Public employee compensation takes center stage

By Dan Balz, Washington Post

SAN DIEGO — Rick Snyder, the former Gateway executive who was just elected governor of Michigan, calls it the next big national issue, on a scale with health care in its importance to the economic vitality of the country. But unlike health care, this battle will be fought in the states, not in Washington.

Snyder is talking about public employee compensation. Like almost every governor in the country, Republican or Democrat, he has identified the issue as a priority in his strategy to deal with looming budgetary shortfalls and structural deficits that plague state governments. The changes governors will seek could produce pain for many state workers and their families and will generate strong resistance from powerful public employee unions.

Snyder is one of a trio of newly elected Republican governors in the industrial Midwest. (The others are Ohio's John Kasich and Wisconsin's Scott Walker.) Each will inherit a state government hemorrhaging dollars and a state economy that has suffered from long-term job loss, particularly in the manufacturing sector.

They will come into office in January after campaigns in which they promised to slash their budgets, to avoid raising taxes (and cut them where they can), and to revitalize economies that have proven stubbornly resistant to past economic development schemes. But even before they can implement their longer-term plans to boost their economies, they will have to address their budgets.

Asked where he will have to try to cut, Snyder quickly pointed

to public employee compensation. “I view that as one of the toughest things I need to do as the next governor,” he said Thursday morning over coffee at the Republican Governors Association meeting.

Read the whole story

Calif. childcare cuts put Tahoe parents, providers on brink

By Jessie Marchesseau

It’s a snow day in South Lake Tahoe, and children busily put on jackets and hats as instructors at Under the Magic Pine Tree wrestle to pull snowpants onto the less cooperative little ones.

Eight-year-old Corey Johnson sits on the floor cramming the bottoms of his gray snowpants into his boots. He explains that he doesn’t want to rip the bottoms by walking on them.

Corey is one of more than 100 children in El Dorado County who has access to daycare thanks to the CalWORKs Stage 3 childcare assistance program. But not for long.



Nicole Johnson pushes her daughter Timber, 12, on the tire swing. Photos/Jessie Marchesseau

“I’m just really worried about the children that are on this,” said Candi Bailey, owner of Under the Magic Pine Tree preschool and daycare center. “Not only here, but across the state.”

More than 55,000 children in California have had their access to child care programs in limbo since Oct. 8 when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger slashed the Stage 3 program from the budget, electing to send the money to the state’s rainy day fund instead.

The CalWORKs childcare program was established as part of Welfare-to-Work in 1998. It provides childcare assistance to eligible working families who have moved off of welfare cash assistance and have had steady employment for more than two years.

“This is the one thing I do get so that I can succeed and make an example for my kids,” Nicole Johnson, Corey’s mom, said.

Just a few days earlier, Corey and his older sister, Timber, were laughing with joy as their mother spun them around on a green tire swing at a local park. She says it’s their favorite thing there; they always go straight to the tire.

Johnson, 29, is a single mother of three. She started the CalWORKs Welfare-To-Work plan as a young mother needing cash assistance, but has worked at Lake Tahoe Pediatrics for the past three and a half years. Johnson says she is proud of her

place in the community and has become a fixture at Lake Tahoe Pediatrics, where clients often ask for her by name.

Despite her success at work, Johnson still needs a little help to make ends meet. And it was working, until last month when she was one of 30,000 families in California told they had two weeks to find other child care options. Johnson said her first reaction was that she was going to have to quit her job. Then she was angry.

“I worked hard to get here,” she said. “All of us in my situation worked hard to get where we’re at and don’t want to go back to the beginning.”

But some people are afraid that might be exactly what will happen.

Since the announcement, Tina Barna, director of Choices for Children, an organization providing childcare resources and referrals for CalWORKs families in El Dorado County, said a number of parents have expressed they may have to quit their jobs because they cannot afford childcare. Even though a subsequent lawsuit has required the state to continue providing assistance through the end of the year, what will happen in 2011 is still up in the air.

Barna said parents basically have three options: be placed on a waiting list with more than 200,000 other families, find a way to pay for childcare on their own or quit their jobs.



Corey Johnson, 8, works on a

coloring project at Under the Magic Pine Tree.

Bailey at Under the Magic Pine Tree concurs.

“Some of the families dropped by Stage 3 will have to consider returning to welfare and starting again,” she said. “The wages in this area are not healthy enough to support housing, food, clothing and childcare, especially as a single parent.”

But the effects of slashing Stage 3 do not stop at the parents or their children.

Childcare providers will also feel the hit. Many are already struggling because of high unemployment rates. If parents are not working, they do not need childcare services. If more parents are forced to pull their children from the childcare system, businesses will be forced to downsize or even close.

Bailey said she has been trying hard not to add to the unemployment in the basin. But if the Stage 3 funds are not reinstated, she may have to reduce her staff.

Sheila Kennedy, also a childcare provider, knows what it is like to be in both positions. Kennedy provides day care services to a family with four children. The family receives Stage 3 assistance.

But just four years ago, she was receiving Stage 3 assistance.

“That program helped me to be able to be self-sufficient,” she said. “They need that little bit of help to get over that final hill.”

She works another job part-time, but if Stage 3 is cut, her childcare salary will go away. If this happens, she will

likely be forced to go back on food stamps.

Kennedy predicts the cuts will result in a domino effect with parents being forced to quit jobs and claim unemployment, welfare and other government aid. Childcare workers will likely follow, then other working families who can no longer find childcare for their children.

“Eliminating this program would be one of their biggest mistakes ever,” she said. “I don’t see how eliminating day care is a responsible or viable choice.”

Meanwhile, Johnson says she feels like she’s on a teeter-totter. One minute they say they’re taking her assistance, then she gets one more week, then two. She says she is tired and stressed, but for the well being of herself and her children, she just has to accept it and hope for the best.

It must be working, because as Corey plays in the snow with his friends and laughs at the snowballs forming on his gloves, he shows no signs of the stress his mother described.

“I think our future is in our kids,” Bailey said, “and I think we had better take care of them.”

CHP beefs up enforcement during holiday weekend

In keeping with its mission of saving lives, the California Highway Patrol is reminding motorists the Thanksgiving holiday is also a Maximum Enforcement Period (MEP).

The CHP’s holiday enforcement effort begins Nov. 24 at 6pm and continues through 11:59pm Nov. 28.

Throughout the MEP all available officers will be looking for motorists who are a danger to themselves or others on our state's roadways.

Last year during CHP's Thanksgiving holiday enforcement effort, 37 people were killed in collisions statewide; this represents a 12 percent increase from the previous year. Among the 19 vehicle occupants who were killed in CHP jurisdiction, 26 percent were not wearing seat belts.

The Thanksgiving MEP coincides with the statewide "Click It or Ticket" campaign which runs through Nov. 29 and includes more than 150 law enforcement agencies in California.

In addition to motorists who fail to buckle up or drive at a safe speed, officers will be seeking to remove impaired drivers from the roadways. Last year during the Thanksgiving MEP, CHP officers made 1,461 arrests for driving under the influence.

With the Christmas and New Year's holiday right around the corner, the CHP is planning for similar maximum enforcement efforts next month.

Report: Nation's schools improve, but have long way to go

By Nick Anderson, Washington Post

The nation's high school seniors are performing slightly better in math and reading than they did in the middle of the last decade, new test results show, but a large majority

continue to fall short of the federal standard for proficiency.

Results from the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress, made public Thursday morning, documented a modest rise in achievement for 12th-graders since 2005. Reading scores rose two points on a 500-point scale, and math scores rose three points on a 300-point scale.

But analysts said the federal test results offer plenty of reason for concern. The scores mean that 38 percent of seniors demonstrated proficiency in reading and 26 percent reached that level in math. In addition, reading scores remain lower than they were in 1992. And the report found essentially no progress in closing achievement gaps that separate white students from black and Hispanic peers.

Those results suggest that public schools must make quantum leaps to approach President Obama’s goal of college and career readiness for all graduates. The District of Columbia and dozens of states (including Maryland but not Virginia) have adopted this year new national standards for what students should learn in math and English language arts from kindergarten onward. Those standards, generally accepted to be tougher than the array of benchmarks states had previously held, also point toward the president’s goal.

Read the whole story

Squaw Valley sold to

Colorado-based company

By Kathryn Reed

Squaw Valley ski resort and the village have been bought by KSL Capital Partners LLC.

This is the second Colorado company to buy a Lake Tahoe area ski resort in less than a month. Vail Resorts purchased Northstar-at-Tahoe from Booth Creek in October.

Details of the sale of Squaw have not been disclosed, but it does include the village. The resort bought the village in January from financially troubled Intrawest.



Colorado company buys Squaw Valley. Photo/Kathryn Reed

KSL plans to put $50 million into capital improvements at the North Shore ski resort in the next five years.

KSL is not a new comer to the ski industry or resort areas. The company also owns Vail Mountain Lodge, Hotel del Coronado in San Diego, The Homestead in Hot Springs, Va., and Barton Creek Resort and Spa in Austin.

Eric Resnick and Michael Shannon, founding partners of KSL, serve as board members for the U.S. Ski & Snowboard Team Foundation. Resnick is also on the Organizing Committee of the

2015 World Alpine Ski Championships. Shannon was president of Vail Associates, what Vail Resorts used to be called, from 1985-92.

Squaw Valley put itself on the map when owner Alex Cushing successfully bid on the 1960 Winter Olympics. Squaw wasn't much of a resort at the time, but still pulled it off and brought international recognition to the slopes of Tahoe. When Cushing died a couple years ago his widow, Nancy, took over control of the entire operations, though she had been president since 1994.

"Alex's dream was to create a world-class, four-season destination resort in one of the most beautiful places in the world," Cushing said in a prepared statement. "This transaction will result in the culmination of that dream by providing the necessary resources to ensure Squaw Valley's continued improvement and success for generations to come."

In August, Cushing made what many in the ski industry considered a dramatic move for Squaw and stepped down as CEO and president. Speculation at the time was Squaw might not remain in the Cushing family for much longer. Andy Wirth took over as CEO at that time.

KSL bought a majority, controlling stake in Squaw. The breakdown of the ownership has not been released. Wirth will continue as CEO.

Mix of open-closed schools in

Lake Tahoe

Schools in Lake Tahoe Unified and Douglas County schools at the lake are closed today for a snow day. Morning classes at Lake Tahoe Community College are canceled. Check with the college at 11am to know if afternoon classes will be held. Tahoe Truckee Unified is open.

LTUSD is out for the remainder of the week for the Thanksgiving holiday.

DCSD has a half day Wednesday before being out for the week.

Ron Christino said visibility is too poor on Kingsbury Grade to have buses hauling students to class.

“The roads are not too bad, there’s not a lot of accumulation, but it’s going to be coming in heavier during the day,” Christino said. “We had maybe 4 inches, but you can’t see anything.”

– Kathryn Reed

Cantilever walk to be built at S. Tahoe’s ‘convention center’

By Kathryn Reed

Normally before construction projects that impact pedestrians begin the first thing to be built is walkways for them. That didn’t happen in 2007 when ground was broken at the would-be

convention center in South Lake Tahoe. Instead, walkers and cyclists are next to traffic without any barrier.

City Manager Tony O’Rourke is appalled this was allowed to happen.

With the project stalled in bankruptcy court and projections construction will not begin until 2013 at the soonest, he wants to improve the area even if the bankrupt developer won’t. The City Council this month approved the expenditure of nearly $200,000 to build a cantilever walkway at the site next building season.



This time next year people won't have to walk in the street next to the fenced bankrupt convention center project. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The council on a 3-1 vote went along with this $183,000 idea presented to them by Jim Marino, the city’s assistant engineer. Councilman Bruce Grego was absent from the Nov. 16 meeting. Mayor Kathay Lovell voted no without explanation.

The money to pay for the project comes from taxes being

collected by the city's Redevelopment Agency from the site via property tax dollars.

"We need the cantilever because of the elevation change," Marino explained.

Marino said if the same project the city and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency approved for the 11-plus acre site at the state line were built, the new sidewalk would be taken out to bring the first floor decking to street level.

"It solves two problems," Councilman Bill Crawford said. "We get a little bit better physical appearance and it's a safer place for pedestrians, and we possibly avoid trouble down the road."

Lovell questioned whether the cantilever design would put the city more at-risk in terms of liability.

"The cantilever should not increase liability. We can get design immunity," City Attorney Patrick Enright told her.

Staff will have to work with Caltrans to get the necessary right-of-way issues worked out. With the cantilever plan, it means getting rid of the concrete barriers now dividing the fence and highway.

The schedule is have the design and engineering done by mid-January, Caltrans permits in hand by mid-April, bids open in May, project awarded June 6, and construction done July 26.

Truckee police chief helps

bring stability to Sudan

Truckee Police Chief Nicholas Sensley led an international team to Juba, Sudan, earlier this month to initiate a national anti-corruption development program. At relative peace since 2005, Southern Sudan had been at civil war with Northern Sudan for 39 of the 54 years of the nation's independence from England.

PLI Global is a nonprofit leadership development institute based in Colorado that Sensley is involved in. His team was primarily sponsored through benefactors in Truckee.

Sensley said his team had "an exceptionally successful journey." He reported that in his final meeting with the government of Southern Sudan's Minister of Internal Affairs Maj. Gen. Gier Chuang Aloung committed to convening a meeting between Sensley and his team with the president of Southern Sudan and his Cabinet to comprehensively address the issue of corruption in the country. The meeting will take place after Southern Sudan's Jan. 9 referendum on succession from Northern Sudan.



Truckee Police Chief Nicholas Sensley, right, with Sudan police. Photo/Provided

During this November visit, Sensley and his team conducted

anti-corruption and leadership development training for the highest level leadership of the police force, fire brigade, prison system, wildlife protection service, and officials of GOSS political party Sudan People's Liberation Movement).

Sensley, like all of PLI Global's 85 consultants from nearly a dozen countries, is a volunteer who uses his personal time to serve the people of developing and transitioning nations around the world. Since 1994, PLI Global has served in 57 nations and trained and provided development assistance to over 60,000 leaders. Chief Sensley has been a PLI senior consultant since 1998.

Visit PLI Global, for more information about the institute's work.

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Storm keeps some from Harveys World Series of Poker

By Eric Ramsey, Poker News

Lake Tahoe is in the midst of it's heartiest November storm in nearly a decade, but that hasn't kept the players away from the poker room this weekend. A very respectable 246 runners plodded through blizzard conditions (or walked downstairs from



their suites) to get themselves registered for Day 1 of of the World Series of Poker Circuit Main Event. After 16 short levels, just 51 of them survived to bag up chips and return for tomorrow's moving day. It's the cowboy-hatted Dan Black who'll take the big stack into Day 2 with his count of 329,500 leading the pack as they round the first stretch.

If the weather and road conditions did dampen anything, they may have kept some of the more notable pros from making the trip up the mountain to put up their $1,500 buy-in. Chris Ferguson, for instance, is still the face of this event after taking the title in 2007, but "Jesus" clearly left home without his snow chains this weekend, rendering him unable to return for a second go at this Circuit ring. Still, there were plenty of familiar faces interspersed with the locals and the satellite winners in the field. Andrew Malott, Jason DeWitt, Aaron Kanter, "Captain" Tom Franklin, two-time Circuit winner John "Cowboy" Land, and two-time WSOP bracelet winner Howard "Tahoe" Andrew all came out to play today, though all of them had fallen out of contention by the time the bags came out just after the bewitching hour on the West Coast.

Read the whole story

Avalanche kills ski patrol director in Colorado

By KDVR

MINERAL COUNTY, Colo. – A ski patrol supervisor was killed in an avalanche at Wolf Creek Ski Area Monday morning,

authorities said.

The avalanche happened inside the boundaries of the ski area, which is located near Pagosa Springs in southern Colorado, at about 10:30 a.m.

The area had received more than a foot of new snow over 24-hours.

“Wolf Creek Ski Area will closed today, November 22nd, due to the fatality of a staff member,” said a message on the ski area’s web site. “Lifts will begin operating tomorrow at 8:30 a.m.”

Postings on Wolf Creek’s Facebook page identified the victim as Scott Kay.

Read the whole story