Pensions prove it pays to be a retired government employee

By Kathryn Reed

There comes a time when it doesn't pay to work. That time is when government workers are tapped out in the Public Employment Retirement System and it makes more sense to start withdrawing from that account.



Former El Dorado County Sheriff Jeff Neves a year ago said he was leaving office a year early to spend time with his family. He might be. He certainly has the cash to do so.

Neves, 56, is collecting $15,202 a month. He is not the only person in the county making more than $100,000 year off the taxpayer funded retirement system. Though he is the highest "paid" ex-county employee at $182,424.84 a year.

Here is what other former El Dorado County employees are collecting annually in retirement:

• Robert Altmeyer, $139,006.20

• Robert Brown, $118,633.68

• Steven Davis, $132,624.12

• Marty Hackett, $117,003.48

• Michael Hanford, $120,500.76

• Keith Harvey, $106,491.36

• David Koupal, $101,294.52

• John Litwinovich, $134,142.72

• Doug Nowka, $102,240.72

• William Whealton, $134,209.56.

Gayle Erbe-Hamlin, who retired earlier this month as the county's chief administrative officer, doesn't register on the list – but she will.

CalPERS recipients receive 60 percent of their highest annual salary.

Even though Erbe-Hamlin's base pay was $185,661 per year, she actually got paid $307,141.23 in 2010, according to county Auditor-Controller Joe Harn. The larger dollar amount includes longevity pay, management or administrative leave pay, buyout of sick pay and vacation time.

A letter from Harn this month to the Board of Supervisors warns the county's unfunded pension liability is $264 million and growing. It doubled from June 2008 to June 2009.

That figure is part of the estimated $1 trillion in unfunded retirement and health care packages nationwide. It's one of the reasons state, county and city budgets keep running a deficit.

South Lake Tahoe has initiated a two-tier pension system so new hires will get less when they retire. The county has not enacted such a policy.

But the city also has former employees who are collecting more than $100,000 a year through their pensions.

Former South Lake Tahoe Police Chief Terry Daniels, 52, is the top money collector at $123,630.84 a year, or $10,302.57 a month. He retired a year ago.

Current Police Chief Brian Uhler makes $145,000 a year – to

work.

Two former South Lake Tahoe fire chiefs are also in the $100,000 club:

• Mike Chandler, $101,670.48

• Jim Plake, $101,145.24.

Placer County has 21 ex-employees with pensions of more than $100,000 a year. Truckee has three people in that category.

All of this data is accessible to the public via this website.

Statewide, there are 9,111 retired government workers with pensions of more than $100,000 a year.

California has 59 city or county public employee retirement systems. Collectively there are 2,330,929 members – of that figure, 1,779,811 are active. There are 1,032,360 people receiving periodic payments.

Nevada has two PERS accounts with 117,794 members. Of those, 106,168 are active and 38,197 receive payments.

Below are two charts from the U.S. Census Bureau regarding PERS.

The 2008 survey covered fiscal years that ended between July 1, 2007, and June 30, 2008, and does not reflect revenue data for the entire calendar year of 2008.

State and level of government	Total receipts		Government contributions			Earnings on investments	
		Employee contributions	Total	From state government	From local government		
United States	79,649,581	36,929,944	81,996,539	36,261,593	45,734,946	(39,276,902)	
State	56,419,735	31,639,290	63,869,874	35,755,522	28,114,352	(39,089,429)	
Local	23,229,846	5,290,654	18,126,665	506,071	17,620,594	(187,473)	
California	(3,740,451)	7,784,280	15,767,098	4,705,733	11,061,365	(27,291,829)	
State	(6,204,256)	6,039,098	11,371,374	4,691,795	6,679,579	(23,614,728)	

Local	2,463,805	1,745,182	4,395,724	13,938	4,381,786	(3,677,101)	
Nevada	739,892	131,333	1,167,578	174,655	992,923	(559,019)	
State	739,892	131,333	1,167,578	174,655	992,923	(559,019)	

Expenditures of state and local public employee retirement systems for fiscal year 2008 in thousands of dollars.

State and level of government	Total payments	Benefits	Withdrawals	Other payments
United States	193,808,914	175,423,416	4,634,335	13,751,163
State	157,410,232	143,453,487	3,211,317	10,745,428
Local	36,398,682	31,969,929	1,423,018	3,005,735
California	30,195,419	28,019,958	606,055	1,569,406
State	21,397,173	20,194,042	482,035	721,096
Local	8,798,246	7,825,916	124,020	848,310
Nevada	1,243,467	1,033,622	16,830	193,015
State	1,243,467	1,033,622	16,830	193,015
Local	–	–	–	–

Missing snowboarder found dead in tree well at Alpine

By Kim Minugh and Bill Lindelof, Sacramento Bee

The search for a missing snowboarder near the Alpine Meadows Ski Resort came to a tragic conclusion this morning when

rescuers found her body in a tree well, according to authorities.

Rescue helicopter crews spotted the body of 25-year-old Shawnte Marie Willis of Tahoma this morning on a part of the mountain that previously had been off-limits to rescue crews because of inclement weather, Placer County sheriff’s Lt. Jeff Ausnow said in a press conference.

Authorities believe Willis might have hit a tree while snowboarding, Ausnow said. Her body was found in a tree well.

Read the whole story

Sense of normalcy returns with power on in most of Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

About 200 customers on the South Shore are still without power as crews from Sierra Pacific Power continue to rectify the problem.

A handful of customers around the lake are also off the grid.

“All three of the circuits that had been knocked out of service yesterday by falling trees and tree limbs are back in service. Sierra Pacific Power has fresh crews at work restoring service for the customers still affected by outages and we hope to have electric service restored to everyone sometime tonight,” Karl Walquist, spokesman for the utility said late Thursday morning.



Sagging and downed power lines were the norm Wednesday in Tahoe. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Those in the Al Tahoe neighborhood of South Lake Tahoe heard furnaces turn on about 3am.

Although South Tahoe opened the rec center as refuge Wednesday night, no one showed up.

When the power is out and temperatures begin to plummet, freezing pipes are always a concern. Typically South Tahoe Public Utility District does not recommend running water because of the waste involved and then having to treat it as sewage.

However, South Tahoe PUD spokesman Dennis Cocking said on a temporary basis in circumstance like the night of Dec. 29 it’s reasonable to keep a trickle of water flowing to prevent pipes from freezing.

Heat tape and keeping the house warm, then opening cabinet doors where the pipes are, are the normal ways to help prevent pipes from freezing.

STPUD had to contend with the power outage on Wednesday with generators. The district has a five-day supply of diesel on hand for such occasions.

Continued cold and snowy weather are in the forecast for the Lake Tahoe area through Monday. While the low tonight in South Tahoe is expected to be 1 degree, it is nowhere near the minus 11 degrees Truckee recorded for this date in 1911.

Highs will hover in the high 20s, low 30s through Monday. A chance of snow is forecast for this afternoon, Friday night and for the weekend.

Snowboarder dies at China Peak ski resort

By Robert Rodriguez, Fresno Bee

A day after a 29-year-old Fresno man died at the China Peak ski area, the Fresno County Coroner's Office is working to determine the cause of death.

Fresno County Coroner Dr. David Hadden said the autopsy of Peter Eli Shelby was expected to be completed Wednesday evening, but it may be the end of next week before he receives toxicology results.

Shelby was found Tuesday about 2:30 p.m. near one of the resort's ski runs in deep, powdery snow near a tree.

About 50 people, including members of the Fresno County Sheriff's Office search-and-rescue team and trained volunteers, began searching for Shelby on Monday night after a friend reported him missing about 3:30 p.m.

The two had spent the day snowboarding at the east Fresno County ski area, said sheriff's spokesman Chris Curtice.

“At one point, the friend was going back up the hill when Shelby zipped by him and [the friend] thought he would see him at the bottom of the hill,” Curtice said. “But he never found him again.”

Tim Cohee, owner of China Peak, said that while he does not know how Shelby died, it’s always important to ski with a friend, especially in areas of new, deep snow.

“Snowboarding is adventurous, and it’s always thrilling to find new terrain,” Cohee said. “But you have to be in control and ski with a friend in case something happens.”

Read the whole story

Pot industry takes cause to Washington

By Rob Hotakainen, McClatchy News Service

WASHINGTON – The cannabis industry has flexed its muscles in 15 states, including California, where it’s legal to smoke marijuana for medical purposes.

Now the industry is ready to go to work in Washington.

A new trade group, called the National Cannabis Industry Association, aims to bring together sellers, growers and manufacturers and to promote pot on Capitol Hill.

“Our intent is to be the go-to organization in Washington for this industry,” said Aaron Smith, the group’s executive director.

For the past five years, Smith worked as California director of the Marijuana Policy Project.

“Coming out of California and expanding into this national field is pretty exciting,” he said. “It’s pretty clear that the medical marijuana industry is becoming recognized more and more by the mainstream as a fully legitimate part of the economy.”

Read the whole story

Tahoe studying ways to meet greenhouse gas emissions rules

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Reducing greenhouse gas emissions per California law is being tackled by the Tahoe Transportation Commission by delving into vehicle miles traveled and other contributing factors.

Jeremy Nelson with Nelson/Nygaard Consulting Associates in San Francisco gave a brief overview of the Sustainable Communities Strategy (SCS) to the commission earlier this month. (The commission is part of the Tahoe Transportation District.)

“We are focusing on a few key areas to help identify a suite of polices to decrease the vehicle miles traveled in the region,” Nelson said.

The broad categories in the SCS are:

• Parking management

• Transportation demand management

• Transit service and facilities

• Bicycles and pedestrians

• Other capital projects.

An updated regional transportation plan must be approved by August 2012 to meet federal and California requirements. The California Legislature through AB32, the Global Warming Solutions Act, has set certain emission reduction targets for metropolitan planning organizations (MPO).

Every MPO must have an SCS in place. With the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency working on its Regional Plan update, much of the data the Tahoe MPO needs is contained in that document even though it covers both states.

“Transportation is the single larges source of CO2 emissions in California (at 38.4 percent),” Nelson said. He said it’s the average person driving her vehicle that is the biggest percentage – 71.8 percent of that 38.4 percent figure.

Nancy McDermid, TTD board member, wants all facets of transit to be looked at as alternatives. She mentioned how some California towns allow golf carts on city streets and this might be an option in parts of Tahoe.

No action was taken by the commission.

Hotels in Northern Nevada doing robust holiday business

By Frank X. Mullen Jr., Reno Gazette-Journal

Don’t look for signs of an economic recession in the Northern Nevada tourism industry this New Year’s weekend.

Major hotel-casinos at Tahoe and Reno-Sparks reported sold-out rooms and lots of reservations at in-house parties to say goodbye to 2010.

“Ring out the old and ring in the new,” said Glenn Carano, marketing director for the Silver Legacy in Reno. “It’s true 2010 was a challenging year, but there were a lot of bright spots. We brought some great entertainment to town, successful special events and (trade) shows and of course, the (National Bowling Stadium) bowlers.

“If the weather cooperates, we’re looking at a sell-out crowd for New Year’s and feeling very positive about what’s to come in 2011.”

The Eldorado Hotel Casino also expects a sold out weekend.

Resorts agreed the holiday season was a boost for the local economy.

Read the whole story

Building industry faces new

fire regulations, green codes

By Jessie Marchesseau

California mandates new building codes every three years. 2011 is one of those years.

Beginning Jan. 1, South Lake Tahoe, Truckee and most of the rest of the state will be implementing some new standards.

“There’s gonna be grumbling with the mandated issues,” said Dave Walker, building official for South Lake Tahoe. “There’s gonna be a learning curve, but our contractors are good. They will adapt.”



Contractor Joe Stewart checks on the boiler at STHS's TADA building that is under construction. Photos/Jessie Marchesseau

Truckee has already hosted classes to bring local building professionals up-to-date on the new codes. South Lake Tahoe plans to offer some after the first of the year, as does the Sierra Green Building Association.

The most notable on this year’s list of building code changes

are the ones having to do with fire sprinklers and the new California Green Building Standards Code, known as CALGreen.

Sprinkler systems

Fire sprinkler systems in homes are nothing new. They have been required in all new homes over 5,000 square feet since the last building code was implemented three years ago. But the state has decided to expand the code to include all new residential structures, regardless of square footage.

“It should provide for a safer community because sprinklers save lives,” said Gareth Harris, fire marshal for Lake Valley Fire Protection District.

According to the National Fire Protection Association, nearly 3,000 U.S. residents die in home fires every year. Harris said not one of those was in a home with functioning sprinklers and smoke alarms.

Contrary to common myths, he said, sprinklers do nowhere near the damage to a home that fire, smoke and water from a fire hose do. They can often detect and extinguish a fire when it is relatively small, and only the sprinkler in close proximity to the actual fire will activate, leaving the rest of the house dry. In fact, the NFPA reports that fire sprinklers reduce the average property loss from a fire by 71 percent.

Even though sprinklers can help significantly reduce property damage from a fire, Harris said the new regulations are “based on saving lives, not saving homes.”

For this reason, he is wholeheartedly behind the new regulation, but admits the added cost to building will make it tougher for builders. Contractor Tod Williamson of TW Construction in Meyers is well aware of this. He fears fewer people will want to build homes because of the additional financial burden.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea to tell you the truth,” Williamson said. “I think it’s a step in the wrong direction, considering the significant cost to the entire project, and they don’t offer significant protection for the money.”

Walker from his city office admitted it is definitely going to add to the cost of building. Even though prices have gone down in recent years, a sprinkler system will still add approximately $15,000 to the cost of building a home.

“The way I see it is anything that they come up with that makes it harder to build makes it harder for me to survive,” Williamson said.

Despite the increased cost, not all contractors are against the new regulations. Joe Stewart of SMC Contracting has been installing sprinkler systems in commercial and residential structures for years.

“They are really, really good. Sprinklers save lives,” he said. “When you’re living in wood houses, wood burns.”

He does note, however, that cold temperatures add to the difficulty of installing fire sprinkler systems in the Lake Tahoe area. If water is sitting in the lines, it could freeze, and the pipe could burst.

For this reason, a mix of 50 percent glycerin and 50 percent water is used in the lines. Harris said this glycerin is food-safe and nontoxic, so Tahoe residents do not have to worry about it leaching into the soil or contaminating the lake.

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency is aware of the new code, but has chosen not to get involved. They do not generally review interior home issues and refer to the Environmental Protection Agency to make decisions on toxic chemicals inside homes.

Green building

Something TRPA does get involved with, however, is the environmental impact of structures and building. In fact, some of the things TRPA has been mandating for years are addressed in the new CALGreen code such as best management practices, or BMPs.

In addition to BMPs and storm water management, the new green building codes demand reduced water consumption, greater energy efficiency, material conservation and improved indoor air quality.

Walker said the air inside homes can be more toxic than the smog in downtown Los Angeles. The new code forces homeowners and contractors to acknowledge the amount of volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, released by building products.

“People are going to have to pay a little more attention to what they put in the interior of their homes because they want better indoor air,” he said.

Walker estimates the CALGreen codes will have less of a financial impact on the building process than the fire sprinkler mandate. But as a contractor, Stewart sees it differently.

“For us as a contractor, that’s going to have a larger impact,” he said. “There will be substantial upfront costs we’re forced to pay.”

Many of these costs will come from the added insulation and energy efficient windows, doors and heating systems. Construction waste management could also potentially add costs for contractors. The new code requires 50 percent of all waste on a construction site be recycled.

However, with a little planning ahead, the waste recycling could end up being one of the least intrusive aspects of the new CALGreen code, at least for local builders. South Tahoe Refuse already offers recycling services to all of its

customers at no extra charge. The company will even track the percentage of waste recycled and provide evidence to the contractor, if they are notified and accounts are properly set up ahead of time.

California is the first state in the nation to mandate green building practices. With local entities such as TRPA and Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board already requiring many of these practices, adopting the CALGreen code may be easier for builders in the Lake Tahoe area than elsewhere in California.

“I believe Tahoe is going to feel less of a shock factor,” Stewart said, “simply because we’re already dealing with portions of it simply by building in Tahoe.”

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More resources brought in to search for missing snowboarder

By Bill Lindelof and Cathy Locke, Sacramento Bee

A National Guard helicopter is scheduled to join the search tonight for a snowboarder who has been missing in the Sierra Nevada since Tuesday afternoon.

Capt. Jeff Ausnow of the Placer County Sheriff’s Department said the helicopter will fly over the area around the Alpine Meadows ski resort using Forward Looking Infrared Technology in an effort to locate Shawnte Marie Willis, 25, of Tahoma. This will be the first opportunity search teams have had to

use air support, he said, noting that a break in the weather they had hoped for before nightfall did not occur.

Ausnow said Tahoe Nordic Search and Rescue skiers searched through the night. They were relieved this morning by another search and rescue team of about 10 people on snowshoes who continued the search.

Ausnow said high winds and low visibility have prevented the use of search vehicles, including helicopters and snowmobiles, and blowing snow has covered tracks. Although the search area is relatively small, he characterized it as backcountry on U.S. Forest Service land that is not groomed for skiing.

As the search continues, Willis' family in Humboldt County is hoping for the best, but worried because she has epilepsy.

Read the whole story

Reno Redevelopment Agency almost out of money

By Susan Voyles, Reno Gazette-Journal

Another significant drop in casino property taxes received by Washoe County in 2011 will essentially put the Reno Redevelopment Agency out of business.

The agency, which works to revitalize downtown and a second redevelopment district, will lose its last 11□2 employees July 1 and will have enough money on hand only to pay debt service and other obligations, said Kevin Knutson, who does double duty as the city's budget and communications director.

“We are going to remove everybody. It will be more like a holding company,” said Knutson, whose agency employed 16 staffers at its height in 2009.

The taxable value of 16 casinos on the Washoe County Assessor’s obsolescence list has been reduced by $143.6 million, to $920 million, for coming tax year. The reduction – which can be calculated by each property’s income if it chooses, instead of the building’s replacement value – comes on top of a $239 million reduction the previous year.

“It’s dire,” said Mark Stafford, a senior appraiser in the Washoe County Assessor’s office who reviewed the financial books of the 16 casinos. “The pie is getting smaller. And the economy is still trending down.”

The redevelopment agency is budgeted to collect $4.4 million in property taxes from its two districts for the current fiscal year of 2010-11.

Read the whole story