

Legislative studies languish because of lack of funding

By Sean Whaley, Nevada News Bureau

CARSON CITY — Nevada's tough financial situation is holding up two interim studies approved by the Legislature because of the requirement for alternative funding sources to assist in conducting the reviews.

One is a study of the state Public Employees' Retirement System and the other is a study of the funding formula now used for public education. Both studies require non-state funding, but proponents are having a hard time coming up with the money.

Typically there is state funding appropriated for interim studies by the Legislature. But the state's difficult fiscal situation led to the imposition of the financial requirements for the two studies.

Gov. Brian Sandoval and lawmakers approved a study of the state public pension system with an eye toward evaluating the need for a change for future state and local government hires to a "defined contribution" or some modified type of plan.

But the study outlined in Assembly Bill 405 requires a \$250,000 contribution from the private sector to be secured before another \$250,000 appropriation from the state could be used for such an assessment.

The private funding has been hard to come by.

Heidi Gansert, chief of staff to Sandoval, said other options are being explored by representatives of Nevada's business community interested in such a review.

"They had to meet the \$250,000 threshold before state funds

would be released and so I think the issue was the level of funding required, private funding, versus getting some funding for it," she said. "There may be some private sector folks that are still going to work on some form of study.

"My understanding is the \$250,000 is too high of a threshold, but they are looking at coming up with partial funding and maybe doing something on their own versus trying to meet that threshold to get the state funding," Gansert said.

Sandoval favors a change to the retirement plan because of a concern about the potential taxpayer liability for the defined benefit plan that covers almost all state and local government employees. The long-term unfunded liability is estimated at about \$10 billion, although some assessments using different measures put it at a much higher amount.

There has been a growing call nationally to move public pension plans to a state to a defined contribution plan, similar to a 401(k)-type plan, from the current defined benefit plan, where retirees are paid a set amount per month based on salary and years of service.

Sandoval has advocated such a position, although the concept did not see any serious discussion in the 2011 legislative session.

Nevada PERS officials say the plan is actuarially sound, and that the unfunded liability will be covered over time. They also note that the contribution rates required to keep the plan healthy are set by an independent actuary and are fully funded by the Legislature. The Legislature also made several changes to the existing PERS plan in 2009.

The legislative study looking at potentially new ways of funding public education was sought by the Clark County School District. But no state funding was provided for the review.

At the first meeting of the New Method for Funding Public

Schools interim study in January, Clark County School District official Joyce Haldeman said \$125,000 in anticipated funding from a private foundation to pay for a study would not be available.

The district is looking for other funding for the study.

Assemblyman Marcus Conklin, D-Las Vegas, the chairman of the interim study, gave the district until Feb. 21 to identify at least \$125,000 for a study. The panel is scheduled to meet Feb. 28, but the meeting will be canceled if no funding is secured.

The Clark County School District would like to see new factors included in the 45-year-old funding formula, such as additional financial weight given to educate special education students, English-language learners and children in poverty.

Questions have been raised as to whether either study is actually needed.

Geoffrey Lawrence, deputy director of policy for the Nevada Policy Research Institute, said in an interview in June 2011, regarding the PERS liability that legislative studies do not typically generate change in subsequent legislative sessions.

And Assemblyman Ira Hansen, R-Sparks, a member of the public education interim study panel, asked for justification for the proposed review at the January meeting, noting a 2007 study by lawmakers identified no inequities in the Nevada Plan.

After spending nearly \$250,000, the conclusion was that the Nevada Plan was highly equitable, he said.

Testing for pot potency done in a legal vacuum

By Joe Mozingo, Los Angeles Times

The tech broke the bud of marijuana into small flakes, measuring 200 milligrams into a vial. He had picked up the strain, Ghost, earlier that day from a dispensary in the Valley and guessed by its pungency and visible resin glands that it was potent.

He could have determined this the old-fashioned way, with a bong and a match. Instead, he began the meticulous process of preparing the sample for the high-pressure liquid chromatograph.

His lab, called The Werc Shop, tests medical cannabis for levels of the psychoactive ingredient known as THC and a few dozen other compounds, as well as for contaminants like molds, bacteria and pesticides that marijuana advocates don't much like to talk about. The strains that pass muster are labeled Certified Cannabaceuticals, a trademarked term.

The commercial lab is one of dozens opening in the last two years, as a rush to build an industry around medical marijuana has produced a desire – by some – to know what exactly is in the medicine.

The idea is that patients don't pop a Vicodin not knowing if the pill has 5 milligrams of hydrocodone or 15. Nor do people make drinks wondering if they are pouring beer or bourbon or Bacardi 151.

Read the whole story

2 Truckee residents plead not guilty to drug charges

By Barbara Barte Osborn, Sacramento Bee

TRUCKEE – Two Truckee men charged with cocaine sales entered not guilty pleas Feb. 14 during arraignment at Nevada County Superior Court in Truckee.

Salvador Ruvalcaba-Munoz, 36, and Conrado Rodriguez-Quintero, 45, remain in custody at the Wayne Brown Correctional Facility in Nevada City in lieu of \$35,000 bail, pending a Feb. 21 felony conference in Truckee.

The two men were arrested at a downtown Truckee residence Feb. 7 by Truckee detectives following a four-month investigation.

During a warrant search, police found a half-pound of cocaine, packaged for distribution, and \$10,000 in cash in the residence, where it was accessible to children, according to a press release.

Nevada County Deputy District Attorney William Cornell charged Ruvalcaba-Munoz with three felony counts – one for transportation and sales of cocaine and two for conspiracy to commit crimes.

Cornell charged Rodriguez-Quintero with two felony counts – one each for possession of cocaine for sale and conspiracy to commit a crime.

TTUSD plans to cut at least 18 teaching positions

The Tahoe Truckee Unified School District board on Feb. 16 agreed to lay off up to 18.4 certificated positions at the end of this school year in order to decrease the \$5 million budget deficit for 2012-13.

The district will use \$3.2 million from the reserve fund to completely close the gap.

According to Steve Jennings, TTUSD superintendent, some of the positions being cut have nothing to do with the budget deficit, but are because of declining enrollment.

"No adjustments for declining enrollment were made last year, but in order to be fiscally prudent, we need to address this," Jennings said in a statement.

With state law mandating teachers be notified by March 15 of a potential reduction in force, the board had to take action even with the state budget being in a state of flux.

Negotiations between the Tahoe Truckee Education Association and the district have been taking place since last fall. Jennings explained that both sides plan to work collaboratively to come up with solutions that have the least impact on teachers and students.

TTUSD is in the process of making cuts in management and district operations that will total a minimum of \$201,000. In addition, non-personnel areas to cut back have been identified, including \$214,000 in cuts to utilities, athletics, and deferred maintenance, plus an increase in

transportation fees, have been approved by the board. The target for cost savings in the non-personnel arena is \$401,539.

However, because nearly 90 percent of the district's expenses are in employee payroll, lay offs are inevitable.

The next regular board meeting is March 7 at 5:30pm.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Ex-STHS football player on a new track – without heroin

Publisher's note: *This is the second of two stories about heroin use on the South Shore. [Click here to read the first article.](#)*

By Jessie Marchesseau

Josh does not look like your stereotypical Hollywood heroin addict. In fact, he sat two tables away from me at a local café for nearly 20 minutes while I waited for the subject of my interview to walk in, someone who *looked* like a heroin addict.

In black pants, black beanie and a white long-sleeved shirt, Josh looks like a typical Tahoe twenty-something-year-old snowboarder. He is clean shaven with a strong, muscular build, something he attributes to working out six days a week and

eating healthy.

By looking at him, you would never guess that eight months ago Josh (whose name has been changed) was in a very different place. He was 60 pounds heavier, homeless, living on the streets in Los Angeles and instead of working out, he was shooting up heroin.

“I’ve replayed the whole thing, how it started, how it just spiraled all the way down, and I ended up at the very bottom,” he said. “I can’t imagine any lower you could go than Skid Row in LA. I can’t imagine anyplace worse.”



**“It’s like a horrible relationship, you know the person’s so bad for you, but you can’t get away from them because it’s all you know, and it’s all you want.”
– Josh**

Now 27, Josh’s downward spiral started 10 years ago, in high school. He was athletic, had lots of friends, snowboarded and played football for South Tahoe High School. When a doctor prescribed him pain killers for a football injury, he remembers liking it right from the start.

Though Josh did not get addicted to the pain killers, he did continue to dabble in other drugs. It was not until after high school that he tried heroin for the first time. A friend had done heroin before, and the pair drove all the way to the Bay Area to get some. Josh decided to just snort the drug at first, but after seeing the instant high his friend had from injecting it, he reached for the needle.

"It was all over from there," Josh said. "I was 19, and until just seven months ago, it was constant."

Back here in Tahoe, heroin was not readily available. But OxyContin, another opiate, was. Injecting the prescription painkiller became a multiple times per day habit for nearly five years.

At first, Josh was able to hold together a fairly normal life. He had a girlfriend, a car, a job, even enrolled in the culinary program at Lake Tahoe Community College. He managed to hide his habit from family and friends.

But as the spiral continued downward, those things ceased to matter. He started blowing off work, sold his car for two eight balls of heroin (an eight ball is one-eighth of an ounce), and gave up trying to hide it. The only thing that mattered was getting high and getting enough money to get high. He sold everything he could and began stealing from friends and family: money, ATM cards, anything he could pawn.

At the same time, OxyContin was becoming harder to find and more and more expensive, up to \$80 for a pill that would last about six hours. Heroin, on the other hand, was becoming easier to find and was only \$5 to \$10 for a bag that could last just as long. Making the switch was easy. After all, this had all started with that first hit of heroin. But Josh's addiction was also escalating. One point, or a tenth of a gram, is considered a single dose of heroin for most people. Josh was doing six at a time.

His first run-in with the law was in 2008. Josh was pulled over with methadone in his possession, something he kept around for emergencies when he could not find heroin fast enough. He went to jail. Over the next three years he would go to jail six or seven more times. Even though he would detox while he was there, as soon as he was released, Josh would start using again.

"In my head it seemed like if I didn't have it, I didn't know who I was," he said. "It's like a horrible relationship, you know the person's so bad for you, but you can't get away from them because it's all you know, and it's all you want."

With the price of heroin going up, and Josh unable to hold a job, he and his new girlfriend decided to move to LA where the drugs were cheap. Once there, they blew all their money on heroin and ended up on Skid Row, sleeping on a cardboard box, all their worldly belongings in a shopping cart. He was arrested twice, held up at gunpoint and their shopping cart stolen. Josh had hit rock bottom.

"I just woke up and was like, 'Who am I? What the hell has happened?'" he said.

For the first time in his life, he did not want to do heroin anymore. Josh had already been through court-mandated rehab numerous times, counseling, Narcotics Anonymous, methadone programs. Nothing had worked because he had never *wanted* to quit. This time was different. June 12, 2011, he called his mom and caught a bus back to Tahoe.

With a warrant out for his arrest, it was not long before the police caught up with him. He had never been so happy to be arrested. Josh spent the next three months in El Dorado County jail sobering up. It was finally over.

Clean since the day he went to jail, Josh said he has had no urge to start using again. His girlfriend also returned from LA and joined him on his journey to recovery. They motivate

and support each other, neither one looking back.

At 27, Josh said heroin has taken nearly a decade from him. He is starting over, building a new life from the ground up. He is taking care of his body for a change, he and his girlfriend want to get married, and he hopes to finally finish culinary school.

While Josh got a second chance, not everyone is so lucky. Two of his friends made the El Dorado County coroner's list of heroin-related deaths last year, and several others are in jail.

Josh said he feels like he has a good head on his shoulders today, and he never would have met the love of his life if he had not gone through this. Even so, if he could do it all over again, he wouldn't.

"If I could go back in time and not stick that needle in my arm, I would have never, ever done it, knowing what I know now."

GOP candidates talk about feds releasing control of Western lands

By Rocky Barker and Dan Popkey, Idaho Statesman

GOP presidential candidate Rick Santorum's call to sell or

transfer federally owned public lands Tuesday night in Boise earned him several rounds of applause.

But Idaho Gov. Butch Otter found in 2005 that while Idahoans don't like how federal lands are managed, they don't want to lose access to the places they hunt, fish and camp.

President Herbert Hoover and former Interior Secretary James Watt learned similar lessons in their times.

But Santorum's detailed proposal on an issue close to the heart of Westerners may help set him apart from Republican Mitt Romney in the March 6 Republican caucus, which is expected to attract the most devoted party members.

"We need to get it back into the hands of the states and even to the private sector," Santorum told an overflow crowd at Boise's Capital High School. "And we can make money doing it."

Santorum said national parks like Yellowstone and Grand Canyon should remain under federal management. But based on the poor management he has seen in the federal lands in his home state of Pennsylvania, he said he believes Westerners could do better.

"We do not need this huge amount of federal land under federal purview and I would be happy to work with your senators and congressmen out here in the West to put a plan together that's going to have a much more responsible management of land in the West than we've had in the last many years, OK?"

Santorum isn't the only Republican in the race urging the federal government to transfer public land.

Rep. Ron Paul has called for eliminating the Department of Interior, which manages more than 500 million acres of public land and a big chunk of Idaho, almost two-thirds of which is owned by the federal government.

Read the whole story

Hwy. 50 open after 3-car accident in American River canyon

A three-car accident that included one vehicle landing on its roof and another 10-feet down the embankment headed toward the American River resulted in at least one ambulance taking injured people to Barton Memorial Hospital.

The Friday collision that closed Highway 50 for about 30 minutes in both directions still had California Highway Patrol officers at the scene as of 11:30am. The accident was near Camp Sacramento and happened about 10am.

The number of people injured and their names have not been released. The cause is also still under investigation.

No snow fell overnight, but it's not known if ice could have been a factor.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Nevada has third highest-rate

of interracial marriages

By Steve Timko, Reno Gazette-Journal

One in four recent Nevada marriages is interracial or interethnic, the third-highest rate in the nation, according to a Pew Center report released this week.

Using U.S. Census Bureau data, the research group concluded that out of the 57,065 marriages by Nevada residents between 2008 and 2010, 25.6 percent were interracial marriages. That trailed only Hawaii and Oklahoma.

Nevada ranked third nationally for marriages between Caucasians and Hispanics (11 percent) and also third for marriages between Caucasians and Asians (5 percent), according to the Pew Center report.

Nationally, about 15 percent of marriages were mixed.

"The rise in interracial marriage indicates that race relations have improved over the past quarter-century," Daniel Lichter, a sociology professor at Cornell University, told the *Associated Press*.

"Mixed-race children have blurred America's color line. They often interact with others on either side of the racial divide and frequently serve as brokers between friends and family members of different racial backgrounds," Lichter said. "But America still has a long way to go."

What does Nevada rank so high? State Demographer Jeff Hardcastle thinks it's the types of jobs in Nevada, especially in the service industry, like hotels.

Read the whole story

Nevada makes sale or possession of 'bath salts' a felony

By Ed Vogel, Las Vegas Review-Journal

CARSON CITY — Nevada legislators unanimously approved a regulation Wednesday that makes it felony to sell or possess methamphetamine-like synthetic drugs sold in some head shops and convenience stores as “bath salts.”

Without any debate, members of the Legislative Commission made permanent a regulation adopted by the Board of Pharmacy last month to outlaw substances that have led to at least two deaths in Nevada and caused dozens of residents to seek medical attention.

The regulation does not prohibit the sale or use of legitimate bath salts or lotions or soaps designed to provide soothing baths, but bans chemical substances that are used to get high but are referred to by users as bath salts.

They are sold under such names as Vanilla Sky, Purple Wave and White Lightning.

Read the whole story

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Note: These drugs are an increasing problem in South Lake Tahoe as reported on *Lake Tahoe News* on Nov. 17, 2011.

South Lake Tahoe becoming a mecca for heroin users

Publisher's note: *This is the first of two stories about heroin use on the South Shore.*

By Jessie Marchesseau

South Lake Tahoe has seen its first heroin-related death for 2012, and if 2011 is any indication, it will not be the last.

The victim, a 31-year-old female, was found in a South Lake Tahoe hotel room on Feb. 2, and was transported to Barton Memorial Hospital where she later died. She showed evidence of being a long-term drug user and had a history of drug-related charges. Toxicology reports are still pending, but El Dorado County sheriff's Lt. Les Lovell and Detective Matt Harwood, coroner investigator for South Lake Tahoe, say it is an obvious heroin overdose.



**South
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**– Rich
Barna,
Tahoe
Turning
Point
executive
director**

Just four days later, another opiate-related death occurred, this one, an overdose of prescription pain medication.

In 2011, the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department recorded nine opiate-related deaths in South Lake Tahoe. That is a significant number for a city with a population of less than 25,000. In fact, Rich Barna, executive director at Tahoe Turning Point, an outpatient counseling and rehabilitation center, says South Lake Tahoe has a higher per capita population of heroin users than some major cities.

The reason for this is unclear. What is clear, however, is that there have been an alarming spike in heroin arrests and seizures in the South Lake Tahoe area during the last 12 months.

The South Lake El Dorado Narcotics Enforcement Team seized 239

grams of heroin in 2011. This is up from 6.2 grams in 2010 and 21.8 grams in 2009. That is more than a 1,000 percent increase in just two years.

Halfway through 2011, South Lake Tahoe was ranked the No. 1 location for heroin seizures in the Eastern California District. The final numbers for 2011 are not in yet.

"We are almost constantly filing cases for use, possession and sale of heroin," Hans Uthe, El Dorado County deputy district attorney in the South Tahoe office, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

While Barna believes it is not so much an increase in heroin usage as it is in people getting caught, Lovell and SLEDNET task force agent Brandon Auxier are convinced otherwise.

"What we see historically is we see drugs come and go," Lovell said, "... and heroin's one of those that comes and goes."

Lovell and Auxier attribute heroin's current popularity to a difficulty in obtaining OxyContin. Also called Hillbilly Heroin, OxyContin is a fairly common prescription painkiller. Both drugs are opiates, both are extremely addictive. But at \$25 for a single dose, heroin has a much more attractive price tag than OxyContin, which runs about \$80 per pill. Heroin is also much more accessible than the prescription drug.

Counselors at Tahoe Turning Point say switching from prescription painkillers to street drugs such as heroin is a common progression. This is why heroin users can be found at any age, from all walks of life and with varying backgrounds. It is also why authorities are seeing an increase in heroin use among teens. What starts with painkillers for a sports injury or from raiding mom and dad's medicine cabinet can progress to heroin usage.

But the transition from one drug to the other is not always easy.

“People don’t realize how easy it is to overdose,” Harwood said.

As a coroner investigator, Harwood said he has seen a definite increase in heroin- and opiate-related deaths compared to five or six years ago. And with two already on the books, 2012 is shaping up to be a killer year.

“It’s unfortunate that we have so many people addicted to it,” he said.

This increase in heroin usage brings with it an increase in people trying to kick the habit. Tahoe Turning Point has experienced an obvious increase in patients seeking treatment for heroin since last summer.

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Note: On Feb. 18, *Lake Tahoe News* will share Josh’s story; from his heroin-induced downward spiral to his journey up the road to recovery.