

Plastic bag lobby not going down without a fight

By Lance Williams, Reveal

In the final months of 2014, the nation's plastic bag manufacturers spent \$3.1 million to sidetrack a California law that sought to ban throwaway bags.

But that political spending spree may be a small down payment on what could be a hugely expensive environmental fight on the state ballot in 2016 – and one with profound national implications as well.

Last year, the California Legislature barred retailers from giving plastic shopping bags to consumers. A dozen bag manufacturers – most from outside the state – banded together to finance a quick-strike petition challenging the law before it had gone into effect.

The bag companies gathered some 800,000 signatures – enough to put the issue of whether California should ban the bags to a statewide vote. Until the November 2016 election, the new law remains in limbo.

The biggest bag manufacturers are based in South Carolina, Texas and New Jersey. But starting in 2010, the industry emerged as a free-spending political player in California's Capitol, pumping about \$6 million into donations and lobbying since then.

That's a measure of how eager the industry is to stop California from enacting what would be the first statewide ban in the country.

With the referendum looming, the price could get quite a bit steeper.

The cost of running a statewide ballot measure spirals upward every election. Four winning campaigns spent an average of \$34 million in 2014, according to a recent analysis by Forward Observer, a Sacramento political consulting firm.

Meanwhile, a Los Angeles Times poll showed that 60 percent of Californians support the bag ban.

Given those numbers, overturning the ban will be a “heavy lift” for the industry, said Renee Van Vechten, a professor of political science at the University of Redlands and an expert on state initiatives. Even extraordinarily heavy spending might not make a difference, she said.

“Is it winnable? The easy answer would be no,” she said. “But they obviously think they have a chance and a lot to lose if it goes forward.”

The campaign’s cost likely will be shouldered by the same companies that financed the petition drive. Here, from state records, are the petition donors:

Contributions to the American Progressive Bag Alliance, 2014

Contributor	City	State	Donation
HILEX POLY CO. LLC	HARTSVILLE	SC	\$1,701,500
ADVANCE POLYBAG INC.	SUGAR LAND	TX	\$500,000
SUPERBAG CORP.	HOUSTON	TX	\$500,000
FORMOSA PLASTICS CORP. U.S.A.	LIVINGSTON	NJ	\$400,000
DURABAG CO. INC.	TUSTIN	CA	\$50,000
HERITAGE PLASTICS INC.	PICAYUNE	MS	\$50,000
PRINCE RUBBER AND PLASTICS CO. INC.	SUGAR LAND	TX	\$25,000
CROWN POLY INC.	HUNTINGTON PARK	CA	\$12,000
THE DOW CHEMICAL CO.	HOUSTON	TX	\$10,000
ELKAY PLASTICS CO. INC.	COMMERCE	CA	\$4,000
METRO POLY CO.	SAN LEANDRO	CA	\$2,500
SID MARANTZ & ASSOCIATES	VERNON	CA	\$1,500
OMEGA EXTRUDING CORP.	COMPTON	CA	\$1,000
Total			\$3,257,500
Source: California secretary of state			

Throwaway bags are a staple of America's convenience lifestyle, but environmentalists complain that they are a huge source of litter and pollution.

Californians throw away 14 billion bags per year, the state Legislative Analyst's Office said. Estimates of cleanup and disposal costs range from \$25 million to \$500 million, and a huge number of bags don't make it to the landfill.

But the industry contends that the rationale for banning plastic bags is based on "emotional imagery, junk science, and exaggeration, rather than facts and good data," as Phil Rozenski, policy chair for the American Progressive Bag Alliance, wrote in an email.

Bag bans threaten the livelihood of 30,000 American workers,

he wrote. Instead of a job-killing ban, California should pursue “comprehensive recycling education and in-store take back programs,” he wrote. He also called California’s law “a scam” and said the industry believes voters will vote to repeal it.

For years, environmentalists concentrated on backing local ordinances to ban throwaway plastic bags. San Francisco was the first to enact a ban, in 2007. Today, advocates say more than 100 California communities and dozens more around the country have such laws on the books.

The push for a statewide ban began in 2010, recalled Los Angeles activist Hans Johnson, but it ran into a furious and well-financed lobbying campaign. From 2010 through 2014, South Carolina-based Hilex Poly Co. spent \$1.8 million lobbying the California Legislature, records show, far more than it spent in any other state. The American Progressive Bag Alliance, the industry’s Washington, D.C.-based political arm, spent an additional \$1 million.

Hilex also donated more than \$500,000 to about 70 state lawmakers and political committees in California, favoring Democrats, who controlled the Legislature, by about 2 to 1. The top recipient lawmaker was state Sen. Leland Yee, D-San Francisco, who was indicted last year in an FBI bribery sting. Hilex gave \$9,800 to then-state Sen. Alex Padilla, D-Van Nuys, now the secretary of state and the author of the bag ban measure that was enacted in 2014.

While the bill was pending – and Padilla was in a tight race for secretary of state – the bag alliance paid for a flurry of television and radio ads criticizing what it called “Padilla’s misguided bag ban.” A lobbying report indicates that the alliance spent \$266,000 on the ad campaign.

Top donations from Hilex Poly Co. in California, 2010-2014:

Top donations from Hilex Poly Co. in California, 2010-2014

Recipient	Amount
STATE DEMOCRATIC PARTY COMMITTEES	\$132,200
STATE REPUBLICAN PARTY COMMITTEES	\$67,502
SACRAMENTO COUNTY DEMOCRATIC CENTRAL COMMITTEE	\$25,000
REPUBLICAN CENTRAL COMMITTEE OF SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY	\$15,000
CALIFORNIA LATINO CAUCUS LEADERSHIP PAC	\$15,000
STATE SEN. LELAND YEE CAMPAIGNS	\$12,700
CALIFORNIANS FOR JOBS AND A STRONG ECONOMY (business-oriented political committee)	\$12,500
YES WE CAN (affiliate of California Latino Caucus)	\$10,000
CALIFORNIA BLACK POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEE	\$10,000
STATE SEN. ALEX PADILLA CAMPAIGNS	\$9,800
Source: California secretary of state	

Shift toward renewables a conundrum for Calif.

By Kim Smuga-Ottoksmugaotto, San Jose Mercury News

FOLSOM — California's electrical grid has a problem — a nice problem, but a problem nonetheless: The state often has too much power.

Nearly 23 percent of California's energy now comes from renewable sources such as wind and solar, and the state is on track to reach its goal of generating one-third of its energy from renewables by 2020. But feeding all that green energy into the Golden State's grid — without overloading it — has

become a major challenge.

That's because the state's aging natural gas plants aren't nimble enough to turn off when the sun starts shining and then quickly switch back on when it gets dark. And while the technology to generate clean energy is growing by leaps and bounds, efforts to store the power haven't kept up.

Power grid operators work in the grid operation center at the California Independent System Operator in Folsom, Calif., on Monday, March 9, 2015.

The dilemma has forced the energy industry to rethink the way we make and use electricity. And utilities are having to recalculate how much they should charge for electricity at certain times of the day.

Read the whole story

TRPA gets grant for vehicle charging station strategy

By Associated Press

The California Energy Commission has awarded a \$200,000 grant to help develop a plan for the expansion of charging stations for electric vehicles around Lake Tahoe.

The commission recently approved the money for the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency to assess the current situation and identify public and private locations where additional charging stations would best serve the public.

Karin Edwards, manager of TRPA's sustainable communities

program says it's important to have a strategy to make electric vehicle travel convenient for local residents as well as visitors to the Truckee-Tahoe area.

She says it's also necessary to identify ways to make sure travelers from the San Francisco Bay Area can get the charges they need to make it to the lake.

Sierra Nevada snowpack hits historic low

By Peter Fimrite, San Francisco Chronicle

The abominable snowpack in the Sierra Nevada reached an unprecedented low this week, dipping below the historic lows in 1977 and 2014 for the driest winter in 65 years of record-keeping.

Electronic surveys show the water content of the snow throughout the Sierra is a shocking 8 percent of the historical average for this time of year, by far the driest it has been since 1950, the year record-keeping began, because of the lack of rain and snowfall and the exceedingly high temperatures. It is a troubling milestone that water resources officials say is bound to get even lower as the skies remain stubbornly blue.

"It's certainly sobering when you consider that the snowpack in a normal year provides about 30 percent of what California needs in the summer and fall," said Doug Carlson, the spokesman for the California Department of Water Resources. "What this suggests is that we will have very little water running off. It accentuates the severity of the drought and

emphasizes the importance of people cutting back on their water use.”

Read the whole story

State releases money for EDC road projects

The California Transportation Commission has allocated \$325.8 million to 142 transportation projects, including ones on the South Shore.

Fifty-one biking and pedestrian projects throughout the state will receive \$27 million in allocations from the Active Transportation Program.

El Dorado County will receive \$750,000 to construct a class I bike and multi-use path on Sawmill Road. This will complete that section, which will then link to Highway 50 and Lake Tahoe Boulevard.

Additional dollars are coming to the county through Proposition 1B funds. Statewide, \$8.4 million is being allocated.

To reduce the number and severity of collisions on highways 49 and 50 in El Dorado County, \$620,000 will be spent to place a thin, high-friction surface treatment on the roadway at various locations.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Study: U.S. workers squander unused paid time off

By Patrick Clarke, Travel Pulse

A recent study on vacation time conducted by economic analysis firm Oxford Economics and commissioned by the U.S. Travel Association reveals that many Americans are hurting themselves and their companies by refusing to capitalize on paid time off.

According to Rachel Emma Silverman of the Wall Street Journal, Oxford Economics' research found that Americans are wasting \$52.4 billion in earned benefits each year as a result of unused paid vacation days, while U.S. businesses are left with \$224 billion in liabilities for accumulated vacation time.

The study found that, on average, workers vacate roughly five vacations days every year.

[Read the whole story](#)

Sandoval looms over fight for Reid seat

By Michael R. Blood and Kimberly Pierceall, AP

Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid's decision to retire next year leaves no clear successor in his home state of Nevada,

where a popular Republican governor appears reluctant to change jobs and the pending loss of Reid's clout in Washington is causing anxiety over who might replace him.

As of Friday, the list of potential candidates came down to Gov. Brian Sandoval and everyone else. The political centrist who was easily re-elected last year is likely to face intense pressure from national Republicans and business interests to pick up where Reid leaves off on Capitol Hill.

Sandoval didn't deliver an unequivocal "no" Friday but he made clear the 2016 contest wasn't on his current agenda.

"My focus is in on Nevada, period. Politics can take care of itself, but right now I am absolutely laser-focused on getting my budget through and improving education in Nevada," he said.

Beyond the governor, the race would be wide open.

Reid, the longtime Senate Democratic leader, quickly blessed former Nevada Attorney General Catherine Cortez Masto to run for his seat, while Rep. Dina Titus, another Democrat, said she would consider a bid. Among Republicans, other possibilities are Rep. Joe Heck, Nevada Attorney General Adam Laxalt and former Lt. Gov. Brian Krolicki.

"The major decision will be made by Brian Sandoval," said political scientist Eric Herzik, who teaches at the University of Nevada, Reno. "If he jumps in, this race tips overwhelmingly to the Republicans."

The Nevada campaign will inevitably figure in the fight for control of the Senate. In a video statement Friday, Reid said Democrats must retake the majority and "it is inappropriate for me to soak up all those resources" to defend his seat.

Awkward in public, clumsy with words, the 75-year-old Reid never was a beloved figure at home. He survived a brutal re-election campaign in 2010, when angry voters turned on him in

the aftermath of the recession. He's been in the Senate since the Reagan era.

But he helped deliver victories for President Barack Obama, including on national health care reform, and his name is affiliated with a long string of wins in Nevada, from development on the Las Vegas Strip to Yucca Mountain, which he helped stop after it was approved by Congress as a nuclear dump in 2002.

Reid lost his role as Senate majority leader when last fall's elections swept Republicans into power. He suffered serious eye and facial injuries on New Year's Day while exercising at his Nevada home.

Las Vegas native Daniel Bastardo, smoking a cigarette during a break from his casino security job, said it was going to be hard to replace the man who proved Sin City was worthy of political respect.

"You gotta hang up your hat at some point," said the 28-year-old Democrat, understanding Reid's desire to retire. "I'm worried who's going to represent us now."

The sense of looming loss was felt around the state. With Reid's pending departure, Nevada will be without its most experienced hand on Capitol Hill. Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., has been in Washington for several years in a chamber where seniority equals influence, and the state's House members are relative newcomers in a body where members sometimes serve decades.

Sig Rogich, an influential Nevada Republican who helped Reid defend his seat in 2010, said "you don't lose him and not expect to feel the void." The Nevada Mining Association said the state would "miss having this native son in its corner."

The contest will play out in a state in which Democrats hold an edge in registration but voters have long displayed an

independent streak. Obama was a two-time winner, but the state also helped send Republican George W. Bush to the White House twice.

Democrats are anchored in the Las Vegas region, while Republicans have an edge in rural parts of the state. A fast-growing Hispanic population is gradually reshaping the electorate, similar to other states in the West, including California.

A major factor in the coming election will be the casino industry, which has a long history ignoring party labels and picking winners in Nevada politics.

Jan Jones Blackhurst, an executive vice president at Caesars Entertainment, called Reid “irreplaceable.” Reid won broad support from the industry in his 2010 victory over tea party favorite Sharron Angle, a Republican.

Finding the right successor, she said, is “a big issue and big concern.”

With Reid’s influence, “all of the sudden Nevada mattered,” she added. With his exit, “that’s going to be a challenge for the state.”

The 2016 presidential race will also intertwine with the Senate contest, potentially driving up turnout among key voter groups, including Latinos. Part of Reid’s victory in 2010 was credited to a Democratic political apparatus that ferreted out supporters, but it’s unclear if another candidate can duplicate those efforts.

Betty Post, a Republican retiree in Las Vegas, said she was thrilled to see Reid stepping down. “We need new blood in there,” she said, adding that she considered the long-serving senator a “bully.”

To Las Vegas attorney Elizabeth Stephens, a Democrat, Reid’s

exit could be summed up succinctly. “It’s scary,” she said.

Calif. loosens sex offender residency rules

By Sam Stanton, Sacramento Bee

State prison officials said Thursday that they are loosening some restrictions on where thousands of California sex offenders may live in response to a state Supreme Court ruling earlier this month.

The new policy essentially means that state officials will review the cases of all 6,000 sex-offender parolees to determine whether their criminal histories involved children or other sex crimes. Those with offenses involving children will remain under current restrictions created by the Jessica’s Law measure passed by voters in 2006 that prevent them from living within about a half mile of schools, parks and other places where children may be present.

But others – such as offenders convicted of rape of an adult or statutory rape – who have shown no propensity for crimes against children may be allowed to live without such restrictions, a move officials hope will reduce the number of homeless sex offenders in California.

Read the whole story

Tahoe homeless facility not progressing



Anne Schiller with Catholic Charities in Reno talks about what her agency offers homeless people.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

Another winter has gone by and still there is no place for the homeless in South Lake Tahoe to seek shelter.

Frustration is beginning to show among those who keep meeting to talk about establishing a warming room in South Lake Tahoe. Without nonprofit status, it is impossible to apply for grants that would help fund such an endeavor. The group doesn't want to form its own nonprofit and no entity has come forward to volunteer to be the umbrella under which the warming room proponents could function.

"We need to get buy-in from the people we want to serve. We need a vision of what we want to create," Marissa Muscat with Barton Hospital and Live Violence Free said.

Representatives from Catholic Charities in Reno spoke to the group March 24 about what they offer and some of the realities

of such an endeavor.

They were quick to say that the talking can go on forever and encouraged the Tahoe folks to jump in, start small and go from there.

Thirty-seven families with kids going to school in Lake Tahoe Unified School District are living in non-traditional housing. Thirty-eight homeless people were identified in the January count; a nationwide effort by the federal government to document this class of people. Throughout El Dorado County there were 247 homeless people counted that day. In the Truckee-Tahoe City area there were 51 people.

It was pointed out that not everyone wants out of this way of life. The Reno women shared how one veteran was given a studio apartment. When he was shown it he turned it down, instead preferring to be at the shelter.

Mental illness is one of the largest barriers to get people to change their habits.

“It’s surprising how many of these people have income who are staying in a combination of these shelters,” Anne Schiller, chief clinical officer for Catholic Charities, said.

Their overflow shelter, which operates during the cold weather months, costs \$24,000 a month to operate. It is equally split between Catholic Charities, the city of Reno and Washoe County.

Men and women are allowed – no kids, no pets. A mattress is provided for a few, but mostly they sleep on mats that resemble insulate pads for backpacking. One is lined up after the other. There is no privacy. But they are out of the cold. Most nights the 100 mattresses are spoken for.

This is more than most warm rooms provide. Typically they are just a building out of the cold where homeless must sleep on

the floor or stay up all night.

Linens are changed twice a week, a deep cleaning occurs once a week and spraying for things like lice and bed bugs happens once a week.

The hours are from 7pm to 7am. Bed checks and perimeter checks are done regularly.

Once a week case management is provided to help these people get services they need and to apply for aid they qualify for.

This facility is in addition to the regular shelter Catholic Charities runs.

“We’ve tried different things and they have not worked that well,” Schiller said. “Before this facility we tried local hotels.”

The problem was it was not in a great location, no staff was on-site to deal with issues and there was a lot of property damage.

For now, the Tahoe group is going to keep meeting, brainstorm and try to find a nonprofit to essentially be the fiscal agent.

Drought relief package falls short, conservation advocates say

By Chris Megerian and Melanie Mason, Los Angeles Times

Not only will the \$1-billion spending plan approved by

lawmakers Thursday provide little immediate relief to drought-stricken Californians, state leaders are missing an opportunity to take more decisive action to restrict water use, conservation advocates said.

“Until we have statewide mandatory restrictions ... we’re not going to see the kind of cutbacks the governor has called for,” said Conner Everts of the Environmental Water Caucus, which promotes sustainable water management.

Brown set a goal of a 20 percent reduction in water use, but Californians reduced consumption by just 8.8 percent in January.

Lester Snow, executive director of the California Water Foundation, said mandatory, statewide restrictions could be difficult to implement because water conditions are different around the state. However, he expects the conversation could change if rain doesn’t arrive soon.

Read the whole story