Ensign stepping down May 3; Heller seen as replacement

By Karoun Demirjian, Las Vegas Sun

WASHINGTON – Embattled Sen. John Ensign announced this afternoon he will resign from office, effective May 3. The move opens the door for Republican Gov. Brian Sandoval to appoint Rep. Dean Heller to finish out the term.

“It is with tremendous sadness that I officially hand over the Senate seat that I have held for eleven years,” Ensign said in a statement. “The turbulence of these last few years is greatly surpassed by the incredible privilege that I feel to have been entrusted to serve the people of Nevada. I can honestly say that being a United States Senator has been the honor of my life.”



John Ensign

Sun columnist Jon Ralston first reported earlier in the afternoon that Ensign would step down.

If Heller is appointed, it would give him a strategic leg up as an incumbent against his presumed opponent in the 2012 Senate race, Democrat Rep. Shelley Berkley. Berkley is still expected to run.

Nevada State Democratic Party spokesman Zach Hudson released a statement Thursday afternoon criticizing Heller.

Read the whole story

Study: Compulsive gambling more common than alcoholism

By Liz Benston, Las Vegas Sun

For decades, researchers have said that alcoholism is more common in the U.S. adult population than compulsive gambling.



But last month the University of Buffalo's Research Institute on Addictions published a surprising report concluding just the opposite.

After age 21, gambling problems are more common than booze dependence, the institute found in analyzing data from two national studies.

The study included all forms of gambling, such as lotteries, office pools, charity bingo, Internet gambling and raffles.

The results have drawn skepticism from some treatment experts in light of long accepted research that drinking problems are at least twice as common as gambling problems. Even the institute's chief investigator, John Welte, was surprised by the results.

"I didn't expect problem gambling to be more common than alcohol dependence for such a wide age range," he said.

Read the whole story

Endless hours spent on S. Tahoe pot law without resolution

By Kathryn Reed

Many of the rules to control the cultivation of medical marijuana in South Lake Tahoe are already on the books, but it would be hard to know that based on the number of hours staff, council and the public has to endure when it comes to discussing the topic.



Once again, it was an agenda item for the City Council. Once again, they delayed passing the ordinance.

On April 19 the five electeds gave staff direction to come up with another version that may be voted on at the May 3 meeting.

California's landlord-tenant rights handbook will take care of a number of concerns. City building codes dictate much of what can be grown where, along with the fire codes. Health laws also are already in place. Then there's the Fourth Amendment about search and seizure. Law enforcement should be able to handle the rest. Plus, Proposition 215 – state law – has a say in what the city can do.

All the city needs to decide is how much growing area to allow (probably will be 10 percent of the square foot of the

dwelling), the fine structure (most likely starting at $1,000) and if the name of people with a cultivation permit will be public information (could be secret unless a violation occurs).

Once the council figures out an ordinance, then the nearly 600 residences out of compliance can be brought into compliance. This could be a moneymaker for the city because the suggested fee for a permit is $300, plus an annual inspection by the fire marshal of more than $200.

One reason the city needs to allow cultivation to occur is Proposition 215 does not allow the transportation of medical marijuana. So, the three collectives must get their supply locally.

Quake expert shakes things up with talk of Tahoe faults

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – "My fear is we don't even remotely have a clue how to deal with something like this."

Those are the words of Graham Kent, director of the Nevada Seismological Laboratory and professor of the Department of Geological Sciences and Engineering at UNR. He is speaking about when the next big quake hits Lake Tahoe and a tsunami wipes-out much of what's on shore.



Graham Kent talks April 20 about Tahoe earthquake faults. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The West Tahoe Fault hasn't had major action in 4,500 years. Scientists say it's due because history shows it erupts every 4,000 to 5,000 years.

"This is a big, big fault," Kent said as he spoke to Soroptimist International South Lake Tahoe on April 20 at Harrah's Lake Tahoe.

Besides being a leader in his field, Kent is a 1980 South Tahoe High School graduate. So, this isn't just work for him – it's a bit about educating his hometown about the dangers that lie beneath Angora, Cascade, and Fallen Leaf lakes, as well as the Incline Village and Stateline faults. Then there's the Genoa fault in the Carson Valley.

What Kent sees as a danger is the lack of monitoring that is going on in Tahoe. No equipment exists on the East Shore. He is hoping to change that.

He believes officials are not planning for what an earthquake and subsequent tsunami would do to the region.

Kent showed computer-generated videos of what the water surge would look like – making some comparisons to the March tsunami in Japan.

“We need to do a much better job of putting signage on beaches. There are 17,000 people (on Tahoe) beaches in the summer. They wouldn’t get out,” Kent said.

He doesn’t want to be an alarmist, but he does want to be a realist. He sees what other countries are doing when it comes to earthquake research compared to the United States and he’s dismayed. He sees what the Northwest does to warn people about tsunamis and evacuation routes and can’t believe the dialog isn’t even happening in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

Kent is hoping his agency will be able to change that – in terms of education and obtaining better data about what is going on when is comes to seismic activity in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

This audience was the first to see lidar (light detection and ranging) images of the Tahoe faults. This technology helps to better define the faults for the naked eye.

These images are available online, then search for Tahoe.

He said as much as the basin keeps putting money toward fine sediment reduction, it would take one earthquake a matter of seconds or minutes to undo all that work.

“Tahoe is strewn full of catastrophic events,” Kent said.

Kent’s crews will be doing work on the Stateline fault this summer. He hopes to get onto Cascade Lake next month to do research. And when the snow melts, he will be walking the West Tahoe Fault at Angora to find out more about the area where he spent many a summer jumping off the cliffs into the lake.

El Dorado redistricting may significantly impact Tahoe

The Lake Tahoe portion of El Dorado County may not have a supervisor devoted just for that area.

Every 10 years all counties look at boundaries based on current Census results.

The U.S. Census Bureau estimates El Dorado County's population at 181,058, an increase of approximately 25,000 residents since the 2000 Census.

The county Surveyor's Office has produced five options for future supervisorial district boundaries. Each version contains supervisorial districts with approximately 36,212 residents. The map alternatives will be formally presented to the Board of Supervisors April 26 at 10am at the county government center in Placerville. The board is expected to adopt a final map in July.

All of the redistricting map alternatives are available online. The website also includes reference maps, a feedback form, contact information, relevant agenda items, and will serve as a platform for future redistricting related announcements.

The redistricting team with Supervisor Ray Nutting will have a community meeting April 28 at the Pollock Pines Community Center, 2675 Sanders Drive from 7-9pm. Another workshop is May 5 at the El Dorado Hills Community Services District Pavilion, 1021 Harvard Way from 6-8pm. Details of additional workshops are pending, though it's not known if one will be in Tahoe.

Nevada legislators' bickering doesn't resolve K-12 budget gap

By Anne Knowles

CARSON CITY – The Nevada Assembly's meeting to debate and close the state's K-12 education budget ended in an acrimonious stalemate, with Assembly Republicans rallying behind Gov. Brian Sandoval's budget and Democrats arguing for smaller cuts to education.

"We've been told it's the governor's way or no way," said William Horne, D-Las Vegas, as he spoke in opposition to a motion by Assemblyman Pete Goicoechea, R-Eureka, to vote on eight elements of the governor's proposal. "I can't even call it a debate. We're not having the discussion. I'm disheartened by that."

"When I got elected I was clearly told to learn to live within your means," said Assemblyman Ira Hansen, R-Sparks, who added that Democrats were proposing to raise taxes without admitting to it.



John Oceguera

In the end, after more than six hours of testimony and

discussion, the Assembly retired without any action on the budget Tuesday night.

Toward the end, the debate became heated, with several Democratic members reprimanding Assemblyman Mark Sherwood, R-Henderson, for calling the process “a farce.”

The education budget, like all department budgets, is normally presented to and closed by the Assembly’s Ways and Means committee, but Assembly leadership announced last week it was taking the state’s most important issues out of committee to the entire body so all legislators could have a say in the process.

“We’ve got some big decisions to make,” Assembly Speaker John Oceguera, D-Las Vegas, said to open the meeting. “This session we are deciding what kind of state we want to be.”

Oceguera said if the budget proposed by Sandoval stands, it would mean more than $1 billion in cuts to K-12 education. Sandoval says the hit will be closer to $600,000.

“Seventy percent of the cuts are in salary adjustments,” said Heidi Gansert, Sandoval’s chief of staff. She said the governor’s budget treats education employees the same as state employees. The budget implements a salary freeze and 5 percent pay cut via furloughs as well as now requiring teachers to pony up one-quarter of the contribution made to their retirement through Public Employees Retirement System. (Other state employees pay 50 percent of the contribution.)

Personnel costs make up the bulk of school districts’ costs – 90 percent of Washoe County’s education budget goes to teachers, administrators and other school employees, for example – so teachers and teachers’ salaries, in particular, came under fire.

“Is collective bargaining the problem?” asked Assemblyman Crescent Hardy, R-Mesquite, referring to the process by which

teachers and schools districts negotiate teacher salaries.

“I can only speak for Washoe County, but collective bargaining is not a problem,” said Heath Morrsion, Washoe County superintendent, in a lengthy question-and-answer session with legislators. “I have been through one budget cycle and asked four of my five employee associations to engage in contract negotiations. They could have said no, but they said yes.”

Morrison said Washoe County last year cut $37 million from its budget and is looking at cutting $75 million this year and another $75 million next year. Even if the county went back to the same trough for cuts, said Morrison, Washoe will still need to find another $40 million to slash from its budget.

“What are the options? We have spent every day looking at this,” Morrison said.

He said options include 30-day furloughs or increasing class size by six students. The county has already asked its board of trustees to increase class size by two, which would cut 94 teaching jobs.

Morrison said his biggest concern, though, was the governor’s plan to sweep out funds from the school district’s debt reserves. The school districts are required by law to maintain debt reserves that equal 100 percent of a year’s worth of principal and interest payments on its bonds. Sandoval is proposing to reduce that to 10 percent and take the rest of the reserves to offset other cuts.

“We have been told the money would be funneled back to us but we have not been told how,” Morrison told *Lake Tahoe News* after the meeting.

Morrison said that would mean the county could not raise money for capital projects, such as building new schools or renovating and maintaining existing ones, by issuing bonds for six to eight years because it could not prudently do so until

it built its reserves back up.

Morrison also asked legislators to consider not allowing the Governmental Services Tax, which is charged on car licenses and helps funds schools, to be reduced from 2.6 percent to 2.25 percent.

“That would mean $111 million (for all schools), $17 million for Washoe,” Morrison said. “It would help.”

Douglas County School District would lose $3.3 million if the GST rate were allowed to drop. This is on top of the nearly $6 million is just approved in cuts last week.

Representatives from other school districts, including Clark, Nye and Lyon counties, also made presentations, as well as Gansert and Director of Administration Andrew Clinger, who took questions on the governor’s proposed budget.

Although the meeting produced no action on the budget, several members suggested the Assembly should wait until after May 2, when the Economic Forum releases new forecasts for the state’s economy. The budget is built based on the forum’s findings and the upcoming forecasts are expected to be rosier.

Study: 1% of U.S. energy consumption used for indoor pot grows

By Colin Sullivan, New York Times

Indoor marijuana cultivation consumes enough electricity to power 2 million average-sized U.S. homes, which corresponds to

about 1 percent of national power consumption, according to a study by a staff scientist at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory.

Researcher Evan Mills' study notes that cannabis production has largely shifted indoors, especially in California, where medical marijuana growers use high-intensity lights usually reserved for operating rooms that are 500 times more powerful that a standard reading lamp.

The resulting price tag is about $5 billion in annual electricity costs, said Mills, who conducted and published the research independently from the Berkeley lab. The resulting contribution to greenhouse gas emissions equals about 3 million cars on the road, he said.

Narrowing the implications even further reveals some staggering numbers. Mills said a single marijuana cigarette represents 2 pounds of CO2 emissions, an amount equal to running a 100-watt light bulb for 17 hours.

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Read the whole story

Private parking company axed, S. Tahoe to take over

Updated: April 20 11:47am.

By Kathryn Reed

The term “parking Nazis” for the people charged with patrolling the lot at the Village Center near Stateline will have to be retired now that South Lake Tahoe is severing its agreement with High Sierra Patrol.

Since the reorganization at the city, staff has been delving into why the parking garage at Heavenly Village is losing money and what various contracts say.



A kinder, gentler approach to parking at the Village Center near Stateline is coming. Photo/LTN

Truth is the garage is not losing money, city officials revealed April 19. It’s breaking even. It’s the enforcement across the street at the private Village Center that is taking a toll on keeping expenses in line. City officials are going to separate the two entities – as they admit should have been

done at the time contracts were signed in 2002.

As with many contracts signed in that era, the one that says the city must provide enforcement at what was called Crescent V Center near Stateline essentially goes on for perpetuity. High Sierra also had contracts with the city starting before 2000 to patrol various locations in the city.

The odd thing about High Sierra Patrol being able to cite people is the 2000-01 El Dorado County Grand Jury report criticized the city for using the private company. At the time, the city said it would go back to using employees for parking enforcement. That policy did not last long.

Terry Hackett, who owns the Village Center, got the city to pay for the enforcement after convincing the powers that be that people using the Heavenly gondola and those shopping or eating at Heavenly Village would clutter his lot in an attempt to avoid paying to park across the street.

Hackett told *Lake Tahoe News* on April 20 that when he is in town next month he plans to discuss various aspects of the parking issue with city officials, including how long people can park, communication between enforcers and the public, and the implementation of things.

The nastiness between patrons and parking enforcers has gone on for nine years, with residents riled up at parking hearings, locals and visitors writing scathing letters to the media, and the city earning another black eye.

Much of the consternation had to deal with High Sierra telling people they could not cross the street if they were parked at the Village Center. Arguments erupted. People were upset. It was a public relations nightmare for the city.

With High Sierra out as of the end of May, it means the city will use mostly community resource officers to patrol the area. They will chalk tires, then issue citations if the

person parks for more than two hours. People will not be harassed if they are seen walking across the street. It's all about how long the car is parked, not where the people are.

The city's 2010-11 contract with High Sierra had the company receiving $85,604 for parking patrol and $37,730 for snow removal enforcement.

The city will save that money by doing things in-house, which could mean the parking authority breaks even.

"The goal is not to issue more citations," Nancy Kerry, spokeswoman for the city, told *Lake Tahoe News* after the City Council meeting. The city just wants to enforce the rules.

The tickets High Sierra writes cannot be tracked by location even though the contract for each area is unique. This is why the city cannot say how much money was brought in from a particular area.

A third party, JDS, collects the revenue.

"The city can discern based on revenue about two to three tickets a day are written at the Village Center," Kerry said.

From each $50 parking ticket the city takes in about $42. The city doesn't see a dime until the appeals process is complete.

One way the city hopes to generate income is by putting in parking meters. The first will go in this summer near Heavenly Village on Bellamy Court. The plan is it will be less expensive to park in those 20 spaces than in the garage.

More paid parking will be added near city beaches in the coming years.

Other items of note:

• The council is expected to decide June 7 on the bids it receives from potential ice rink operators. There was a walk

through April 18 with perspective bidders. One was from within the city, two were groups from the community, and one person from Virginia.

• The two workshops were postponed because the meeting did not end until 5:30pm. The General Plan will be on the regular May 3 agenda, with City Manager Tony O'Rourke giving updates individually to councilmembers before then. If the capital improvement plan does not fit into the May 3 workshop, a special meeting will be called on May 10.

• In order to play fair, the appointments to the city's fiscal sustainability committee won't be made until May 3. This is because two applicants missed the deadline. This means the process is open until April 27.

• The state City Clerk Conference will be hosted by South Lake Tahoe at Embassy Suites April 26-29.

S. Tahoe council supports Nevada leaving TRPA

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe's City Council took a baby step toward wanting to be done with the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. On the same day, the council agreed the board and members of the League to Save Lake Tahoe should get a clue about what is really going on in the basin and then find a new executive director.

In what was a marathon council meeting April 19, one topic was whether the council would support a bill in the Nevada Legislature that would have it withdraw from the bi-state Compact with California that formed the TRPA 42 years ago. Another item centered on a letter to the League.

In what appeared more like a sparring match between Councilmembers Bruce Grego and Claire Fortier that had to be refereed by Mayor Hal Cole, it was eventually agreed the council would send a letter in support of the Nevada Senate bill. The vote was 4-1, with Fortier the lone dissenter.

But the motion was much more than that. It also included sending a letter to South Tahoe's representatives in the California Legislature stating all the reasons why it doesn't like TRPA, the proposition of forming a new bi-state agency, and the threat of South Tahoe withdrawing from TRPA if its demands are not met.

South Tahoe wants more control. It wants an elected Governing Board, not political appointees. It wants logic in decision-making by the TRPA, not having it involved with the paint color of houses or whether a drive-though business should be allowed.

Fortier supports petitioning California lawmakers for change, but does not believe the city should be involved in Nevada politics.

To complicate matters, during councilmember comments at the end of the meeting, Councilwoman Angela Swanson said although it was not legal at that point to switch her vote to no, that is how she intended to vote.

The motion as it was made was convoluted and probably should have been separate motions to adhere to protocols the city operates by. Nonetheless, the motion would have passed if she

had voted no.

A no vote by Swanson would have been in line with her arguments. She, too, has issues with a California city telling Nevada what to do. She also said a letter to California lawmakers needs teeth and that a meeting with Tahoe's reps should be called for so they could introduce legislation.

No one at the meeting, including the city attorney, could say what happens if Nevada votes to pull out of TRPA because Congress formed the bi-state regulatory agency.

The NTRPA and CTRPA existed before the TRPA was formed.

"NTRPA still exists. It's essentially the Nevada delegation of our board. They have a special meeting once or twice a year to discuss gaming issues and to elect the 'at large' Nevada board member," Julie Regan, TRPA spokeswoman told *Lake Tahoe News*. "CTRPA dissolved in the early '80s after the Compact was amended to gain more statewide representation on the Governing Board."

Special interest groups got a bad rap Tuesday, with Fortier calling the League a special interest, and Cole saying Gov. Jerry Brown and the Attorney General's Office are special interests. Brown is labeled as such partly because of his most recent appointment to the Governing Board – attorney Clem Shute, a longtime League supporter.

"He has been a problem ever since he was attorney general," Cole said of Brown. "If I were in Nevada, I would support this whole-heartedly."

It was Davis who brought forth the idea to write a letter to the League, in which the original draft said the environmental nonprofit used "underhanded tactics." His colleagues voted to have that scraped.

At one point Davis said he wanted to cooperate with the League

and in the next breath called them obsolete. But he could never answer Swanson's question of what the purpose of the letter would be.

Grego added that the letter should also ask for a meeting between the council and League's board.

Although Davis kept saying this is a new day, his tactics are the same as they were when he was first on the council from 1992-2004 – write a letter to complain. He had no other ideas to effect change.

Candidate Gaines planning for life in Legislature

By Torey Van Oot, Sacramento Bee

The election is still several weeks away, but 4th Assembly District candidate Beth Gaines is already contemplating bill packages and committee assignments.

The Roseville Republican has met Gov. Jerry Brown and the first lady several times. She's even attended a news conference on the Capitol steps.

Gaines and Democrat Dennis Campanale are the sole candidates on the May 3 ballot to fill the seat formerly held by her husband, Ted Gaines, who was elected to the state Senate in January.

The two emerged as the top vote-getters in an eight-way March primary battle, with Beth Gaines besting her closest Republican rival by just one percentage point.

But the upcoming round of balloting isn’t expected to be much of a nailbiter.

Name recognition and a double-digit perentage registration edge for Republicans, who make up 45 percent of district voters, give her a leg up in the race for her spouse’s old job.

Gaines, hoping for spots on the education and health panels, says she wants to be “completely ready on Day One” to dive into the budget and other issues up for debate under the dome.

Read the whole story