California pension proposal seeks to hike employee contributions

By Jon Ortiz, Sacramento Bee

From California to Florida, many public employees are paying more for their pensions now than a year ago as strapped state and local governments cast about for savings.

Now a sweeping Republican proposal in the California Senate, among other changes, would hike how much all current and future state and local government workers pay toward their pensions.

A union coalition has blasted the long-shot proposal as a one-size-doesn’t-fit-all encroachment on bargaining rights. Many labor groups, including a dozen representing California state workers, already have agreed to higher pension contributions from their members.

Plus, the unions say, pension payments are part of their members’ total compensation package. Deals struck that allow low or no employee contributions were in lieu of higher pay, they say.

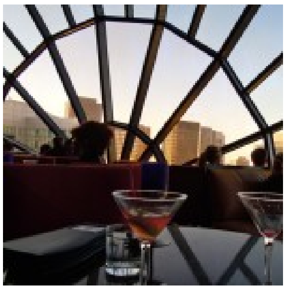
“Taking this away doesn’t take the previous trade-offs into consideration,” said Dave Low, head of Californians for Retirement Security, the coalition battling efforts to change public pensions.

Read the whole story

Lake Tahoe hotel room occupancy below state average

Lake Tahoe, Monterey/Carmel, Napa and other Northern California locations were among the weakest markets for hotel occupancy, average nightly rates and revenue per room in May, according to PKF Consulting.

San Francisco, on the other hand, is outpacing most of Northern California with an 84.5 occupancy rate in May and 77.8 percent for the first five months.



San Francisco hotels are busy filling rooms and drink glasses. Photo/LTN

Northern California occupancy was 74.1 percent in May this year, while in 2010 it was 71.2 percent. Average room rates in Northern California jumped 10.1 percent in May, to $138.55 from $125.80 a year ago.

May can always be a tricky month for Lake Tahoe because it is in between seasons – too much snow to hike, but the ski resorts aren’t open. And this particular year the snow just kept coming, which led to the Tour de California never happening in the basin. Echo Summit construction also didn’t help put heads in beds.

While exact numbers are not out for July yet, reports are the Fourth did not appear to be as busy as prior years in Lake Tahoe.

This compares to San Francisco, which was hopping that long weekend. An employee at the Marriott hotel on Fourth Street said their property is always busy, but on a weekend like that it’s “crazy.”

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

S. Tahoe woman disappears in Washington

By KATU-TV

SKAMANIA COUNTY, Wash. — A woman who traveled to Washington state from South Lake Tahoe to attend the Rainbow Family gathering in the Gifford Pinchot National Forest is now missing.

Marie C. Hanson, 54, was last seen on July 10.

She was here visiting from South Lake Tahoe and joined thousands of others for the 40th annual gathering of the Rainbow Family of Living Light, a group of peace activists borne out of the ’60s counterculture movement.

As many as 20,000 people have turned out for annual gatherings of the Rainbow Family, which has no formal structure or leaders. An informal council decides each year where the gathering will be held and this year a remote area of the Gifford Pinchot National Forest was selected.

According to the Skamania County Sheriff's Office, people who were traveling with Hanson lost track of her at the gathering and ended up leaving without her. Since then, her family has been unable to reach her.

Read the whole story

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3 arrests in graffiti incident at S. Tahoe school

Three teenagers were reportedly caught tagging Bijou Community School in South Lake Tahoe on July 13.

Six South Lake Tahoe teens were at the scene that night, with only three being arrested. A fourth arrest is pending, according to officers.

Four of the six were actively engaged in marking the campus with graffiti, officers said.

"The others were interviewed and determined not to be involved in the graffiti, none of which appeared to be gang related," police Sgt. Brad Williams said in a statement.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Tallac Association without an

executive director

By Kathryn Reed

Board members of the Tahoe Tallac Association will be working without an executive director for the foreseeable future.

Lori Cramer has tendered her resignation effective the end of the month. Notice was give to the board at the July 11 meeting, with it being made public July 14.


Lori Cramer

It was a mutual decision with the board because of the financial situation the group is in – owing Cramer money, needing to repay loans to board members, and revenue not as robust as anticipated.

The organization did learn this week $11,000 in the form of a grant and $5,000 in sponsorship money will be coming in this month.

Today the board is having what board President Ginger Nicolay-Davis described as “an all-day strategy session.”

She told *Lake Tahoe News* board members will be divvying up the executive director duties. What to do about a leadership position likely won’t be decided until the bulk of the summer festival is over.

Nicolay-Davis said TTA – which puts on the annual Valhalla Arts and Music Festival each summer at the Tallac Site on the

South Shore – has no intention of going away. In fact, she said since word has gotten out about the nonprofit's struggles, people are coming forward to help however they can.

She also said the U.S. Forest Service, which owns the property, wants to continue the 32-year-old partnership.

Nicolay-Davis said the board would be adding members, but not immediately.

"We don't want to bring new people on until all of our ducks are in a row," Nicolay-Davis said.

Lane wants to stay involved with bankrupt S. Tahoe project

By Kathryn Reed

Randy Lane is not giving up on being an integral part of whatever the rebar and concrete near the state line in South Lake Tahoe eventually becomes.

His firm, Lake Tahoe Development Company, this month asked the bankruptcy judge in Sacramento for more time to come up with a plan. South Lake Tahoe and the creditors have until Aug. 16 to file with the court their views on Lane's plan.

City Attorney Patrick Enright told *Lake Tahoe News* the city has no desire to allow Lane more time to figure out what to do with the 11 acres.

Debris covers parts of the rebar-concrete bankrupt construction site in South Lake Tahoe. Photo/Kathryn Reed

“It’s the same thing he has been saying for the last two years,” Enright said.

That site was supposed to be a $400 million convention center, with two boutique hotels, retail and open space.

The idea is it would have complemented the Heavenly Village development on the other side of Highway 50.

Without all the parties foreclosing, Lane still has ownership of nine of the 29 parcels. Owens Financial is owed the most – about $25 million.

Lane admits something different than originally planned is what the market now dictates.

“The units will be smaller so you can be more competitive from a pricing standpoint. The market doesn’t want $2 million units,” Lane said.

Several entities have looked at the project, though all turned out to be false starts. Since the foreclosures started Vail Resorts has revisited the possibility of having a roll in the project. Initially the Colorado company was the hotelier. Vail backed out long before LTDC filed for bankruptcy.

Heavenly Mountain Resort is Vail’s only ski resort without a high-end hotel nearby.

JMA Ventures out of San Francisco, which owns Alpine and Homewood ski resorts, also studied the possibility of taking over the project.

“Every week there seems to be more interest than the previous week,” Lane told *Lake Tahoe News*. “The solution is not filling in the hole and starting over again.”

For now, though, there is no serious investor.

City officials allowed construction to start without the Zephyr Cove developer having financing definitively in place. Lane was also allowed to go forward without a consolidated map being filed. That is why the bankruptcy process that started in October 2009 and subsequent foreclosures in December 2010 are convoluted.

The site continues to look more rundown by the day, with graffiti on fences, no passable sidewalks for pedestrians and debris inside the compound.

Lane would like to change some of that by October.

“I want to clean the place up, maybe fix the sidewalks,” Lane said.

Asked who would pay for that, Lane said, “Us, and a couple of the creditors and maybe the city.”

It’s possible at the early September court hearing the judge will put an end to Lane’s continuous pleas for more time. The judge could dismiss the case, which means the bankruptcy goes away. This could create a mess with property owners

The judge could also turn it into a Chapter 7 bankruptcy. This would mean liquidating the assets.

USFS wins court battle to remove Angora’s dead trees

By Kathryn Reed

The U.S. Forest Service is about to remove the trees that are a constant reminder of the June 2007 inferno that reduced 254 houses to ash.

This is because a federal judge on July 13 sided with the federal agency.

Earlier this year Earth Island Institute and the Center for Biological Diversity filed a lawsuit in U.S. District Court in Sacramento contending habitat for the rare black-backed woodpecker would be destroyed if the 1,398 acres were logged.

The Forest Service said that is not the case and maintains not clearing the trees will increase the threat of another catastrophic fire.

Judge Garland Burrell granted a summary judgment on all counts in the Forest Service’s favor.

Remains of the Angora Fire in April 2011. Photo/LTN

Restoration work could begin as early as July 26.

“Work to control harmful invasive plant species, improvements to the road and trail system, and mechanical and hand-thinning of dead and some live trees to reduce the future risk of wildfire and improve forest health will begin this summer,” the Forest Service said in a press release. “Planning and design for stream channel, wetland and meadow restoration projects continues, and some field work will begin next summer.”

More than 3,000 acres, mostly USFS land, burned during the multi-day fire that started June 24, 2007, when a campfire that wasn’t completely extinguished became a raging wildland fire on the outskirts of South Lake Tahoe.

A substantial number of trees had been removed in the last four years prior to the lawsuit being filed. Health and safety reasons were the reasons given for felling them.

A number of seedlings have also been planted.

With the lack of alive trees in the area and the abundance of moisture this winter and spring, water is everywhere in the burn area. Fresh vegetation and an array of wild flowers are sprouting in some areas. This will begin to stabilize the soil and absorb the water, but can’t take the place of the thousands of trees that were lost in the inferno.

Combo ski-parking pass available for Heavenly passholders

By Kathryn Reed

Harrah’s may have a few more empty parking spaces this winter. That’s because Heavenly Mountain Resort and South Lake Tahoe are partnering to offer skiers a deal to park at the garage near the gondola.

Until now Heavenly passholders had to pay the hourly rate of $3.75 or $25 daily rate — or park free at the casino and walk over if they wanted to access the mountain via the gondola.

On Tuesday the City Council approved a deal where Heavenly season passholders could park midweek for $229 or seven days for $299. This will be good for the length of the ski season. It compares to the winter monthly rate of $175. (The summer monthly rate is $50.)

The details of the parking pass should to be worked out next week between the entities.

The plan is the ski pass will have something on it indicating it is also a parking pass. This makes it non-transferable because it will have a specific person’s name and picture on it.

Still to be figured out is if the pass has a magnetic strip to raise the arm to allow the vehicle to exit or some other way for people to leave the garage.

The garage has 420 regular spaces and 90 overflow. The plan is sell no more than 200 midweek passes and a maximum 150 unlimited passes.

Court ruling may hit Incline school district's coffers

By Brian Duggan, Reno Gazette-Journal

Washoe County officials are starting to gauge the fallout of a Nevada Supreme Court decision from last week that ordered the county to issue property tax refunds to Incline Village and Crystal Bay property owners and opened a budget hole that could exceed $40 million by early estimates.

The refunds are for the owners of 8,700 parcels in the two north Lake Tahoe communities who overpaid in property taxes in 2006-07. The decision is the result of a nine-year legal battle over improper property assessment methods, such as basing property values on views of Lake Tahoe, that were ultimately deemed unconstitutional.

For now, county officials are still trying to calculate the total cost of the refund and finding the people who are owed money, which could take months. County commissioners are expected to address the matter at their July 26 meeting.

While county officials in 2009 said the refund would amount to $13 million, County Manager Katy Simon said a more accurate, albeit very rough, estimate is closer to $40 million, of which approximately $4 million is about five years of accrued interest for the unpaid refunds .

In an email sent to employees last week, Simon called the high court decision a “game-changer,” but had little detail regarding the potential effect on entities such as the Washoe County School District.

Regardless, county commissioners must now figure out how to close the potential $40 million deficit on top of a $33.8 million budget gap the county was already facing, which the county seeks to fix by $20 million in employee concessions and program cuts.

Read the whole story

Placer GOP committee’s finances again under scrutiny

By Torey Van Oot, Sacramento Bee

For the second time in two years, the Placer County Republican Central Committee is facing investigators’ questions about its financial practices.

The state Fair Political Practices Commission is examining a complaint that key committee members used donors’ money to benefit themselves.

A critic of the committee’s actions says she’s been questioned by the FBI.

Lawmakers have gotten involved, pressing for more information about the committee’s ties to Headquarters Partnership, a financial entity used to pay the committee’s rent. They say the financial concerns have clouded the party’s local operations for more than a year and created deep divisions within the GOP.

“I know many people on that committee who are good servants to the cause, but there are some there that are not really playing above board,” said Republican Sen. Doug LaMalfa of Richvale. “A lot of funny stuff (is) going on with where the money’s going or how many hands it’s going through before a check actually gets cut.”

The Placer County arm of the state Republican Party is an elected board that can raise and spend funds to mobilize voters and elect GOP candidates.

The controversy began with the committee’s decision in 2007 to pay rent on Roseville office space through a private entity called Headquarters Partnership.

Its partners were Tom Hudson, then committee chairman, and George Park, then first vice chair of the committee, according to minutes of a March meeting that year.

Read the whole story