

Investigators ID remains found on West Slope

The remain found in field off Missouri Flat Road and Highway 50 in Placerville have been identified as Penny Juergenson, 52.

The initial cause of death is undetermined pending toxicology results. However, the preliminary investigation does not indicate any foul play, according to El Dorado County sheriff's deputies.

The remains were found Aug. 17 by hikers.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Rising alpine vegetation could hit Calif. water supply

By Pete Spotts, Christian Science Monitor

A warming-climate-induced march of alpine vegetation up a large river basin on the western slope of the Sierra Nevada could slash by one-fourth the annual flow of water the basin delivers to California's thirsty Central Valley by the last two decades of this century, a study says.

The results of the Kings River Basin study imply that the same type of risk holds for another 10 major river basins along the western Sierra, although to varying degrees, say the researchers involved in the study. It also could hold similar implications for other regions around the world that rely on

alpine snows for much of their fresh water.

The results also imply that in a warming world, some forests may have to be managed as much to ensure adequate water supplies downstream as they will be to reduce the hazards of large wildfires.

Managing vegetation for stream flows already has been undertaken to some extent along rivers and streams in the Southwest, where invasive plants such as tamarisk took root along the banks, siphoning far more water than native species such as cottonwoods. Groups have been removing the tamarisk and other water-binging invasives in hopes of maintaining or restoring normal seasonal stream flows.

Read the whole story

Tesla chooses Nev. for battery factory

By CNBC

Tesla has finally decided that it will build its battery “gigafactory” in Nevada, sources say.

“That’s a go, but they are still negotiating the specifics of the contract,” a source within the Nevada’s governor’s office told CNBC Wednesday afternoon. The source noted that it could be a week before the deal is official.

Nevada is planning a press conference Thursday in Carson City, according to a Dow Jones report.

Read the whole story

Gay marriage decision could hit Nevada quickly

By Sean Whaley, Las Vegas Review-Journal

CARSON CITY — A ruling from the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals finding Nevada's ban on same-sex marriage unconstitutional could almost immediately open the floodgates to gay unions across the state, a legal analyst involved in the challenge said Tuesday.

Lambda Legal Legal Director Jon Davidson said that is what happened in cases in Pennsylvania and Oregon when a federal appeals court found those same-sex marriage bans unconstitutional.

When state officials in those two states decided, as they have in Nevada, not to challenge the effort to overturn the bans, the rulings were allowed to go immediately into effect, he said. Efforts to stay the rulings were denied all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, Davidson said.

"So we might see a similar scenario in Nevada," he said.

But while the marriages might happen quickly in Nevada, Clark County Clerk Diana Alba said she has been told by the county district attorney's civil division that officials should have a 21-day period to prepare for same-sex unions.

The 9th Circuit is scheduled to hear arguments in the challenge to Nevada's same-sex marriage ban on Monday in San Francisco. A ruling is not expected for several weeks.

Read the whole story

Nevada trapping regulations subject of lawsuit

By Martin Griffith, AP

RENO — Two men suing Nevada wildlife commissioners say trapping regulations are causing needless suffering for thousands of animals not targeted for their fur, including dogs, golden eagles and mountain lions.

The lawsuit by Donald Molde of Reno and Mark Smith of Incline Village, filed Thursday in Washoe County District Court, seeks an injunction to halt the upcoming trapping season and force change.

Their complaint comes after commissioners in August voted against increasing the number of times trappers must check their traps or snares in most of Nevada. Now, fur trappers must do so every four days except near the urban areas of Reno, Carson City and Las Vegas.

Days between checks means animals not targeted by trappers will suffer injury or death that earlier release might have been prevented, Molde and Smith said. Even targeted animals such as bobcats, foxes and coyotes should not have to suffer because of regulations that allow for trapper “convenience,” they added.

Typical injuries include broken bones, dislocated joints and tissue damage, Molde said. Some animals such as mountain lions and dogs break teeth when they bite at traps and can lose toes and claws if they manage to get free. Captured animals also are vulnerable to attack by other wildlife.

“This action has been long in the making and is a direct result of the recalcitrance by the commission to consider public concerns about trapping,” Molde said. “Wildlife is not the private property of sportsmen and trappers. It is an invaluable public asset and deserves protection.”

Commission vice chairman Jeremy Drew declined to comment on the suit, saying, “I am confident in our public process and consideration of our mission.”

Last month, wildlife commissioners approved changes that would require visits once every two days to traps set around Reno, Carson City and Las Vegas. But they kept the four-day interval for the rest of the state.

Joel Blakeslee, president of the Nevada Trappers Association, said the suit lacks merit and trapping would end in Nevada if Molde and Smith have their way.

“They would love to have us on a 24-hour trap check because it would make it impossible to trap in the state,” he told the Associated Press. “This lawsuit has to do with just regulating us out of business.”

Long mileages, adverse weather and other factors already make it difficult for trappers to check traps in remote areas once every four days, Blakeslee said.

But Molde and Smith say Nevada has one of the longest trap-visitation intervals in the country.

4 parties interested in

buying prime SLT parcel



The vacant lot on Ski Run and Highway 50 will likely be developed in 2015. Photo/Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe officials expect to be in escrow this fall on the property at the corner of Ski Run Boulevard and Highway 50.

The City Council in closed session on Sept. 2 appointed Mayor Hal Cole and Councilwoman Brooke Laine to discuss particulars with the interested parties.

Four entities have come forward with letters of intent for the 1½-acre parcel that has an \$800,000 price tag.

“We are confident we’ll find a project that will work for us,” Cole told *Lake Tahoe News*. “There was no mention of who might rent the space. That is what Brooke and I are going to look at.”

On the table will be discussions about commodities such as commercial floor area and coverage.

The city earlier this year bought the land from the now defunct Redevelopment Agency. The agency had acquired it in deals with the prior owner of the timeshare complex that is kitty-corner to this lot. Originally that land was to be developed as another phase of what is now a Diamond Resorts owned property.

City Attorney Tom Watson told *Lake Tahoe News* the city wants

the deal to be solidified in time so the property owner could begin construction next building season.

The city is limited in telling property owners what they can do with the land, but it won't be a drug store. City officials have said they'd prefer to see a mixed-use commercial venture or something the public would benefit from.

– Kathryn Reed

Select SLT workers forfeit retiree health plan

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe's City Council on Tuesday approved a tentative agreement that calls for nearly one-third of the employees not to receive city-provided health benefits when they retire.

The public works bargaining unit, which is the largest of the six groups in the city, is expected to vote this week on the proposal. Still to be worked out are raises and changes to the health care plan.

Also agreeing to eliminate retiree health benefits are the at-will management workers. Altogether this represents about 60 employees.

South Lake Tahoe faces about a \$40 million unfunded liability because of promised health care benefits for employees and their dependents after they retire.

"This is an important thing for the public," City Manager

Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*. "How often do you see public employees say I will personally make a sacrifice? This particular group has some of the lowest paid employees in the city. That's why I really admire them. They don't have the resources others might have."

Already employees hired after 2008 don't have the same retiree health benefits. Changes do not affect current retirees. What would affect their benefits is if and when the current health plan is altered.

The city is negotiating with the other bargaining units. Kerry would not comment on how discussions are going, other than to say the city has no problem negotiating long after the budget is voted on at a special meeting Oct. 1.

At the Sept. 2 council meeting Kerry and all the department heads went over the proposed 2014-15 budget that takes effect Oct. 1. It was in closed session that the retiree health care was voted on.

The \$73 million budget is about \$20 million less than the current year's budget. This is because there is less outside money coming into the city for capital projects. For instance, the \$18 million on the books this year for the Bijou erosion control project will be gone next year because the work will be done this fall.

What is remaining consistent is the \$32 million general fund. That is the pot of money the council has leeway with when it comes to spending. However, with that said, 89 percent of that pot of money is allocated for salaries and benefits.

The city spends about \$4 million on health care and another \$4 million on pensions each year.

Kerry said the state Legislature has the power to change CalPERS, but refuses to do so. Public entities may negotiate with employees for increases to CalPERS, but are not allowed

to go in the other direction.

She called out South Tahoe Public Utility District, saying how that agency during the recession never had pay cuts, furlough days or staffing cuts, and now is rewarding its employees with a three-year pay hike just two months after imposing a rate increase on users.

“Maybe they could take a 9 percent pay cut and improve infrastructure,” Kerry said.

She said, that while city employees are also due a raise, it’s imperative cuts are made, too, so there is more prudent spending of taxpayer money. For the city, this is coming in the form of changes to health care for current employees and retirees.

On the negotiating table are five health plans with three tiers.

Mark Carlson, the city’s finance director, told the council if changes are not made, the city will find itself back in 2003 economic conditions. That means no reserves and no money in the bank.

If changes to health care are not made across the board, Carlson said, “expect to be upside down” starting in fiscal year 2017.

Accident at Hard Rock Hotel halts construction



South Lake Tahoe's SWAT vehicle rams the entrance of the former Horizon casino in Stateline on Aug. 13. Photo/Provided

Updated Sept. 4 1pm

Construction at what will be a Hard Rock Hotel in Stateline temporarily stopped because of an accident on the job Friday.

The porte cochere – or overhang for what was the valet area for the old Horizon hotel-casino – collapsed Aug. 29, trapping one of the workers in the debris. The person was projected by equipment and not injured.

Brothers Jon and David Park are spending \$60 million to transform the property into Lake Tahoe Hard Rock Hotel. Neither was available for comment, nor was Nevada OSHA. Occupational Safety and Health Administration officials have since OK'd all work to continue.

Tahoe-Douglas Fire Marshal Eric Guevin said his agency and Nevada-OSHA put a "red tag" on the site, meaning work had to stop at least in the area of the accident. This was lifted on Sept. 2 at 2pm.

"They have new plans and doing things differently," Guevin told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Construction crews had a permit from the county to demolish

this outside structure on the west side of the property. Some of it had been destroyed Aug. 13 when law enforcement used it as a training site.

Someone driving by the site that morning about 8am said they saw dust wafting in air and that two sides of the ceiling looked like it was folding in on itself.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Health plan deductibles weigh down employees

By Tara Siegel Bernard, News York Times

Anita Maina was working on an arts and crafts project she found on Pinterest – creating a table out of wood and cork – when she ripped off a fingernail while removing staples from a piece of wood.

“It is one of those things that really hurt, and I thought I should go to urgent care,” said Maina, 27.

But she ultimately skipped the visit since she had not met the \$6,000 deductible on her health plan, and she knew she probably did not have much left in her health savings account, a type of tax-advantaged savings vehicle that is often used with high-deductible plans to help defray out-of-pocket costs.

Maina, an associate in a health and human services consulting agency, said her employer added the high-deductible plan earlier this year; though her monthly premiums are only \$34, these plans require employees to pay for a greater share of their medical expenses upfront, before the plan starts making

payments.

Next year, even more corporate workers are likely to be offered high-deductible plans – sometimes known more benignly as consumer-directed plans – and at a rising share of large companies, it will be the only option remaining.

“You can’t sugarcoat this,” said Paul B. Ginsburg, a professor of the practice of health policy and management at USC’s Sol Price School of Public Policy. “This is a more challenging situation for consumers and it’s a reflection of how difficult it is to afford health care.”

Just as employers replaced pensions with retirement savings plans, more large companies appear to be in a similar cost-sharing shift with health plans. Besides making workers responsible for more of their care, employers hope these plans will motivate employees to comparison-shop for medical services – an admirable goal but one that some say is hard to achieve.

Read the whole story

Policymakers rethink merits of Common Core

By Kimberly Hefling and Julie Carr Smyth, AP

COLUMBUS, Ohio – Millions of students will sit down at computers this year to take new tests rooted in the Common Core standards for math and reading, but policymakers in many states are having buyer’s remorse.

The fight to repeal the standards has heated up in Ohio, with

state Rep. Andy Thompson, a Republican, saying it's kind of "creepy the way this whole thing landed in Ohio with all the things prepackaged."

It's playing out in Louisiana, where GOP Gov. Bobby Jindal is in a nasty feud involving his former ally, Education Superintendent John White. Jindal has sued the Obama administration, accusing Washington of illegally manipulating federal grant money and regulations to force states to adopt the Common Core education standards.

The standards were scrapped this year in Indiana and Oklahoma. Governors in North Carolina, South Carolina and Missouri have signed legislation to reconsider the standards, even though they still will be used in those three states this fall.

Like many critics, Thompson and Jindal base their opposition on federal support of the standards. But states led the Common Core movement that really took off in 2009 and that effort was voluntary.

The administration offered incentives to states to adopt college and career-ready standards, and Common Core fit the bill. The incentives included cash grants and permission to ignore parts of the much-maligned No Child Left Behind law.

The standards emphasize critical thinking and spell out what reading and math skills students should grasp at each grade level, while leaving how those skills are mastered up to districts and states. The hope was that higher standards shared across state lines would allow for shared resources, comparable student performance measures and smoother school-to-school transitions for children who move, such as military kids.

Nearly every state adopted the standards.

Debate spreads

The debate over Common Core has spilled into the national political realm. Among potential GOP presidential candidates in 2016, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush supports the standards; Jindal, Indiana Gov. Mike Pence and Kentucky Sen. Rand Paul do not.

Teachers' unions, historically aligned with the Democrats, endorsed the standards and helped develop them. But they now complain about botched efforts to put them in place and say it's unfair to use Common Core-based assessments in new teacher evaluation systems rolling out in much of the United States.

The issue has gotten pulled into a general anti-testing backlash in parts of the country. To ease the testing concerns, Education Secretary Arne Duncan recently said he would allow states to delay using students' test scores in teacher evaluation systems.

"What really has happened is that this has become a politicized issue and it's become an ideological symbol, interestingly, on both sides," said Patrick McGuinn, a political science professor at Drew University. He said the standards and the assessments designed under them are generally considered acceptable or of high quality.

Classrooms prepare

Far from the political discourse, American classrooms continue to be transformed by the use of the standards, with new curricula developed and teachers trained. Some parents are perplexed by the new ways their children are completing their lessons.

Supporters like former Georgia Gov. Sonny Perdue, a Republican who helped lead the governors' group that identified the goals set by Common Core, say politics and mistrusts have hijacked a needed and effective education overhaul.

The standards were a response from governors in a defensive mode to keep the federal government out of education, Perdue said, and he supported the changes out of concern for U.S. students' global competitiveness. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce is among backers.

"It's just a situation that I don't think should have become political, which has become politically toxic and I don't really know how to decontaminate that," Perdue said.

Shifting public opinion

A PDK/Gallup Poll released Aug. 20 found a dramatic change in the number of people aware of the standards. Last year, two-thirds of those surveyed said they'd never heard of the standards. This year, 81 percent said they had – and 6 in 10 said they oppose them.

Daniel A. Domenech, executive director of the national organization representing school superintendents, said polling provides more evidence it's important to "slow down to get it right."

This school year marks a milestone. This coming spring, roughly 11 million students in more than half the states are expected to take new computer-based assessments aligned with Common Core standards that were developed by two groups of states to replace the standardized tests that had been used.

States can choose the assessment to be used, but those decisions have not been without controversy. Some states, including Georgia and Michigan, that originally joined the consortiums, have dropped out and opted for different tests.

Awaiting results

The rollout of Common Core-based tests will be watched closely for computer glitches and other problems, as well as to see how well students perform.

The ambition of Common Core is “quite broad,” said Jonathan Supovitz, co-director at the Consortium for Policy Research in Education at the University of Pennsylvania. He said the standards have the potential to bring new tools and technologies into classrooms and lead to greater student mastery of subjects, but it will take time.

“This is not going to happen overnight. It’s going to take lots of resources and lots of teacher exposure to new ways of doing things and we’re just at the beginning of that process,” Supovitz said.

Many state lawmakers aren’t willing to wait.

State pushback

Jindal initially supported Common Core. He said that’s because the standards were first presented as a bottoms-up approach, but “the reality is what it has become is another tool for the federal government to try to dictate curriculum.”

He suspended contracts that the state Department of Education planned to use to buy testing material aligned with the standards. White and education board leaders say the governor overstepped his legal authority, and they sued. A state district judge has since said the governor’s actions were harmful to parents, teachers and students and he lifted Jindal’s suspension of the contracts. The decision allows White to move ahead with Common Core-tied testing plans until a full trial is held later over the legality of Jindal’s executive orders against the standards.

At the same time, 17 state lawmakers who oppose the standards have lodged their own legal challenge, but lost their first round in court.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan has criticized the Jindal’s opposition to Common Core as politically driven. In a June interview with “CBS This Morning,” the secretary said of

Jindal's switched position: "It's about politics, it's not about education."

In Ohio, some teachers have raised concerns about how the standards came out, Ohio Federation of Teachers president Melissa Cropper said, but most largely support them. Some of the state's largest urban districts, such as Cleveland and Columbus, have spent two years and lots of money preparing for the rollout that started this school year, she said.

Cropper urged state lawmakers to stay the course with the standards, which were adopted in 2010.

"All that time, energy and resources would be wasted," Cropper said. "I think it will absolutely throw our districts in chaos."

State Rep. Thompson, whose wife is a Spanish teacher, isn't convinced. He says Ohio and other states adopted the standards in the wake of the economic downturn because they were in desperate need of money.

"When you take federal leverage, it affected people's behavior," Thompson said.

Other voices

Parents and educators opposed to the standards in Ohio were allotted three full days of hearings in mid-August to discuss the merits of replacing Common Core. Defenders of the standards were relegated to holding news conferences.

Lincoln Bramlage, a father of three from Ottawa-Glandorf in northwest Ohio, said the standards are "hardly relevant." He added: "We need to fight for the teachers and the kids. This is not education. It's indoctrination."

Carrie Moenster, a parent and teacher, said she's seen her fourth-grade students in tears because they couldn't understand math standards that she called "abstract and

developmentally inappropriate.”

“One child who was once very confident comes up to our desks repeatedly while working on an independent assignment because he doesn’t trust his own mind and judgment anymore,” she said.