Congresswoman taken off ventilator

By Thomas H. Maugh II, Los Angeles Times

Surgeons at Tucson's University Medical Center removed Rep. Gabrielle Giffords from a ventilator Saturday and inserted a tracheotomy tube into her neck to assist her breathing, according to the center.

Removing her from the ventilator, which means she is now breathing on her own, allows the medical team to assess her ability to speak and is another step toward stabilizing her condition so she can leave the intensive care unit and be moved to a regular hospital room.

The tracheotomy tube in her throat provides a passageway for free movement of air and, if she begins to have trouble breathing, allows a simple way for doctors to insert a tube into her lungs to assist her breathing.

Read the whole story

Mild quake rattles Douglas County

By Reno Gazette-Journal

A magnitude 3.2 earthquake struck this morning in southern Douglas County about 15 miles southeast of Gardnerville, the Nevada Seismological Laboratory reported.

The quake came at 8:35 a.m. and was about 4.5 miles deep. The reading has been reviewed by a seismologist.

The Douglas County Sheriff's Office said it has no reports of damage.

Read the whole story

Douglas County bucks state trend – people are moving in

By Northern Nevada Business Weekly

The number of people moving into Nevada has slowed after 24 years of high inbound traffic, finds an annual study of moving trends by United Van Lines.

United Van Lines' 34th annual migration study, which tracks interstate household moving patterns among the 48 contiguous states, shows that 1,761 households used United Van Line services to move into the state in 2010, while 1,451 households contracted with United to leave the state. The 54.8 percent of incoming shipments to the state is just a hair under the benchmark of 55 percent that denotes high-inbound traffic.

In Northern Nevada, neighboring states accounted for a large portion of the relocation business.

Of the 313 households that used United Van Lines to move out of Washoe County in 2010, the overwhelming majority headed to California (54), Arizona (15) and Washington (28), or to heavily populated states such as Florida (18) and Texas (31). Those same states accounted for 128, or 46 percent, of the 277

households that moved into the county last year as well.

Read the whole story

Investors shun coal, turning to cleaner energy

By Steven Mufson, Washington Post

The headline news for the coal industry in 2010 was what didn't happen: Construction did not begin on a single new coal-fired power plant in the United States for the second straight year.

This in a nation where a fleet of coal-fired plants generates nearly half the electricity used.

But a combination of low natural gas prices, shale gas discoveries, the economic slowdown and litigation by environmental groups has stopped – at least for now – groundbreaking on new ones.

"Coal is a dead man walkin'," says Kevin Parker, global head of asset management and a member of the executive committee at Deutsche Bank. "Banks won't finance them. Insurance companies won't insure them. The EPA is coming after them. . . . And the economics to make it clean don't work."

From 2000 to 2008, construction started on 20 units in 19 plants, according to Edison Electric Institute. Last year, utilities and power-generating companies dropped plans to build 38 coal plants while announcing that they would retire 48 aging, inefficient ones, according to the environmental group Sierra Club.

Although 2010 saw the collapse of climate legislation in the Senate, the Sierra Club is trumpeting such statistics as a sign that “coal is a fuel of the past.”

The battle over coal plants could sharpen in 2011, as the Environmental Protection Agency deploys regulations to improve the efficiency – and lower the greenhouse gas emissions – of big power plants.

Read the whole story

Gaines wants to change special elections rules

State Sen. Ted Gaines, R-Roseville, has introduced a bill to help cut the cost of special elections in small California counties.

Senate Bill 109 would give counties with populations of less than 400,000 the option to only have vote-by-mail special election.

“My bill will help cut the costs counties incur to conduct special elections by eliminating the mandate to open polling places and hire staff for these elections,” Gaines said in a press release.

The average cost of an election in El Dorado County is roughly $300,000.

“Should Senate Bill 109 become law, I estimate a savings of about $50,000 – and that is on the conservative side,” El Dorado County Registrar of Voters Bill Schultz said in the same release. “It comes down to not just saving money, but

also avoiding the issues our smaller foothill communities face during elections held in the winter months. Delivery of equipment, transportation issues – all those are negated with the ability to vote by mail."

Gaines was part of special election this month when he successfully ran for the Senate. Twelve counties had to pay for the election. This spring four counties will pay for a special election to replace Gaines in the Assembly.

Report: State needs to crackdown on wasteful water use

By Bettina Boxall, Los Angeles Times

California should more aggressively enforce the state's ban on wasteful water use and crack down on inefficient irrigation practices, a state watermaster recommends.

In a report that will be presented next week to the State Water Resources Control Board, Delta Watermaster Craig Wilson wades into a potentially explosive area of water law: the "reasonable use" doctrine in the state Constitution.

The principle, reinforced in statute and court decisions, holds that a water right does not include the right to waste water and mandates that "the water resources of the state be put to beneficial use."

Read the whole story

Proposal to raise slot fees gains steam in Nevada

By Liz Benston, Las Vegas Sun

A long-running legislative proposal to increase slot machine fees is gaining steam as Nevada deals with a budget deficit of billions of dollars and a gubernatorial mandate to avoid increasing taxes.

Predictably, some casino interests oppose the fee increases, calling them taxes by another name and a shortsighted cash grab that doesn't fix the underlying problem of a tax system overly reliant on a single industry.

The issue is raising a philosophical debate about whether those who regulate the state's chief industry should be entirely funded by fees borne by the companies they oversee.

Would funding the budget entirely with fees make the industry's watchdog more dependent on the fortunes of the gaming industry and thus, hurt its independence?

Will it guarantee robust funds for a regulatory function crucial to the state, assuring that regulators stay ahead of the industry's growth and complexity?

Read the whole story

TripAdvisor sponsorships pit North v. South Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – TripAdvisor isn't solely driven by free content like customers might think it is. Chambers of commerce and visitors bureaus may buy regions, thus in turn dictating what content viewers see.

The divide is pitting the North Shore against the South Shore in Lake Tahoe.



In July, the North Lake Tahoe Visitors Bureau locked in the use of Lake Tahoe, Calif., as a region. This means people clicking on that region will be fed information dominated by the North Shore entity.

Todd Skelton, sales manager with TripAdvisor, spoke to the South Lake Tahoe Lodging Association meeting Jan. 13. He talked briefly that morning about this new product his company has, but more in-depth with *Lake Tahoe News* the following day.

"We do that because user generated content is great for hotels, restaurants and attractions, but it may not be the best content for a region," Skelton said of the sponsorships.

It's also clearly a tool for TripAdvisor to rake in some cash. The one-year sponsorships range in price from $7,500 to $70,000. The entity that has the rights has first right of refusal when the contract expires.

Skelton said the price depends on how detailed the sponsor wants to be as well as unique visitors to that page.

According to Carol Chaplin, Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority

executive director on the South Shore, TripAdvisor first offered Lake Tahoe, Calif., to the North Shore. Andy Chapman with NLTRA did not return a phone call.

Skelton said he doesn't have the history of how NLTRA got those rights, but said it is possible for the two agencies to share the name.

"North and South could not play nice in the sandbox. They could not figure out how to split the content," Skelton said.

Starting next week, LTVA will have sponsorship title of Lake Tahoe, Nev.; South Lake Tahoe; and Tahoe area.

"It's an unbudgeted expense, but was required for us to maintain our 'territory,' if you will," Chaplin emailed LTN.

What exactly the respective Lake Tahoe tourism bureaus are paying to TripAdvisor is not known at this time.

TripAdvisor allows nonprofits to buy the regions, not a business. The city of South Lake Tahoe would qualify as such an entity if it so desired.

It wasn't until last year that South Lake Tahoe was listed as its own region. Skelton at the meeting said it has skyrocketed to the 10th most searched California destination – below Santa Barbara and above Napa.

He said even though Expedia bought the 10-year-old company about three years ago, the parent company does not influence placement. For example, a hotel that does not use Expedia will not be placed below ones that do on TripAdvisor, according to Skelton.

One thing that surprised the packed room a the LTVA office on Thursday is people writing reviews from their rooms in Tahoe are likely to not see their posts go live. This is because TripAdvisor's fraud detection system assumes the use of a local IP address is someone in-house doing the review, not a

guest in the hotel.

A concern brought up by a meeting attendee was what to do about the customer who complains about something, then threatens to write a negative review on TripAdvisor if their room or meal is not comped.

Skelton advises not giving into to threat. He added that businesses may make a "management response" on the site to counter any negative reviews. However, all the examples he used in doing so were to agree with the person – as in, yes, we are making changes to fix such and such.

Some members in the audience said their experience with TripAdvisor in trying to refute what they called a bogus complaint was unpleasant. It became a he said, he said situation, with the negative review staying.

TripAdvisor and other reviewing sites like Yelp are affecting how consumers choose where to sleep, eat and play. Skelton said TripAdvisor has 35 million reviews, with more than 42 million unique visitors a month.

Amount of North Shore sewage reaching lake uncertain

By Steve Timko, Reno Gazette-Journal

A five-month-old, $278,000 generator failed Dec. 19 and 150,000 gallons of sewage spilled out of a manhole onto the ground about 260 feet from Lake Tahoe on Dec. 19.

The North Tahoe Public Utility District has hired an expert to try to determine how much of the sewage made it into the lake.

But NTPUD did three tests and there were no indications of pollution in the water, said Pam Lefrancios, an NTPUD executive assistant.

Problems started when the electricity around Lake Tahoe was cut due to weather, Lefrancois said. A $278,000 generator the district had installed the prior July to provide back up power to the sewer pump at the main station kicked on and NTPUD employees then went to install generators at other satellite pumps, she said.

The system notified NTPUD workers that the main generator had stopped working at about 1 p.m. and workers used NTPUD collection system to store the sewage, which averages about 861,000 gallons a day, Lefrancois said.

Read the whole story

California waste to be turned into ethanol in Nevada

By Mark Glover, Sacramento Bee

What Northern Californians throw away might someday end up back in their fuel tanks, courtesy of a newly formed business partnership.

Folsom-based waste hauler Waste Connections has partnered with a Pleasanton company that is ramping up to convert municipal solid waste into ethanol.

Fulcrum BioEnergy Inc. said last week that Waste Connections-collected waste ultimately will be used by Fulcrum’s Sierra BioFuels Plant, a planned facility for converting waste into

low-carbon ethanol, renewable electricity and other chemical products.

The $120 million facility will be built about 20 miles east of Reno in the Tahoe-Reno Industrial Center in Storey County. It’s expected to be up and running in late 2012.

Fulcrum said the plant will produce large volumes of low-cost transportation fuel and create more than 500 jobs in Northern Nevada while ultimately producing 10.5 million gallons of ethanol annually and 16 megawatts of renewable electricity. Financial terms were not disclosed.

Read the whole story