

San Diego becoming leader in solving housing crisis

By Justin Ewers, PublicCEO

It didn't get much attention outside San Diego, but it may well have been the biggest step a political coalition has taken this year to shift the focus of a major city onto a crisis impacting millions of Californians—and moving rapidly up the income scale.

“More than 70 percent of San Diegans cannot currently afford a median-priced home,” San Diego Mayor Kevin Faulconer said in his January state of the city address—noting that renters in the region now spend a higher portion of their income on housing (an average of 35 percent) than people in either hyper-expensive San Francisco or New York City. San Diego's affordability crisis, he noted, has moved into the middle class—and shows no signs of stopping: “People who love San Diego and want to live in San Diego should not be priced out of San Diego. I'm going to say something that mayors have traditionally been afraid to say: We need to build more housing!”

Faulconer's call to arms may not sound that dissimilar from the rhetoric emerging from other parts of the state, as rising prices make living in California increasingly unaffordable. But the San Diego mayor's framing of the problem—and the solutions the city is developing with a unique coalition of business associations, labor groups, environmentalists, and builders—are fundamentally different.

Read the whole story

Tahoe Keys votes to pay for aquatic herbicides

Tahoe Keys property owners have voted to assess themselves the necessary fees to pay for the use of herbicides to rid the South Lake Tahoe canals of invasive weeds.

Now the Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board must approve the application, with the goal to start using the chemicals in 2018.

Homeowners will pay up to \$1,600. The first payment of not more than \$400 will be due June 1. Subsequent payments would be required after all the agencies sign off on the treatment. The money is projected to cover costs through 2023.

There are 1,529 Tahoe Keys Property Owners Association members. Fifty-nine percent voted. Of the valid ballots turned in, 588 votes were in favor of the assessment. To pass, there had to be 383 yes votes.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Status of forests is 'dire' as world marks Earth Day

By Ann M. Simmons, Los Angeles Times

They cover a third of the world's landmass, help to regulate

the atmosphere, and offer shelter, sustenance and survival to millions of people, plants and animals.

But despite some progress, the planet's woodlands continue to disappear on a dramatic scale.

Since 1990 the world has lost the equivalent of 1,000 football fields of forests every hour, according to World Bank development indicators from last year. That's 1.3 million square kilometers of forest, an area larger than South Africa, according to the international financial institution.

Read the whole story

Nev, flirts with primaries; maligned caucus system prevails

By Yvonne Gonzalez, Las Vegas Sun

CARSON CITY – Long lines and frustrated voters that accompanied Nevada caucuses in 2016 were not enough to sway lawmakers toward a primary system.

Legislative efforts from both parties to return to presidential primaries have failed to gain traction over the years, with the most recent failed push marked by concerns that Nevada would lose political prominence nationally.

UNLV political science professor Michael W. Bowers, who took part in the 2016 caucuses, says it was a confused atmosphere for everyone. Volunteers struggled to handle the heavy turnout brought on by supporters of Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., he

said.

Bowers said the primary system would give more people the opportunity to participate and increase voter turnout.

Read the whole story

SLT seniors on losing end of city, county squabble



Seniors, foreground, on April 20 tell city and county officials that things need to change. Photo/LTN

By Kathryn Reed

While there are plenty of senior citizens on the South Lake Tahoe City Council and El Dorado County Board of Supervisors, leadership seems to be lacking – at least when it comes to how to manage a senior center.

Members of the two elected bodies, along with staff from both

agencies met this week with seniors from the South Lake Tahoe facility. The seniors are tired of the squabbling between the two entities. They just want to be able get answers to some basic questions and know that they have a place to congregate for the indefinite future.

The conundrum is the county owns the building and the city has the lease to operate it. That lease expires in 2023. The lease says the city is supposed to handle routine maintenance. Defining “routine” is a stumbling block.

“Regarding the roof, we haven’t settled on who is responsible for it,” Supervisor Sue Novasel said. “We aren’t sure. We haven’t gotten to where we both agree.”

They’ve been talking for a year.



Ceiling panels are damaged from the leaky roof at the senior center. Photo/LTN

This winter was horrendous. Buckets were needed to catch the dripping water inside the building – which was still happening earlier this week. Ceiling tiles are damaged, so is the floor.

The city has said it will pay for the roof because it’s the right thing to do. The county – they haven’t offered to come forward with a dime for the structure; they just collect rent.

State law mandates the county provide certain programs. That's their major contribution, even though each year when budget talks roll around there is the threat to dismantle Meals on Wheels.

Seniors mostly said they'd like the city to be in charge – even own the building. They know those people, have a relationship with them. This was obvious by the dialogue.

A bigger issue is what is to be done with the entire 56-acre parcel. It's county owned, city run. This includes Campground by the Lake, Lakeview Commons, and where the library is.

The two government bodies this month entered into a \$60,000 agreement to have a feasibility study done to determine the value of the land, assets, and money making capabilities. (The county didn't want to rely on the city's figures.) The two entities are sharing the costs, though city taxpayers get to pony up more of the money since they are also county taxpayers. The study is expected to be completed in 90 days.

The city and county have squabbled for decades, and this acreage is just part of the pettiness. While in the past the city has said it would like ownership and full control, that drum isn't being beat so loudly anymore.

In the meantime, the seniors have a to-do list they'd like someone to approve. They have their own money, but the city can't just say yes, the county wants to approve changes to its building – as most landlords would want. But government moves slowly – even more slowly than the average senior, and that is what has those using the facility so exasperated. This building is like a home to many of them. It's where they meet friends, share what's going on. It might be their only human contact on any given day. They want the powers that be to start treating this like the sanctuary they revere and not just some building.

Sales of existing U.S. homes rise to fastest pace in a decade

By Sho Chandra, Bloomberg

Sales of previously owned U.S. homes rose more than forecast in March to the fastest pace in a decade, signaling sustained momentum in the housing market despite higher prices and scarce supply, a report from the National Association of Realtors showed Friday.

Contract closings jumped 4.4 percent to a 5.71 million annual rate (forecast was 5.60 million), the highest since February 2007, after a revised 5.47 million the prior month.

Inventory of available properties fell 6.6 percent from March 2016 to 1.83 million, marking the 22nd straight year-over-year decline.

Read the whole story

Flood advisory for Truckee River area at Tahoe City

The National Weather Service in Reno has issued a weeklong flood advisory for the Truckee River in Tahoe City.

In anticipation of runoff from the extreme snowpack in the basin water managers on April 21 increased the flow leaving Lake Tahoe through the dam in Tahoe City. The flows will be the highest they have been in 11 years.

This could cause minor flooding along the river from Tahoe City to Squaw Creek near the Squaw Valley ski resort, along bike trails and any low area..

The warning is in effect until April 27 at 9:45am.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Calif. city managers concerned pensions will be crippling

By Daniel Borenstein, Bay Area News Group

Lodi City Manager Steve Schwabauer worries about his town's fiscal solvency – and estimates roughly a third of California's municipalities are in the same position because of rising pension costs.

Nancy Kerry, city manager of South Lake Tahoe, says her community will avoid bankruptcy but will have to make severe cuts in services to do so.

Schwabauer and Kerry are among a small number of top administrators now publicly talking about the financial crisis ahead. They both say the only way to stave it off begins with reducing pension benefits for existing employees.

Recycling is in trouble – and it might be your fault

By Paul Singer, USA Today

ELKRIDGE, Md. – If you are recycling at home, you are probably doing it wrong.

That is why a worker lunged to grab a garden hose off the conveyor belt at a Waste Management recycling facility here Wednesday before it got caught in a giant sorting machine. Such tangles frequently require the plant to stop the waste processing line and clean out the jaws by hand.

“Our contamination changes by the season,” said Mike Taylor, the company’s director of recycling operations here. Since it’s spring, the facility is getting a lot of garden hoses. Around the holidays, they get broken strands of Christmas lights, another choking hazard for the sorting line. And all day every day there are plastic shopping bags (recyclable at a grocery store but not from a household), chunks of styrofoam, diapers, syringes, food-contaminated containers ... a nearly endless litany of things that residents throw into their curbside recycling carts figuring they are or ought to be recyclable. One worker grabs the remnants of a screen door off the sorting line while another snags a wire rack from a DIY shelving unit.

Many cities around the country will celebrate the 47th Earth Day on Saturday by highlighting their recycling programs, but the industry is grappling with a dual threat: The value of

recovered waste products has plummeted over the past five years, and the amount of effort required to extract them has risen.

Read the whole story

Court sides with EDC residents, against chain store



This is a rendering of the Dollar General that would have faced Main Street in Georgetown, though there is no entrance here.

By Joann Eisenbrandt

The anti-Dollar General store advocates in El Dorado County won in court.

El Dorado County Superior Court Judge Warren Curt Stracener on April 14 ruled in favor of the Georgetown Preservation Society to stop construction of a 9,100-square-foot Dollar General store on Main Street in the historic mining town of Georgetown.

Stracener's ruling requires the county to vacate its earlier approval of the project and its environmental documents, and take the steps needed to prepare a detailed environmental impact report. This is the latest development in a protracted David vs. Goliath battle playing out on the county's West Slope since late 2015.

Dollar General is a well-known national chain of stores that offers a variety of discounted merchandise and grocery items. They frequently choose locations in smaller towns with lower-income and senior residents who need to travel relatively long distances to shop at box store retailers.

Georgetown is a former Gold Rush mining town on the county's West Slope west of Placerville. The proposed site for the Dollar General store is on three parcels at the end of the central Main Street historic district. These parcels are zoned commercial but have been vacant for some time. In October 2015, the county approved the project put forth by Simon CRE Abbie, a commercial real estate company that applied on behalf of Dollar General and property owners Denton and Carolyn Beam.

Under the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the county prepared an initial study and issued a mitigated negative declaration (MND) identifying and providing mitigations for potential environmental impacts. An MND is at the lower end of possible environmental reviews under CEQA and says basically that any environmental impacts of the project are small and can be totally mitigated. This approval was appealed to the El Dorado County Planning Commission by Georgetown resident Dennis Smith. The Planning Commission denied the appeal and the issue was then appealed to the Board of Supervisors.

The **April 5, 2016, board meeting** brought out not only concerns from Georgetown-area residents about potential environmental issues, but made it clear that beyond that it was clearly a "quality of life" issue. The chamber was packed with visibly

upset residents who had traveled from Georgetown to Placerville to show the depth of their concern by their large physical presence.

Some did speak about environmental concerns, including impacts on the wetlands and biological resources on the properties, traffic, circulation and safety concerns, problems with the proposed septic system, water quality and the fact that an abandoned mine still remained underneath a portion of the proposed site. But the preponderance of comments focused on the impacts the out-of-proportion Dollar General store would have on the aesthetic and historical qualities of the small town. Some were very angry. Others were in tears. The board denied the appeal with Supervisor Shiva Frentzen dissenting.

On May 6, 2016, the Georgetown Preservation Society **filed a lawsuit** to force Dollar General and the county to do an EIR before proceeding further.

Of the court's decision, Ron Sheckler of the Georgetown Preservation Society told Lake Tahoe News, "What was very obvious to me was that weight was given to the people who were not necessarily demonstrated experts. This is groundbreaking in that the judge took into consideration what many people who have lived there for their entire lives see and feel and love about Georgetown. He gave that the weight it was worthy of."

Don Mooney, attorney for the Georgetown Preservation Society, agreed. "We are pleased with the ruling. It sends the message to Dollar General that you have to take into consideration and do an EIR if there is a real conflict (of the project) with the aesthetic values of these historic communities."

From the beginning, the issue of the appropriateness of a single large building in an area of Georgetown comprised mainly of older historic buildings with Gold Rush era architecture, an historic bed and breakfast and residential properties was a key area of disagreement. The county's own

Historic Design Guidelines say that new buildings constructed in such areas need to “generally conform” to the types of architecture prevalent in California mining towns of the 1850s through 1910.

Interpreting those guidelines for this specific project proved challenging. In approving the project, the county found it did conform. When residents expressed concerns, project proponents made a number of design changes which they believed made it meet the intentions of the Historic Design Guidelines. For many Georgetown residents, nothing would make a Dollar General store on Main Street fit in. Sheckler put it simply when he pointed to the lyrics in the Joni Mitchell song, “Big Yellow Taxi” – “They paved paradise. And put up a parking lot.”

In his decision, Stracener referenced many similar comments made by residents at Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors meetings, and in a petition against the Dollar General store that many had signed.

“A resident on Main Street living across from the proposed store commented: the proposed 9,100 square foot, 26 foot high chain store is inappropriate for the historic downtown district.” Others noted that what would front on Main Street was not a period-compatible entrance but a blank stucco wall and a loading dock. It would have “no congruity” with the remainder of Main Street where each building had its own personal gold rush era character. The judge noted the project proponent’s very different view, “Respondents argue that the above cited comments are merely unsubstantiated opinions lacking any factual basis made by persons who are not experts in historic architecture.”

In CEQA-based lawsuits, the court’s decision is based on whether the petitioners have presented enough evidence in the record to conclude that there is a “fair argument” that the project will have significant effects on the environment that have not been adequately addressed and that the lead agency,

in this case the county, had “abused their discretion” in approving the project. The Georgetown Preservation Society argued the county’s approval of the mitigated negative declaration was an “abuse of discretion” because it did not fully identify all potential environmental impacts or show how they could be successfully mitigated. They asked the court to require preparation of the more-detailed EIR.

The court concluded that, “the fact that the persons who commented did not set forth in the record a foundation of expertise in historic architecture does not bar the court from considering their comments” “In summary,” the decision continues, “the court finds there is substantial evidence to support a fair argument that the project may have significant aesthetic and historic quality environmental impacts that have not been mitigated.” The petitioner’s other claim that the traffic and circulation issues had not been fully addressed was not found to be supported by the record.

During the April 5, 2016, board meeting, District 4 Supervisor Michael Ranalli, in whose district Georgetown is located, asked the proponent’s attorney if they would be willing to prepare an EIR to help diffuse the controversy. “No, we won’t voluntarily do one,” was the response. Ranalli also asked Deputy County Counsel David Livingston if the county could require them to move the project to another location. The project, Livingston responded, was consistent with the county’s General Plan. It was a commercial building going on a commercially zoned site so they had the right to build it there.

Some Georgetown residents had indicated they were not necessarily opposed to Dollar General itself, but to the location, and would be happy if it were just moved outside the town’s historic central district.

In a conversation with Lake Tahoe News following the court’s recent decision, Ranalli said, “I was surprised by the judge’s

ruling and felt the applicant had met their burden. The property was commercially zoned in a commercial district. But now I have some unsettled questions.”

One of these, he explained, was what would happen if the project site were actually moved. Once they were outside the historic district, he noted, they would not have to follow those guidelines. He pointed to the fact that the applicant had, “already made about six revisions to the building design ... I fear they would not invest that much in the style of the building if it were outside the historic district. There wouldn’t be any incentive for them to not just put up the concrete block building you see everywhere else.”

Ranalli also expressed concern at what other options there would be for the site that would fit in with existing buildings and “benefit the long-term health of the Georgetown community.” He pointed to the concerns raised by residents themselves about the “perc rate” of the soil on the parcels. The percolation rate is a test of how well water drains through soil. It is important in regard to septic system leach fields and could be a problem for site uses that included large restroom facilities.

This same question had been raised by Supervisor Ron Mikulaco at the April 5, 2016, board meeting. Sheckler told Lake Tahoe News that he believes the best use of that area would be as open space. “That particular property is not suitable for any type of development. It’s a wetland. It has a Swiss cheese of mines underneath it.” What he’d prefer seeing is, “horseshoe pit, a wetland and a nice open space in Georgetown where people can come and enjoy being in downtown.”

The other big unanswered question is what will the project proponents do following the court’s ruling. Will they appeal the court’s decision, agree to complete an EIR for the current location, look for another location in the Georgetown area, just give up, or even sue the county?

Attorney Don Mooney explained that they have 60 days from the date of the decision to appeal. The Georgetown Preservation Society will prepare, circulate and present to the court within 20 days of the decision a writ for the court's signature outlining the steps now required of the project proponents.

While very pleased with the court's decision, Sheckler told Lake Tahoe News that, "It's very important to note that the war isn't over. We may have won this battle, but until it is determined that the Dollar General store won't be built there we haven't won the war."

The attorneys for the project proponents were contacted for comment but did not respond.