Minor work in Kings Beach to continue

While much of the work on the Kings Beach Commercial Core Improvement Project has stopped for the season, some may continue.

Based on weather, there is a chance AT&T this season may complete the last utility relocation at the intersection of highways 28 and 267.

With the recent precipitation, crews have been out monitoring the stormwater treatment system to verify it is doing what it is intended to do. Drainage patterns are also being observed to locate areas of adverse ponding or flooding.

Other improvements anticipated to be completed in the coming weeks are the installation of handrails at the entrance to several businesses between Bear Street and Coon Street.

Placer County is hiring a snow removal contractor to clear a 5-foot wide path along portions of the project where the new sidewalks have been built. Brook and Minnow parking lots will continue to be cleared.

Gateway to the Core is the second phase of improvements which are planned along Highway 28 and in the grid. This second phase of work will provide pedestrian, water quality, and aesthetic improvements on both ends of Kings Beach’s commercial corridor. Bids will be advertised in fall 2015, with construction expected to begin the next spring.

Money laundering a concern for casinos

By J.D. Morris, Las Vegas Sun

Monitoring casino floors for potential money-laundering is a full-time job for the American gaming industry.

Casinos, like banks and other institutions that deal with a lot of money, are required by law to vigilantly look out for financial transactions that may be illegal. And a first of its kind report from the industry's Washington, D.C.-based trade association sheds light on the best methods casinos can employ to do that.

The report comes as the industry is under substantial pressure to make sure its anti-money laundering tactics are airtight.

Read the whole story

Settlement ends North State resort plans

By Jane Braxton Little, Sacramento Bee

SUSANVILLE – A decadelong legal battle over a controversial four-season resort on Dyer Mountain has ended with a settlement agreement reached between Lassen County, Sierra Pacific Industries and three environmental groups.

The county and the timber company, which bought the 7,000-acre property in 2013, agreed to pay $519,000 to Sierra Watch, Mountain Meadows Conservancy and the Sierra Club, said Richard Egan, Lassen County administrative officer.

The payments were sent this week, he said Thursday.

The settlement, approved last month in a closed session of the Lassen County Board of Supervisors, ends the environmentalists' challenge of the development, planned to include ski facilities, golf courses, 600,000 square feet of commercial space and more than 4,000 residential units.

Read the whole story

Detectives revisiting 20-year-old Tahoe murders

By Ed Pearce, KOLO-TV

INCLINE VILLAGE — Twenty years ago, a retired couple was murdered in their Incline Village home. The crime remains unsolved, one of Washoe County's "cold cases."

But it and others like it are getting new attention. In a small storage room in the Washoe County Sheriff's Office are shelves containing the files of this department's unsolved major crimes. Each represents a victim, a family without closure, justice delayed, but not necessarily denied.

You see these cases aren't sitting on the shelf, gathering dust. They're getting new attention and that includes the murders of Charles and Nona Rauer.

Sixty-three-year-old Charles Rauer and his 56-year-old wife Nona had moved in their retirement away from the big city crime of southern Florida to the safe quiet of Tahoe’s north shore. “They were retired, living in a condo up in Incline, basically living the dream that they had,” says Washoe County Sheriff’s Detective Josh Palmer..

The dream turned to nightmare one morning in early December of 1994. Their bodies were found in their home in the 800 block of Oriole Way in Incline Village on the foruth. It’s likely they were killed in the morning of the second or third. Cause of death: blunt force trauma.

Read the whole story

El Dorado ordinance fuels outcry over pot-growing boom

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

The tense public hearing was three hours in Tuesday when a friend pushed Joyce Hall in her walker to address the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors. The frail, 100-pound woman rose, grasped the lectern with both hands and began to cry.

“You’re going to kill us,” said Hall, 57, a Garden Valley resident and medical marijuana patient who suffers from a rare immune disorder that causes severe weight loss. For the past year, a caregiver has been growing 12 marijuana plants on Hall’s property under a September 2013 county ordinance that permits individual patients to grow 200 square feet of plants in fenced off plots away from neighbors’ property lines.

But El Dorado County Sheriff John D’Agostini, who originally supported the policy, now says the county’s marijuana ordinance was a “big mistake.”

The sheriff blames the ordinance – intended as a compassionate action for local medical marijuana patients – for broadcasting a “weed friendly” message. He says it has attracted criminal profiteers who are ripping up public and private lands and cultivating hundreds of thousands of plants on a scale vastly exceeding county guidelines.

Read the whole story

Few rules = hefty payouts for public employees

By Joanna Lin, Center for Investigative Reporting

California taxpayers spend about $40 billion a year to pay their fire chiefs, mayors, tree trimmers and thousands of other city and county employees. Some – including harbor pilots in Los Angeles – make more than $300,000 a year. Others receive as little as $190, the payout for one planning commissioner in tiny Alpine County.

Although the salaries of government employees are public, most taxpayers know little about whether these paychecks, which typically represent more than a third of communities’ spending, are fair.

No statewide standards govern how local pay is set, leaving the public in the dark about whether their city managers, for example, are paid appropriately for the job and the community.

With that in mind, The Center for Investigative Reporting analyzed four years of data – from California's 482 incorporated cities and 58 counties – to see what factors correlated with top officials' compensation. Most of the time, the larger a community and the higher its median rent, the more money its leaders tended to make.

But CIR's analysis, based on data that cities and counties report to the state controller, also found that top officials in a few communities bucked the trend, earning significantly more than their counterparts in similar places.

Butte and Yolo counties are about 90 miles apart in the Sacramento Valley and similar in size and living costs. In 2012, then-Butte Sheriff-Coroner Jerry Smith earned about $183,000 – about the same as his counterparts in similar counties. But Yolo Sheriff-Coroner Ed Prieto made almost 40 percent more – about $256,000.

The difference is largely explained by money Prieto received in lieu of retirement pay. Prieto, a retired California Highway Patrol captain, chose not to participate in Yolo's retirement system, so he receives extra pay equivalent to what the county would otherwise contribute to his pension, said Assistant County Administrator Mindi Nunes.

The analysis also showed that pay can spike significantly when officials leave office.

After Greg Johnson was forced to resign as city manager of Indian Wells, he became California's highest-paid municipal employee for 2011. His severance package included a year's salary and benefits and about $65,000 in unused vacation, administrative and sick leave. Johnson, whose desert resort town had about 5,000 residents and 39 people on its payroll, took in more than $677,000 that year, compared with his regular annual salary of nearly $255,000.

"I have to say, in hindsight, it's a very bad contract.

Something none of us will let happen again," City Councilwoman Mary Roche said of the City Council's approval of the severance package, according to a news report at the time.

Wade McKinney, the current city manager, can bank far fewer leave hours under his contract than his predecessor could. If he were fired, his severance package would include nine months' salary and benefits instead of a year's.

Cities use severance packages as a powerful enticement when recruiting new leaders. State law limits a public employee's severance to 18 months' salary.

It's like an insurance policy for what can be a vulnerable position, said R. Craig Scott, an Orange County attorney who negotiates contracts for executives in the public and private sectors.

"They can, on any night the city council meets, find themselves unemployed," he said. "By a 3-to-2 vote – they're gone."

In addition to promising severance pay, city manager contracts historically have not capped how much vacation time can be accrued, Scott said. That's led to hefty payouts for some outgoing city managers.

When Buena Park City Manager Rick Warsinski retired in 2012, after working 33 years for the city, he cashed out $293,050 in unused vacation and sick time. With a salary of more than $239,000 and about $13,000 in other pay, including a cellphone allowance, he earned more than $545,000.

Some cities have capped leave accrual and shrunk severance packages since 2010, Scott said, after officials in the small Southern California city of Bell became embroiled in a public corruption scandal. Bell, where the former city manager earned more than $1 million a year, became a symbol of local government excess, prompting the League of California Cities to recommend compensation guidelines for city managers.

The guidelines call for establishing benchmark agencies, nearby communities that are similar in services provided, population served and the number of employees. The International City/County Management Association offers similar guidelines for government managers.

Other factors – such as a city's political stability and the scope of an official's responsibility – are "very hard to reduce to data points," said Chris McKenzie, executive director of the League of California Cities.

Local governments don't use uniform metrics for setting compensation, said Norman Roberts, a consultant whose Beverly Hills firm recruits public-sector executives. "You just kind of roll your eyeballs in the back of your head because there's no rhyme or reason in half the places."

Even when cities and counties try to establish fair compensation by benchmarking pay to outside factors, some employers and employees can cherry-pick data to get their desired paychecks.

San Bernardino is the only city in California where public safety compensation is not set by collective bargaining. Instead, police and fire department salaries are based on the average pay for comparable jobs in similarly sized cities.

How those cities are chosen is like a sports draft in reverse: Labor and management take turns striking cities from a list until only 10 remain. The initial pool of cities is based on only one factor: population.

The unique approach means that police pay this fiscal year is pegged to cities whose median rent is 14 to 102 percent higher than San Bernardino's.

In November, local voters rejected a ballot measure to replace the benchmarking process with collective bargaining. The city, which recently entered its third year of bankruptcy, calculates that police employee salaries will grow by about 4 percent this year.

The measure would not have fixed all of San Bernardino's financial woes, but it would have freed the city from "a financial straightjacket," said Thomas Pierce, an economics professor at California State University, San Bernardino who served on the city's charter review committee that recommended the proposition.

Up north in Contra Costa County, elected officials in October chose a pay benchmark that boosted their salaries by 33 percent – to more than $129,000.

The Board of Supervisors – whose members already earned about what could be expected based on Contra Costa's size and cost of living – voted to set their salaries at 70 percent of a superior court judge's pay. They chose the formula, which is similar to ones used by several counties in the state, after surveying how other San Francisco Bay Area counties paid their supervisors.

"Nobody wants to be at the bottom. You're always trying to be in the middle," said Supervisor Candace Andersen, who cast the board's only dissenting vote. "You escalate just because everyone else has set theirs at the median."

However, when county employees tried to use some of the same Bay Area counties to negotiate higher pay, county officials said those counties' larger budgets made them inappropriate comparisons.

"For employees, I hate to say it, but it was a slap in the face to them," said Andersen, who is taking the 4 percent raise that other county employees received instead of the 33 percent bump for supervisors.

Surveying salaries in other communities ratchets up pay over time, as local governments try to stay competitive, said Nestor Enrique Valencia, the current mayor of Bell. That puts some communities at a disadvantage, he said.

To even the playing field, state law should cap the amount of vacation and sick time that public employees can cash out, Valencia said. Bell limits payouts for unused vacation time to 360 hours and sick time to between 100 and 1,500 hours, depending on the type of employee.

His city now suffers, he said, for getting out in front of the issue.

“Who’s going to come work for the city of Bell,” he said, “when they know they could get these other benefits elsewhere?”

CIR reporters Jennifer Gollan and Emmanuel Martinez contributed to this story. It was edited by Jennifer LaFleur and copy edited by Stephanie Rice and Nikki Frick.

Top EDC official named in suit by ex-employee

By Kathryn Reed

The woman who is acting chief administrative officer for El Dorado County is being sued by a former employee who worked for her when she was CAO in Alpine County.

Robert Levy, former undersheriff of Alpine County, in the 19-page lawsuit alleges Pam Knorr along with three supervisors at the time and a private citizen violated his civil rights, conspired to do so, discriminated against him based on age, failed to prevent discrimination and retaliation, violated the Public Safety Officers' Procedural Bill of Rights Act, and defamed him.

"Her theory was a younger, cheaper workforce was better," Jeanette Viduay, investigator with the Watts Law Office, told *Lake Tahoe News*. The Folsom-based firm is representing Levy.

Gayle Tonon of Truckee is representing all of the defendants, but did not return multiple calls.

"Generally I can say sometimes counties settle items and sometimes they choose to litigate. I think there are good reasons behind each of those choices," Knorr told *Lake Tahoe News*.

She is confident in the job she did in Alpine County, stating, "I sleep like a baby every night."

Pam Knorr, temporary head of El Dorado County and former CAO of Alpine County, is a defendants in a labor lawsuit.

Knorr deferred further comment to Tonon.

(Knorr was hired to be the human resources director for El Dorado County, and still is, in addition to be acting chief administrative officer because of CAO Terri Daly’s departure last month and Assistant CAO Kim Kerr leaving later this month. She worked for Alpine County from 2008-13.)

When Knorr left Alpine County the chairman of the Board of Supervisors wrote a glowing letter dated Aug. 9, 2013, on her behalf. In part it says, “Most importantly, Pamela took on the mantle of CAO at a difficult time for the county and made vast improvements in our operations. It was with reluctance that the Board of Supervisors accepted her resignation and she would be welcome back here at any time.”

Terry Woodrow signed the letter. Woodrow is still on the board.

Also named in the suit are former Supervisors Tom Sweeney and Phillip Bennett, current Supervisor Don Jardine, and Nancy Thornburg, volunteer assistant archivist for Alpine County.

Viduay, with the firm representing the employee who filed the suit, said, “(Levy) wants the truth to come out about Pamela Knorr. I, like him, don’t believe she should be the CEO of any county. She is like a snake charmer.”

Viduay said Knorr was able to charm three of the supervisors, which when it comes to a five-member board is all that is needed.

Levy had been undersheriff since 2000, though he worked for the sheriff’s department since 1995.

The court filings say, “In the aftermath of county and Knorr harassing, attacking, and demoting plaintiff, these defendants assigned certain of plaintiff’s job duties – including certain law enforcement tasks as well as tasks related to plaintiff’s years-long work on county communications projects – to individuals who possessed inferior job qualifications and experience, and who were significantly younger than plaintiff. As a direct, foreseeable, and proximate result of defendants’ discriminatory actions, plaintiff has suffered and continues to suffer substantial losses in earnings and related employment benefits, and has suffered and continues to suffer extreme emotional distress, humiliation, damage to his professional reputation, and diminished employment advancement opportunities in his chosen profession, all to his damage in an amount to be proven at trial."

Enforcing digital privacy might be tough

By Marlisse Silver Sweeney, Columbia Journalism Review

Freedom from surveillance is shaping up to be a major human rights issue in the post-Snowden era. The UN human rights committee is calling for a review of how member states collect residents' data, and a Pew study last month found that most Americans are concerned with government and corporate data collection.

For journalists, recent events such as the FBI posing as the Associated Press and an Uber executive allegedly threatening to expose the personal lives of the people writing about the company underscore the importance of digital security in the 21 century, says legal scholar Nancy Leong.

But when it comes to finding what feels like a fundamental right for journalists and civilians alike within the Constitution, the issue isn't as simple as the inclinations of the public and UN resolutions. Though there is an argument to be made that digital privacy rights are enshrined in the supreme law of the land, legal scholar Mark Tushnet of Harvard Law says that idea is actually controversial. It stems from outdated doctrines and case-law that doesn’t reflect modern realities.

A right to privacy was first found to exist within the Constitution in the abortion cases of the 1960s and 1970s, Tushnet explained in a recent phone interview.

In Roe v. Wade, Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun, writing for the court, said though “the Constitution does not explicitly mention any right of privacy,” past decisions indicate a “right of personal privacy, or a guarantee of certain areas or zones of privacy, does exist under the Constitution.” To protect a woman’s reproductive privacy in this case, the Court relied on what Tushnet calls a “slew of constitutional provisions,” including the First, Fourth, and Fifth amendments.

Read the whole story

El Dorado County man guilty in child porn case

And El Dorado County man pleaded guilty Dec. 4 to receipt and distribution of child pornography.

According to court documents, 63-year-old Nicholas Robert Bowen of Grizzly Flats took a woman to a Davis park and had her expose herself to 10- and 12-year-old boys while Bowen filmed using a spy camera built into his glasses. They were arrested by Davis police. A subsequent search of Bowen’s phone and computer discovered more than 600 images and videos of minors engaged in sexually explicit conduct.

Bowen is scheduled to be sentenced Feb. 19. He faces a maximum of 20 years in prison and a $250,000 fine.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

How climate has changed Earth

By Seth Borenstein, AP

WASHINGTON – In the more than two decades since world leaders first got together to try to solve global warming, life on Earth has changed, not just the climate. It’s gotten hotter, more polluted with heat-trapping gases, more crowded and just downright wilder.

The numbers are stark. Carbon dioxide emissions: up 60 percent. Global temperature: up six-tenths of a degree. Population: up 1.7 billion people. Sea level: up 3 inches. U.S. extreme weather: up 30 percent. Ice sheets in Greenland and Antarctica: down 4.9 trillion tons of ice.

“Simply put, we are rapidly remaking the planet and beginning to suffer the consequences,” says Michael Oppenheimer, professor of geosciences and international affairs at Princeton University.

Diplomats from more than 190 nations opened talks Monday at a United Nations global warming conference in Lima, Peru, to pave the way for an international treaty they hope to forge next year.

To see how much the globe has changed since the first such international conference – the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 – the Associated Press scoured databases from around the world. The analysis, which looked at data since 1983, concentrated on 10-year intervals ending in 1992 and 2013. This is because scientists say single years can be misleading and longer trends are more telling.

Our changing world by the numbers:

Wild weather

Since 1992, there have been more than 6,600 major climate, weather and water disasters worldwide, causing more than $1.6 trillion in damage and killing more than 600,000 people, according to the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters in Belgium, which tracks the world's catastrophes.

While climate-related, not all can be blamed on man-made warming or climate change. Still, extreme weather has noticeably increased over the years, says Debby Sapir, who runs the center and its database. From 1983 to 1992 the world averaged 147 climate, water and weather disasters each year. Over the past 10 years, that number has jumped to an average 306 a year.

In the United States, an index of climate extremes — hot and cold, wet and dry — kept by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration has jumped 30 percent from 1992 to 2013, not counting hurricanes, based on 10-year averages.

NOAA also keeps track of U.S. weather disasters that cost more than $1 billion, when adjusted for inflation. Since 1992, there have been 136 such billion-dollar events.

Worldwide, the 10-year average for weather-related losses adjusted for inflation was $30 billion a year from 1983-92, according to insurance giant Swiss Re. From 2004 to 2013, the cost was more than three times that on average, or $131 billion a year.

Sapir and others say it would be wrong to pin all, or even most, of these increases on climate change alone. Population and poverty are major factors, too. But they note a trend of growing extremes and more disasters, and that fits with what scientists have long said about global warming.

It’s this increase that’s “far scarier” than the simple rise in temperatures, University of Illinois climate scientist Donald Wuebbles says.

Temperature

It’s almost a sure thing that 2014 will go down as the hottest year in 135 years of record keeping, meteorologists at NOAA’s National Climatic Data Center say. If so, this will be the sixth time since 1992 that the world set or tied a new annual record for the warmest year.

The globe has broken six monthly heat records in 2014 and 47 since 1992. The last monthly cold record set was in 1916.