isn't a Hollywood tale. Rather, it rests on an understanding of its core competencies and competitive advantages: attitudes and capabilities that, even in this age of globalization, remain unique. Contrary to the declinists’ view, global growth has not been a zero-sum game for America’s economy.

Read the whole story