

Education proposal would challenge Brown on the ballot

By Torey Van Oot, Sacramento Bee

When Molly Munger's name surfaced last year as a potential partner on efforts to provide more funding for schools, California State PTA President Carol Kocivar had to turn to Google to find out who she was.

While Munger is a longtime champion for civil rights and education policy issues, the 63-year-old attorney was a virtual unknown in California political circles.

That changed the moment she submitted a \$10 billion tax proposal for the ballot.

Munger's proposed initiative to raise state income taxes for all but the poorest Californians to fund schools and early childhood development programs – and the personal cash she has pledged to spend to put it on the ballot – makes her a major player in the 2012 ballot wars and a thorn in Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown's side.

Her measure, one of at least three tax proposals that could qualify for November's ballot, is seen as a threat to the one Brown is pushing. His would generate nearly \$7 billion in budget relief by raising income taxes on high earners and enacting a half-cent increase in the sales tax.

Brown and his allies have called for proponents of rival tax initiatives to drop their efforts, arguing that a ballot featuring multiple tax hikes will lead voters to reject them all.

The argument hasn't moved Munger, a Democrat and Pasadena resident, who says her polling shows a tax hike earmarked for

schools can win even with other tax measures on the ballot.

“We think the governor doesn’t have as good of an idea this year as we do,” Munger told reporters this week. “And that’s part of democracy, to put that out in the marketplace of ideas and let the voters decide.”

Read the whole story

Millions of dollars for Tahoe fuels projects may have been misspent by Fire Safe Council

By Anne Knowles

The Nevada Fire Safe Council may have to return \$2.7 million to the U.S. Forest Service unless it can prove it properly spent the grant money. A federal investigation found the group mishandled the funds.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Office of Inspector General, which has been investigating the group after receiving a tip in July 2011, found NVFSC violated several federal regulations, including commingling federal grant money with other funds, allowing one person to be in charge of all aspects of managing the grant money and not conducting annual audits.



While no criminal charges have been filed, Andrew List is no longer with the Nevada Fire Safe Council.
Photo/LTN file

In a report released in January, the OIG recommended the USFS recover \$2.7 million of the \$9.8 million it awarded the nonprofit for hazardous fuels reduction work in the Lake Tahoe Basin. In a response to the OIG, the Forest Service said it is working with NVFSC and has given the group until Feb. 29 to provide documentation proving it spent the money in a way allowed by the grant.

Lake Tahoe News in July 2011 broke the story that the Nevada Fire Safe Council's financial practices were being questioned and the subsequent federal investigation.

The OIG also recommended the USFS withhold any further grant money until NVFSC proves it has implemented adequate internal controls and conducted the missing audits, and that NVFSC provide documentation for all other money spent. If unable to do so, the USFS should withhold reimbursement, the report says.

The OIG is still investigating NVFSC to see if it overcharged for fuels reduction work because it did not use a competitive

bidding process to award contracts, the claim of the whistleblower whose call prompted the investigation. The OIG said it would deliver a final report, but did not specify when.

“This first report is letting us know they have uncovered some concerns,” Cheva Heck, a public affairs officer with the USFS’s Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “At this point, we’re going to work with Nevada Fire Safe Council and move forward.”

And while the OIG report did not accuse NVFSC of anything worse than mismanagement, it also didn’t rule it out.

“Although nothing has come to our attention at this time to indicate that fraud actually occurred, our review of the council’s financial accounting practices is still ongoing,” the report says.

As an example of commingling of funds, the report said NVFSC put \$705,611 received through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act into an account with other funds from other sources and used the account for rent, utilities and for other purposes not authorized under the act.

The report said Andrew List, the former executive director, was solely responsible for all aspects of handling the grants, such as receiving, depositing and dispersing the funds, when rules require those tasks to be handled by multiple people in order to reduce error and fraud.

Finally, the investigation found that NVFSC had not been audited for four years, from 2007 to 2010, as required by federal regulations.

When asked why, NVFSC board members told OIG that List had “maintained that each year that the audits were not being performed because an accounting firm could not be hired at an acceptable price.”

According to the report, on Oct. 14, NVFSC board of directors told the OIG it planned on replacing the executive director with an interim director, developing new business and accounting procedures and hiring an accounting firm to manage its grants.

List left NVFSC late last year and Elwood Miller is now interim director.

Reid, Berkley give up Whittemore campaign donations

By Martha Bellisle, Reno Gazette-Journal

After agents with the Federal Bureau of Investigation served subpoenas to former and current employees and associates of Nevada power broker Harvey Whittemore in an investigation into his campaign contribution activities, at least one member of Congress moved to distance himself from the controversy.

Kristen Orthman, a spokeswoman for Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., said Reid has given up Whittemore contributions.

“Sen. Reid has already donated the contributions made by Mr. Whittemore and his spouse to charity,” Orthman said. “His office will continue to review other contributions associated with Mr. Whittemore, and treat them appropriately.”

Orthman didn't respond to requests for clarification on when Reid donated the money.

Whittemore did not immediately respond to requests for comment, but his Las Vegas lawyer's firm released a statement about the FBI subpoenas.

Read the whole story

Lawrence Livermore Lab studying groundwater in Martis Valley

Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory is studying climate change impacts to recharge and groundwater quality in the Martis Valley.

The Lawrence Livermore water aging study will help further the ongoing efforts to determine how the aquifer functions. Previous studies have indicated that some water in the Martis Valley groundwater basin may be in excess of 1,000 years old. The study will help further the ongoing efforts to determine how the aquifer functions.

The study is being funded by the state Groundwater Ambient Monitoring & Assessment Special Studies Program. The results of the study will supplement the Martis Valley groundwater model being prepared under a separate grant to the Desert Research Institute by the Bureau of Reclamation.

The local water agencies – Truckee Donner Public Utility District, Northstar Community Services District and Placer County Water Agency – continue their partnership in developing

a groundwater management plan and groundwater model for the Martis Valley basin. The partner agencies contributed \$250,000 to the initial costs, based on their number of connections. This collaborative effort had previously leveraged an additional \$500,000 in federal funding from the Bureau of Reclamation. The Bay Area lab study brings the total project funding to more than \$1 million.

The Martis Valley aquifer includes a 35,000-acre area in Placer and Nevada counties. It is the main water supply for numerous public and private entities.

Placerville mine owner surrenders to law enforcement

By KCRA

PLACERVILLE – A mining dispute in Placerville came to some resolution Thursday as a landowner turned himself into El Dorado County deputies to face 14 criminal charges of operating without permits and polluting a creek.

Joseph Hardesty was in the middle of a dispute with government agencies in what officials called one the most egregious cases of illegal mining they have ever encountered in the Sierra Nevada foothills.

Hardesty was suspected of operating an illegal mine on 30 acres of land and had already faces fines leading up to his arrest, deputies said.

Read the whole story

2 skier deaths in Colo. this week bring state's season total to 11

By Joey Bunch, Denver Post

A 72-year-old skier from Stonington, Conn., died Thursday from a broken neck and a brain injury after he was found face-down in the snow at Keystone Resort Tuesday, marking the 11th ski season death in Colorado this year.

The Summit County Coroner's Office said William Emberton was wearing a helmet when he was found at about 1:30pm on the expert-level Geronimo Trail.

The incident is still under investigation, the coroner's office said.

A skier fatality in Eagle County Tuesday also is under investigation. Authorities there still have not named the 37-year-old Missouri man who was killed while while skiing on advanced-level Berries trail on Vail Mountain Tuesday at about 10am, according to the Eagle County Sheriff's Department.

Read the whole story

Winter wildfires in Tahoe-Reno area could become more common

By Jeff DeLong, Reno Gazette-Journal

It happened not once, but twice.

Two rare winter wildfires roared through Reno-area neighborhoods, destroying more than 50 homes, changing lives and leaving some wondering whether the destructive events might be a sign of things to come.

November's Caughlin Fire was followed almost two months to the day by the Washoe Drive Fire on Jan. 19. The fires were strikingly similar – both the result of high winds associated with a dry cold front pushing flames through brush and grass made ready to burn by an early winter of record dryness.

The combination was explosive.

"The fire behavior was intense as it can probably get," Reno Fire Chief Michael Hernandez said. "Those two fires were more destructive than any other fires we've had along the Sierra front in 50 years."

The combined disasters would be remarkable in the heart of summer but instead occurred at a time of year more closely associated with problems such as trying to keep passes open that snowstorms likely closed. For the Reno-Tahoe area, the situation was unprecedented.

Dry and windy conditions lined up perfectly as a fuse for the fires but with a warming climate, invading vegetation and more people living in fire-prone areas, could big winter wildfires become the norm?

It's impossible to say for sure, but some experts say the possibility is there.

Read the whole story

Birth-control fight turns into political tool

By Lisa Mascaro and Kathleen Hennessey, Los Angeles Times

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration's new requirement that most health insurance plans provide contraceptive services has exploded into a high-octane political weapon, with combatants on both sides scrambling to score points among the electorate and gin up fundraising from their most ardent supporters.

In Congress and on the campaign trail Wednesday, Republicans attacked the rule as another example of government overreach, Exhibit A in the case against President Obama's healthcare law, while Democrats asserted the GOP was trying to turn back the clock on women's rights.

House Speaker John A. Boehner, R-Ohio, a Catholic, fueled the political firestorm by making a rare floor speech vowing to block the requirement that most faith-based employers, including Catholic ones, offer contraception, regardless of their religious beliefs. Churches and other houses of worship are exempt.

The campaign of Mitt Romney, a leading candidate for the GOP presidential nomination, said the rule "compels religious institutions to violate the tenets of their own faith," and Romney vowed to strike it down.

Democrats and Republicans used the controversy to appeal for contributions from their traditional political bases, a strategy that carries risks as well as rewards. At a time when independents and moderates can sway general elections, turning up the heat on a social issue could prove distracting and annoying to voters who are more concerned about unemployment and the sluggish economy.

Amid the rising clamor, administration officials are exploring the possibility of implementing the rule so that religiously affiliated employers could offer supplemental policies, known as riders, for contraception or direct workers to insurance companies that sell such riders.

Even if Catholic voters and independents agree with the White House on substance, the administration doesn't want to appear insensitive to the concerns of the Catholic Church.

Women's groups would be likely to vigorously oppose any alteration of the rule.

Read the whole story

People rarely pay for starting fires in Northern Nevada

By Martha Bellisle, Reno Gazette-Journal

Fire officials are continuing their investigation into the cause of the Washoe Drive Fire, which burned 3,200 acres and 29 homes last month, but they have yet to decide whether to file charges against the man who admitted starting the blaze.

Although some fire-starters have served time in prison, officials have had little luck collecting funds from the people who ignited some of the area's wildland blazes, even though Nevada law allows fire districts to go after those responsible.

But if officials identify the man who admitted starting the Washoe Drive blaze, his neighbors may find some relief through his insurance company, a Reno lawyer said.

One man who started a 2007 blaze continues to serve time in prison but has paid little of the restitution he was ordered to pay. Another man responsible for a large Reno fire settled the lawsuits filed against him for less than \$1 million, and has since filed for bankruptcy.

The Washoe Fire first broke out in an area off Washoe Drive and U.S. 395 about noon on Jan. 19. High winds ahead of a winter storm quickly spread the blaze in different directions, forcing about 10,000 people to evacuate.

An elderly man, who has not been identified, contacted officials late in the afternoon to report that he had started the blaze by disposing fireplace ashes improperly. Fire Marshal Joan Presley has declined to say whether they'll seek charges, and only said the blaze is under investigation.

The estimated cost of the Washoe Drive Fire has yet to be calculated, but the Caughlin Fire in November burned 1,935 acres and caused more than \$7.6 million in property damage, according to a new report.

Read the whole story

2 Truckee residents jailed on multiple drug charges

Two Truckee residents were arrested this week on drug charges after a four-month investigation.

Conrado Rodriguea-Quintero was arrested on charges of possession of narcotics, sales of cocaine, criminal conspiracy, and child endangerment. Salvador Ruvalcaba-Munoz was arrested on charges of sales of cocaine and criminal conspiracy. Both booked into the Nevada County Jail on Feb. 7.

Truckee police detectives recovered one-half pound of cocaine packaged for distribution, along with \$10,000 in cash. The cocaine was located in an area of the residence that was accessible to children living at the residence, officers said.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report