Nev. No. 2 most popular destination in West for movers

By Jason Hidalgo, Reno Gazette-Journal

Many U.S. residents are apparently considering a move to Nevada to be, well, a nice move.

A survey by national moving company United Van Lines found that the Silver State is the second most popular destination in the Western United States for folks moving to a new area.

Only Oregon was a more popular destination for movers in the West, according to the 2015 National Movers Study, which compared inbound and outbound moves for every state. Nevada's inbound rate of 57 percent also placed it seventh overall among all states in the country, with Oregon's 69 percent also getting the top ranking nationwide as well.

Read the whole story

CHP arrest man on attempted murder charge

A 65-year-old Stockton man was arrested Monday near Truckee on attempted murder charges.

Harris Riddle

Harris Riddle allegedly fired several shots from a 9mm pistol into a vehicle parked near the Donner Lake Vista Point. One bullet struck a woman in the leg.

California Highway Patrol troopers made the arrest about 3pm Jan. 11. The vehicle was parked on westbound Interstate 80.

Troopers saw the bullet holes and determined there had been a domestic violence altercation.

Riddle also faces weapons charges.

The woman was taken to Tahoe Forest Hospital.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Scientist rings climate change alarm at Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE — "The threat of climate change is not from what we have done in the past, but what we do in the future."

Those are the words of Ken Caldeira, the keynote speaker at last week's annual Operation Sierra Storm conference, a gathering of television meteorologists hosted by Lake Tahoe

Visitors Authority. Caldeira is with the Department of Global Energy at the Carnegie Institution for Science at Stanford.

His concern is that most of the carbon dioxide emissions are going to come from infrastructure that is not built. That prospect also offers him hope because it means there is still time for change.

“We need to stop using the sky as a waste dump for our CO2 pollution,” Caldeira said.

Ken Caldeira is worried not enough is being done to stop climate change. Photo/LTN

He was at the international climate conference in Paris last month. On the one hand Caldeira is encouraged that the world is acknowledging climate change to the point leaders want to do something about it. At the same time he is skeptical about the agreements that were made because he believes those actions were going to happen any way so in many ways nothing new came from the gathering.

“There is a mismatch in what is politically feasible and what is necessary,” Caldeira said.

Previous conferences – this was the 21st – sought binding agreements. The problem any president of the United States has with this is needing Congress to approve it.

President Obama committed to reducing emissions to 17 percent below 2005 levels by 2020. Using the Environmental Protection Agency is how he can circumvent Congress.

Caldeira’s repetitive mantra is stop building smoke stacks and tail pipes. He’s taking that call to the average person with the hope individuals will put pressure on elected officials to create the change he believes is needed to curb global warming.

He said the rate things are going now the Arctic ice will melt, sea levels will continue to rise, coral reefs will disappear and the world as we know it going to be very different – even if it’s not in our lifetime.

“It’s not too late to do something, but we need to start doing it now,” Caldeira said.

Judge puts Nevada school choice program on hold

By Associated Press

A district judge has put Nevada’s sweeping school choice program on hold just weeks before money was expected to flow to parents for private school tuition.

Carson City District Court Judge James Wilson granted a preliminary injunction Monday that orders the state treasurer to stop implementing Nevada’s new education savings accounts pending further court deliberations.

The Republican-backed program allows parents to claim more than $5,000 in state per-pupil school funds each year and use it for qualified education expenses.

A coalition including Democratic former state Sen. Justin Jones challenged the program with a lawsuit filed in August, saying it would divert money from public schools and could run afoul of the state constitution.

Thousands of families who applied were told they could receive funds by February if courts didn't object.

Will California's booming economy pay off in pupil spending?

By Lisa Leff, AP

Soaring tax revenues have carried per-pupil education spending in California beyond where it stood before the recession, but even the record sum proposed by Gov. Jerry Brown is unlikely to reverse the state's standing as a comparative miser when it comes to investing in public schools, advocates and education officials said.

Brown, a Democrat known for preaching fiscal restraint, released a budget plan last week that would boost state spending per student to $10,591 in the next fiscal year, compared to $8,564 per student in 2007 and $7,008 during the worst of the recession. The rebound stems from a constitutional amendment that guarantees schools a minimum level of annual funding, an amount that grows considerably, as now, during good economic times.

While expressing gratitude, lawmakers and school officials noted that with California consistently ranking in the bottom 10 in state-by-state rankings of school expenditures, student-teacher ratios and other measures, the latest infusion may not be enough to get the state to the national average, never mind the top of the charts.

“We have to be aware of the fact that even though we have increased our funding in education, we’re still number 40-something in the nation, so we’re still far, far behind in terms of adequately funding our schools in comparison to other states,” said Assemblywoman Shirley Weber, D-San Diego, who heads the Assembly budget committee.

Brown’s proposal would increase the state’s overall K-12 spending to $51 billion, or $1.4 billion more than the current year. The figure reflects both cuts attributed to projected enrollment declines and more than $3.2 billion in new funds.

Most of the money – $2.8 million – would go toward accelerating one of Brown’s signature initiatives: a new school funding formula that directs extra funds to schools with the most students learning to speak English, from low-income families or living in foster care.

Brown said the funding would bring the formula close to full implementation, a milestone the state originally did not expect to reach until 2020. The funding formula also encourages districts to set class sizes kindergarten through third grades at no more than 24.

Even if California ideally would be spending more on its schools, redistributing the money it does spend could narrow the achievement gap in a state where half the students are eligible for free school meals and 22 percent are learning to speak English, Education Trust-West Executive Director Ryan Smith said.

“The governor’s kept his promise in creating a more equitable funding system. It’s now up to policy makers, districts and schools to live up to their end of the bargain in getting results for students,” Smith said.

Mike Walsh, a Butte County school board member who serves as vice president of the California School Boards Association, said school leaders are thankful for what would be a fourth consecutive year of budget growth following the same number of painful cuts.

At the same time, they are mindful that schools also are being tasked with carrying out instructional, staffing and testing reforms linked to the new funding formula and the Common Core standards — all of which cost money, Walsh said.

“It’s not like we are arguing to be #1 in spending. We are just suggesting that we are moving in the right direction but still have a lot to do to get back to average in spending, even if it was just to hire more teachers to do the work we have been asked to do.”

State-by-state comparisons of per-pupil funding are based on federal data that typically are a few years old. Education Week’s Quality Counts report, a respected ranking system that accounts for regional living costs and poverty rates, last week listed California at 46th among the states with per-student spending of $8,213 in 2013, far below the national average of $11,667.

Since then, schools have received sizable funding bumps thanks to revenue from income tax growth, observed Public Policy Institute of California Research Associate Paul Warren. Increases in 2014-15 and 2015-16 may already have gotten California to the national average, although it likely will be another two years before state-by-state standings can confirm that, Warren said.

And while Brown’s 2016-17 budget takes a more modest approach, “things are probably going to be rosier in June than they are now,” if negotiations with the Legislature and higher-than-anticipated tax revenues yield a bigger payoff for schools, he said.

The new proposal “is the standard Jerry Brown woe-is-me budget, which personally I think is the best approach for schools,” Warren said. “Let’s not get overly excited about how much money is out there, let’s put it out in a paced way so they can absorb it, and not get out ahead of yourself and have to cut because you overspent.”

EDC intensifies push to attract college satellite campus

By Loretta Kalb, Sacramento Bee

El Dorado County is on the hunt for a four-year college that will open a campus within the rural county, hoping to give students an opportunity they now can only find elsewhere.

A four-year campus would benefit students and the community, backers said, reducing the time students often spend commuting and improving opportunities for students to remain close to home. County leaders say El Dorado is a prime venue for studying natural resources, tree genomics and related fields, some of which is already under way.

The effort gained steam last spring when a group led by Treasurer-Tax Collector Cherie Raffety sought to convince UC Davis to establish a campus there. Last week, county supervisors supported a broader search that includes other four-year institutions, she said.

Read the whole story

UNR a leader in federal highway improvement models

UNR Assistant Professor Elie Hajj shows off some test samples in one of the five pavement testing labs. Photo/UNR

By Mike Wolterbeek

When the Federal Highway Administration needed to update it's crucial and complicated 30-year-old formula for fuel consumption and vehicle operating cost predictions, it awarded the project to UNR's renowned Pavements/Materials Program. The results of the study will give federal highway managers more accurate data as they seek to improve the nation's transportation network.

"The project is one of the extremely highly critical and influential projects for FHWA and the nation," said Elie Hajj, assistant professor of civil and environmental engineering and the project's lead researcher.

Hajj works with Peter Sebaaly, director of the university's Western Regional Superpave Center, on this and a number of research projects to improve pavements in Nevada and around the country, including asphalt and concrete pavement testing, software management tools used around the world, a national research database and super heavy load research – all in the department's five labs dedicated to pavement and materials research.

"Pretty much on any road on which we drive in Nevada, the pavement – whether asphalt or concrete – has been to some extent influenced by our laboratory," Sebaaly said. "We work with government agencies and industry in Nevada and around the West to help determine the best materials and mixtures for economical, durable, and sustainable pavements under every conceivable condition."

All of these initiatives combine to give the group in the civil engineering department, and their industry and agency partners, the expertise to tackle this important five-year federal project. The team includes the transportation group in the civil engineering department, Nevada Automotive Test Center, and Dynatest Consulting, a leading manufacturer of pavement testing equipment and analytical expertise.

The research will improve the vehicle operating costs estimation by taking into consideration changes in vehicle technology, vehicle operating speeds, traffic management, driving cycles over the past 30 years – including hybrid and electric vehicles – and pavement types and conditions.

“Savings on vehicle operating costs are a key measure of the effect of improvements of the transportation network,” Hajj wrote in his proposal to the highway agency. “Accordingly, vehicle operating costs equations need to adequately describe the effects of different speeds, traffic conditions, roadway characteristics, and current vehicle technology.”

Typically, such a study occurs every 20 to 30 years with the last study being in the 1980s. This one will be expected to have a similar lifespan, which shows the need for a comprehensive, research-based approach.

“Most of our research is for asphalt, which is what 90 percent of the paved roads in the country are made of,” Hajj said. “There are 2.5 million miles of asphalt paved roads, under all types of temperatures, climate, humidity, traffic loads. We help design the best mixture of materials and binders through research in our five labs with all of those specific variables in mind.”

For example, in one research project Hajj and his team used a large-scale experiment, with a 6-foot tall, 8-foot diameter tank and numerous channels of instrumentation, to capture data on five variables, including vertical stress distribution, deformation, confinement and slippage condition. The tank lets the University engineers conduct dozens of asphalt and concrete experiments economically in a short time with a variety of depths and layers of soil, aggregates and binders or cements – the glue that holds the mixtures together. The insights gained on this and other research help to inform the researcher’s vehicle cost prediction work for the federal highway administration.

Federal and state governments continuously evaluate the transportation network’s performance and use transportation management programs and performance models to take the necessary corrective actions. They will use the information developed by Hajj and his team in three analysis tools, including revenue forecasting, economic requirement systems and truck size and weight analysis to estimate the potential effects of suggested regulations and investment scenarios over 20-year periods.

The Nevada Automotive Test Center is one of the preeminent groups in modeling and simulation of full vehicle performance, bringing to the table a wealth of experience in vehicles dynamics, powertrain performance, suspension types, and tire characteristics. The test center also brings a unique capability and expertise in the measurements of the onboard fuel economy for gasoline and diesel powered vehicles.

The second phase of the project will specifically look into the influence of pavement roughness on fuel economy and other vehicle operating costs such as tire wear, vehicle repair and maintenance, and oil consumption. This phase of the study will also quantify and provide means to estimate the effect of traffic congestion on vehicle operating costs.

Phase two will last two years, followed by a final year of evaluation, consolidation of data and a final report to the Federal Highway Administration.

“This grant is an issue that can have immediate effects on the regional and national economy,” Manos Maragakis, dean of the College of Engineering, said. “It’s a great accomplishment that shows our Superpave Center is one of the major leaders in this field.”

Mike Wolterbeek works for UNR.

Series of mild storms lined up to hit Tahoe

What originally was expected to be a decent storm headed to Tahoe has broken apart.

Forecasters from the National Weather Service in Reno are now saying the system headed to the greater Lake Tahoe area "will brush to the north of the area on Monday and Tuesday with little to no precipitation for the Sierra and western Nevada. Our next decent chance for rain and snow will be on Wednesday, but just how much will be uncertain."

On Wednesday the snow could be down to the 5,000 foot level. More moisture is in the forecast for later in the week as well.

There won't be much difference between the high and low temperatures – about 10 degrees – as highs for most the week will be in the high 30s and lows in the high 20s.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Little interest in Liberty wanting to raise rates

PROPOSED RATE INCREASE

Customer Class	Current Revenue Rate	Proposed 2016 Revenue Rate	Proposed 2017 Revenue Rate	Proposed 2018 Revenue Rate	Total Revenue ($) Increase	Total Percentage (%) Increase
Residential	$39,821,901	$44,993,811	$44,993,811	$44,993,811	$15,515,730	12.99%
Small Commercial	14,627,536	17,696,342	17,696,342	17,696,342	9,206,418	20.98%
Medium Commercial	8,052,346	8,121,444	8,121,444	8,121,444	207,294	0.86%
Large Commercial	13,734,692	18,868,878	18,868,878	18,868,878	15,402,558	37.38%
Street Lights	122,262	93,828	93,828	93,828	(85,302)	(23.26%)
Outdoor Lights	160,784	168,779	168,779	168,779	23,985	4.97%
Irrigation Service	44,451	192,364	192,364	192,364	443,739	332.76%

Source: *Liberty Utilities*

By Kathryn Reed

A proposed 17 percent rate increase by Liberty Utilities generated little interest from the public in the way of giving feedback to the California Public Utilities Commission.

The commissioners, who are responsible for granting or declining the hike, conducted four hearings last week – two in Kings Beach and two in South Lake Tahoe.

Combined, less than 30 people showed up for the meetings, and even fewer spoke.

Commissioners are expected to make a decision in late spring. Assuming an increase is approved, it will be retroactive to Jan. 1. Instead of one lump sum added to bills it would be spread out over a few months. A residential customer using 601.67 kilowatts per month would see an average monthly bill increase of $3.95 (or 4.37 percent), from $86.56 to $90.54.

Liberty provides electricity to about 49, 000 customers, with about 80 percent of them in the Lake Tahoe Basin on the California side.

Liberty first applied for the 17.34 increase in May. It is designed generate $13.57 million.

Ken Wittman with Liberty told the commission the actual increase may be scaled back because the cost of natural gas gone down since last spring.

General rate increase filings are required by the CPUC every three years. In 2012, rates went up nearly 5 percent. At that time the CPUC did not require the local public meetings.

"We welcome it. It's an important part of the process," Greg Sorensen, president of Liberty Utilities, told *Lake Tahoe News.*

Reasons for the increase include: vegetation management; drought-related fire prevention mandates; more energy efficiency programs/incentives; and the new solar incentive program.

Liberty also needs funds to pay for its **multimillion-dollar upgrade** to facilities on the North Shore and in the Truckee area. The Truckee to Northstar work was done last summer, with the Northstar to Kings Beach work to start after the snow melts in the spring.

"It helps with our reliability," Sorensen said.

Normally peak usage is over the Christmas-New Year's holidays, where the system is on the borderline of requiring customers to scale back use or the company will need to initiate brown outs. While consumption is always monitored, this year – even with so many people in the basin and resorts blowing snow – the usage didn't reach the danger zone. The new line is credited with supplying enough power, Sorensen said.

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Notes:

· The rate increase application is on Liberty's **website**.

National Park Service stretched thin as it approaches 100th year

By Kevin Freking, AP

WASHINGTON — Under President Dwight D. Eisehower, the nation prepared for the 50th birthday of the National Park Service with a spending splurge that refurbished Independence Hall in Philadelphia and helped complete the Gateway Arch in St. Louis and the 469-mile Blue Ridge Parkway. This year, the world-famous system turns 100 and the celebration will be far more modest.

The Obama administration and Republican lawmakers have vastly different ideas about what to do.

Both parties agree that the country's national parks and historic sites could use some sprucing up. Their shared goal is to use the centennial to improve trails, visitor centers, campgrounds and other park features that need maintenance work.

The question is how much of a dent Congress will make in a system-wide maintenance backlog with an estimated $11.5 billion price tag.

President Obama has recommended spending an additional $1.5 billion on the parks over a three-year period. Republican leaders in Congress have a smaller birthday present in mind.

Just the fact they are open to greater investment, though, is being viewed as a promising first step by some Democrats.

Areas of agreement include lifting the price of the $10 lifetime park pass for seniors to $80 and enacting a lodging tax for those who stay overnight, though how much and whether it should apply to campers as well as hotel guests, will have to be worked out in the months ahead.

The administration and lawmakers are also looking to use some of the additional federal dollars to leverage private-sector donations and endowments.

Lawmakers go into the debate with different views on why the parks system is failing to keep up with basic maintenance. Republicans point to Congress's appetite for adding new units to the parks system, diluting the pot of federal dollars into ever-smaller slices.

"It's fun and sexy to add a new unit to the Park Service. It's not fun or sexy to talk about fixing a sewer system," said Rep. Rob Bishop, the Republican chairman of the House Natural Resources Committee.

Democrats say Congress has simply failed to make the national parks a priority. The budget over the past five years has been largely flat, increasing from $3.16 billion to $3.24 billion, though Congress did just boost spending by more than $200 million in this year's budget.

Most of the nation's 409 park units have a piece of the backlog.

Alcatraz, the former federal prison in California, has crumbling walls and deteriorated windows. "The walls leak, concrete falls off the building, rust jacking is causing the building to move and crack…," the National Park Service said in a report to Congress this past year detailing its budget requests.

Mammoth Cave in Kentucky needs to have dirt trails replaced for safety reasons. "Without this project the park may have to severely curtail visitor access to Mammoth Cave and eliminate significant visitor experiences," the Park Service said.

And a historic hotel at Glacier National Park needs a new fire sprinkler system and other work. "Failure to rehabilitate this building will pose serious health and life safety threats to park visitors and park and concession employees," the Park Service wrote.

Congress is just beginning to take a closer look at the administration's request for more money and the debate will extend well into 2016. In a recent hearing, Republican Sen. Lisa Murkowski, chairman of the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee, called the backlog a travesty, but she said that spending $1.5 billion without identifying how most of that money would be raised was troubling. Other Republicans agreed.

Meanwhile, draft legislation that Bishop is putting together provides too little help, Democratic lawmakers said when reviewing it.

"Making a dent in the maintenance backlog is going to require a significant investment," said Democratic Rep. Niki Tsongas of Massachusetts. "New revenue generated by fees will not solve this problem."

Lawmakers from both parties are interested in using federal dollars to generate more private sector investments in the parks. They want to follow the model of a program called the Centennial Challenge in which the federal government spent $10 million and other groups and individuals pitched in about $16 million.

Obama has upped the ante, calling for federal spending of up to $100 million over each of the next three years to be matched with private contributions from individuals, foundations or businesses.

“It’s essential the federal government have skin in the game. The first question I get from prospective donors: Is the Park Service invested?” said Will Shafroth, president and CEO of the National Park Foundation, a charity that raises money for park improvements.

The big-ticket item in Obama’s request is $900 million that would address non-transportation infrastructure. Roads and bridges make up about half of the maintenance backlog, and administration officials will use the recently passed highway bill to direct more money there.