Marriott now the world’s largest hotel chain

By Scott Mayerowitz, AP

Several of the best-known names in travel are now united in one hotel company.

Marriott International closed Friday morning on its $13 billion acquisition of Starwood Hotels & Resorts Worldwide, bringing together its Marriott, Courtyard and Ritz Carlton brands with Starwood’s Sheraton, Westin, W and St. Regis properties.

In total, 30 hotel brands now fall under the Marriott umbrella to create the largest hotel chain in the world with more than 5,700 properties and 1.1 million rooms in more than 110 countries. That’s more than 1 out of every 15 hotel rooms around the globe.

Marriott now eclipses Hilton Worldwide’s 773,000 rooms and the 766,000 that are part of the Intercontinental Hotels Group family, according to STR, a firm that tracks hotel data.

“We’ve got an ability to offer just that much more choice. A choice in locations, a choice in the kind of hotel, a choice in the amount a customer needs to spend,” Marriott CEO Arne Sorenson told the Associated Press in an interview Thursday.

Starwood’s guest loyalty program – Starwood Preferred Guest – was also a “central, strategic rationale for the transaction,” Sorenson said. The program’s members are deeply loyal to it, have generally higher incomes and tend to spend many nights on the road.

Starting Friday, members of Starwood and Marriott’s two loyalty programs will be able to link their accounts together.

Gold elite members in one program will get gold status in the other. Platinum elite members will get platinum in the other. Marriott silver members will see Starwood's lowest category, Preferred Plus.

Each Starwood point will be worth three Marriott Rewards points.

Starwood put itself up for sale in April 2015. The Stamford, Conn., company had struggled to grow as fast as its rivals, particularly in "limited service hotels," which are smaller properties which don't have restaurants or banquet halls. They are often located on the side of the highway, near airports or in suburban office parks.

To get Starwood, Marriott had to outbid China's Anbang Insurance Group. U.S. and European anti-trust regulators were quick to approve the sale but the Chinese government hesitated, delaying the sale by months.

"We may have been a little too optimistic about how fast we could get this thing closed," Sorenson said Thursday.

Marriott and Starwood — like other hotel chains — own very few individual hotels. Instead they manage or franchise their brands to hundreds of individual owners, often real estate development companies. Those individual hotel owners are responsible for setting nightly room rates. It isn't uncommon for a developer to own a Marriott, Hilton, Hyatt and Sheraton in the same city.

The purchase gives Marriott more leverage with corporate travel departments who often look for one giant chain to house all of their employees. It also gives Marriott more power over Expedia and Priceline, the two giant online travel agencies that sell rooms on behalf of hotel companies in exchange for a commission. The hotel industry has spent the last year trying to get travelers to book directly with them instead of the travel agencies to avoid paying those fees.

There are still many details to work out.

Marriott has thrived as an “asset light” company, owning a handful of hotels. Starwood has been selling off properties, while singing long-term management agreements for those same hotels. As of June 30, it still owned 23 properties. Sorenson said he believes there is a strong market to continue selling off many of those iconic hotels.

“There is always a market for the St. Regis in New York,” he said, adding that other assets in the portfolio have comparable stature. “In great global cities, real estate like that always has a value.”

The new company will keep Marriott’s Bethesda, Md., headquarters but hasn’t announced if it will keep any presence at Starwood’s Connecticut or New York offices.

Then there are the 30 brands. Some have performed better than others but Sorenson said all of them will probably survive the merger.

“I think so. Every one of them has hotels in them,” he noted.

For now, Starwood and Marriott will keep separate loyalty programs. Starwood has a credit card deal with American Express as well as close partnerships with Delta Air Lines and Uber. Marriott has a much larger program with partnerships with Chase and United Airlines.

“Nothing changes immediately. We have to see how those partnerships evolve,” Sorenson said.

Gary Leff, who writes about points and miles at ViewFromTheWing.com, called the three-to-one exchange rate of Starwood points to Marriott points “just right.”

“It’s one of the many reasonable and positive steps that Marriott has taken along the way as it acquires Starwood,” Leff said. “But there’s a whole lot still to happen between now and the programs actually being combined."

SLT council candidate in serious crash

Updated 7:10pm:

South Lake Tahoe City Council candidate Jason Collin was in a serious accident on Kingsbury Grade this afternoon.

The RV Collin and his wife, Natalie, were traveling in with five others collided head-on with a Nissan Pathfinder.

The female driver of the SUV died at the scene. She was from Wellington.

"It looks like the Nissan crossed over into the other travel lane and struck the motorhome head-on," Dan Lopez, Nevada Highway Patrol trooper, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "At this time we can't say if alcohol or drugs were a contributing factor, but we will be investigating that."

The Collins were headed down Kingsbury Grade toward the Carson Valley just after 1pm Sept. 23. Their children were not in the vehicle, according to a family friend.

The wreckage from the accident that killed one person and injured five. Photo/NHP

Jason Collin was airlifted to Renown Medical Center in Reno with non-life threatening injuries. Reports are that one of his legs sustained the most serious injury. Natalie Collin was taken to Barton Memorial Hospital where she was treated for a broken finger. She has been released.

Three people were transported by air ambulance, two by ground ambulance to area hospitals, according to Douglas County sheriff's deputies. People had to be extricated, according to officials. Names of the others involved in the crash have not been released.

Lopez said one of the injured – not Collin – is in serious condition, but does not have life-threatening injuries.

Kingsbury Grade was closed in both directions. It was expected open about 7:30pm Friday. The accident was 1½ miles from the top of the summit.

Witnesses are asked to contact NHP at 775.687.0400.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Federal education law could be chaotic for Nev.

By Neal Morton, Las Vegas Review-Journal

Nevada Superintendent of Public Instruction Steve Canavero warned members of a U.S. House of Representatives subcommittee Wednesday that proposed rules to implement a new federal education law could create chaos and confusion as Nevada schools try to help at-risk students.

Canavero, whose department oversees about 460,000 students, also testified during a nearly two-hour congressional hearing that a new accounting method in the draft regulations threatens a recently approved plan to drive more control over budget, instruction and staffing decisions to individual school communities.

The hearing centered on the U.S. Department of Education's proposed rules for the Every Student Succeeds Act, which President Obama signed into law in December.

Read the whole story

Bear trap set near Kahle playground

A bear trap at Kahle Community Center is causing controversy. Photo/Toogee Sielsch

A bear trap has been placed at Kahle Community Center by the Nevada Department of Wildlife.

An employee at the Stateline recreation facility said a bear has been wandering through the playground area close to young children. The trap was placed on Sept. 21.

Chris Healy with NDOW said the bear has been getting into dumpsters at the restaurants below the park.

"Bear will be tagged and given onsite aversive conditioning in hopes of altering the behavior," Healy told *Lake Tahoe News.* "People who interfere with this process are actually creating worse/more dangerous bears by stopping us from doing aversive conditioning, which we've proven works with our own research. Knowing that this bear was in the area and coming through the park during daylight hours, we wanted to set the trap in order to catch the bear and give it the same aversive conditioning."

Not everyone using the recreation facility has been happy there is a trap, and have voiced their concerns to Kahle staff.

"The Bear League sees the placing of a baited bear trap in the middle of Kahle Park on Lower Kingsbury Grade as irresponsible. It also goes against one of the stated goals of the Nevada Department of Wildlife's bear management program to mitigate human/bear interactions," Toogee Sielsch, Bear League board member, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "This baited trap sits within 10 feet of the family picnic cabana, 20 feet from the outside bathroom facility, and 30 feet from the small children's playground."

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Caesars offers another $1.6B to creditors of bankrupt unit

By Karen Pierog, Reuters

Caesars Entertainment Corp. said on Wednesday it proposed along with its private equity backers a settlement offer with an added $1.6 billion for creditors of its casino operating unit, raising hopes of an end to the subsidiary's costly bankruptcy.

Apollo Global Management and TPG Capital Management, the private equity firms that control the Las Vegas-based casino company, will fund the bulk of the deal by contributing their stock in Caesars, which was estimated to be worth $954 million.

Caesars is the parent company of Harrah's Tahoe and Harveys at Stateline.

Read the whole story

Federal grant to help Nev. students with exam costs

By Neal Morton, Las Vegas Review-Journal

The U.S. Department of Education will send Nevada a $415,783 grant to help cover the cost of Advanced Placement exams for low-income students.

Estimates are the grant should pay for all but $15 of the cost of each exam, which students can take to earn college credit while in high school.

The College Board, which administers the tests, charges $93 for each exam, though the organization offers a $31 discount to students from low-income households.

Read the whole story

USFS wins California bottled water permit fight

By Associated Press

A federal judge has ruled against environmentalists who sued the U.S. Forest Service claiming the agency was letting Nestle pipe water out of forest land on an expired permit.

U.S. District Judge Jesus Bernal said Tuesday that the permit by Nestle Waters North America “is still valid.” The judge noted that Nestle’s predecessor contacted the Forest Service to renew the permit before the old one expired in 1988, but the company never heard back from the agency.

The ruling was a setback to environmental groups, which sued the federal government last year to halt the piping of water in the San Bernardino National Forest unless a new permit is obtained.

The groups estimated Nestle siphoned 98,000 gallons of water a day from springs in the forest last year. The water is then trucked to a nearby plant, where it is bottled as Arrowhead Mountain Spring Water.

Last year, the Forest Service began an environmental review of Nestle’s spring water pipeline as part of the permit renewal process. The agency had said Nestle’s permit was in full force during the renewal period.

Nestle, which wasn’t a party in the case, said it is pleased with the latest decision.

Arrowhead has been sustainably bottling “water from the springs in Strawberry Canyon for more than 121 years – since before the creation of the San Bernardino National Forest,” the company said in a statement.

Environmentalists said the prolonged drought and water withdrawal in the San Bernardino National Forest are affecting wildlife.

“The court’s decision is disappointing, but the real tragedy lies in the fact that Strawberry Creek is drying up, dooming the plants, fish and animals that have relied on it for tens of thousands of years,” Ileene Anderson of the Center for Biological Diversity said in a statement.

A message asking for comment from the Forest Service was not immediately returned.

Douglas County residents face stormwater fee

The Burke Creek stormwater project under way in Stateline involves Douglas County, Nevada Department of Transportation, Nevada Tahoe Resource Conservation District and the U.S. Forest Service. Photo/LTN

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Douglas County wants to get a handle on its stormwater. It's been trying to do so for years.

In this incarnation residents are likely to foot the bill via a special fee.

It’s estimated that countywide about $2 million is needed on an annual basis, with much of that money to be used for ongoing maintenance. Individual households are likely to see a $4 to $7 monthly bill. It’s being called a fee, not a tax.

How this dollar amount was calculated has not been revealed, nor have the valley and lake needs been broken out.

A vocal and concerned group of citizens turned out Sept. 19 at Kahle Community Center to hear what officials had to say.

People are worried money collected at the lake will be used in the valley. The administrative costs are another concern; people are worried not enough money will go for real work. Lack of trust in the county commissioners as a whole was a common theme.

Larry Werner, interim Douglas County manager, and Jeff House with House Moran Consulting led the discussion.

“There is a stormwater plan in place, but it is inadequate because of the lack of funding. It’s not because of the lack of expertise,” House told *Lake Tahoe News.*

His contract with the county expires at the end of the year. Between now and then the commissioners are each supposed to appoint two people to a committee. That group will take comments from the various public meetings, look at the work that needs to be done, and help come up with a credit program.

The credit program was also met with skepticism at Tuesday’s meeting. People wondered how it would be equitable and administered.

There is already a credit program in place for the total maximum daily load (TMDL) mandate handed down from the feds. This credit is given to entities like the county and Nevada Department of Transportation.

In 2011, Douglas County was being more innovative with its

TMDL-stormwater issues.

Some people have their Tahoe Regional Planning Agency best management practices certificate and want that to be considered. The various general improvement districts have a variety of programs in place, but there is no consistency.

Then there are companies like Edgewood Tahoe that receives stormwater from a variety of sources based on being a lakefront business. Patrick Rhamey with Edgewood said it would be “crazy” for his company to pay a dime when it is spending more than $5 million on stormwater issues related to the lodge construction.

That would be where the credit program comes into play — some entities might get cash back.

Facts about opioids, political cash in Nevada

By Michelle Rindels, AP

Heavy-duty prescription painkillers like hydrocodone and OxyContin are a big part of medicine in Nevada, with doctors prescribing them at a rate that nearly reached one per person last year.

Meanwhile, lawmakers in the state get a huge chunk of their campaign cash from donors with ties to the prescription painkiller business.

But Nevada isn’t alone: a joint investigation by The Associated Press and the Center for Public Integrity found that drugmakers that produce opioid painkillers and allied advocacy groups spent more than $880 million on campaign contributions and lobbying nationwide over the past decade. The money comes from members of the Pain Control Forum — a loosely affiliated group that touts prescription opioids as having a vital role in improving the quality of life for millions of Americans.

By comparison, groups advocating for limits on opioid prescribing spent about $4 million nationwide.

Things to know about political spending by the painkiller industry and opioid use in Nevada:

Drug spending: Between 2006 and 2015, members of the Pain Care Forum contributed more than $855,000 in Nevada. Among all states, Nevada has the highest portion of total political contributions that come from Pain Care Forum members.

Drug lobbyists: There have been about 19 lobbyists hired each year for the past decade to represent members of the Pain Care Forum in Nevada.

Prescriptions: Prescriptions for opioid painkillers are common in Nevada, with nearly 2.4 million prescriptions issued in 2015. That’s the equivalent of .83 prescriptions per person.

Drug deaths: The number of Nevadans dying from drug overdoses is on the rise. The state’s drug deaths increased 18 percent between 2006 and 2014, with a total of 5,007 during that period. Though the drug death data isn’t limited to opioids, the CDC has indicated that prescription opioids and heroin account for the majority of drug deaths.

Poll: Sandoval one of nation’s most popular guvs

By Sean Whaley, Las Vegas Review-Journal

He may not be running for political office in 2016, but Gov. Brian Sandoval is weighing in on races and ballot measures. His latest popularity rating may help in those efforts.

Sandoval, who’s amid his second and final term as governor, had the fifth-lowest disapproval rating among governors at 21 percent, a survey by Morning Consult, a Washington-based politics and polling publication, shows.

His approval rating was 62 percent; seven governors had higher approval ratings.

Read the whole story