EDC residents wage ballot battle over growth

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

El Dorado County's growth wars are headed to the November ballot with unexpected drama, quixotic political alliances and developer dollars flowing in conflicting directions.

Local environmentalists and advocates have qualified separate November initiatives – Measure M and Measure O – that seek to protect rural lifestyles, prevent gridlock on Highway 50 and stop traffic-inducing subdivisions in the Sierra foothills region.

Those initiatives, plus a third measure originally backed by a Sacramento group representing commercial builders, are drawing financial opposition from housing developers as well as real estate and engineering firms that are banking on continued residential growth in the county of 180,000 residents.

At stake are competing visions of the future for the county, where a 2004 general growth plan anticipates 21,000 new houses.

The latest ballot battles come 16 years after a voter revolt over the county's approval of projects bringing 11,000 new houses to El Dorado Hills. Measure Y in 1998 prohibited any residential project of five or more units that caused or worsened traffic gridlock. It was reaffirmed by voters in 2008.

Read the whole story

Caesars losses continue to grow

By Anna Prior and Josh Beckerman, Wall Street Journal

Caesars said its most recent results reflect strength in Las Vegas, helping to offset less favorable conditions in Atlantic City, N.J., and regional markets.

Caesars Entertainment Corp. said its second-quarter loss widened as the casino operator said strong Las Vegas results were offset by persistent softness in Atlantic City and regional markets, including Lake Tahoe. Caesars in the parent company of Harrah's Lake Tahoe and Harveys in Stateline.

Caesars has struggled to recover fully from the recession and hasn't posted a profit since late 2009. The company runs casinos across the U.S. with hubs in Las Vegas and Atlantic City. It has been weighed down by its debt load since the recession, and its failure to acquire a gambling license in Macau has hobbled its ability to compete in that fast-growing market.

Last week, Caesars and a group of its creditors traded competing lawsuits over the company's plans to rework its more than $20 billion debt load.

On Monday, Caesars reported a second-quarter loss of $466.4 million, or $3.24 a share, compared with a prior-year loss of $212.2 million, or $1.69 a share. The loss from continuing operations widened to $3.06 a share from $1.65.

Read the whole story

Hefty retiree package for Meeks Bay fire chief

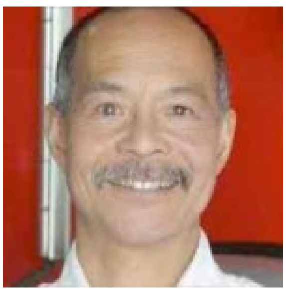
By Kathryn Reed

Questions are swirling on the West Shore and in Placerville because of the package John Pang received when he retired as fire chief from Meeks Bay Fire Protection District earlier this year.

Pang, who worked for the district from January 1995 to April 2014, will receive a $6,746.09 check each month in retirement pay, according to CalPERS. That’s $80,953.08 a year to do nothing. It’s possible the monthly rate will be recalculated once CalPERS has all of the 2014 payout information.

While he was fire chief his total wages were $146,212 in 2013 and $131,776 in 2012. This was to manage a handful of employees. Meeks responds to about 200 calls a year, most of which are medical aid.

This compares to the South Lake Tahoe fire chief who oversees 37 employees and is paid $157,131.73 per year. In 2013 the South Lake Tahoe Fire Department responded to 3,293 calls; approximately 70 percent were medical aid.



John Pang

When members of the Meeks district, who have voluntarily voted to tax themselves to help pay for fire costs, started asking questions the district had outside counsel look into the legalities.

Ed Miller, president of the fire district board, had a prepared statement ready when *LTN* called. He told *Lake Tahoe News* further questions could be asked in public at the next board meeting later this month. The statement states that Stephen Lieberman, independent counsel, reviewed Pang's contract, salary, sick and vacation pay and determined it did not violate CalPERS rules and there was no gifting of public money.

The statement says, "Chief Pang retired with well earned retirement benefits …."

Miller, at the urging of Lieberman, is not releasing the attorney's full report. Attorney-client confidentiality was cited.

In 2012, the state Public Employee Retirement System instituted new rules, part of the Public Employees Pension Reform Act. Some of the changes deal with spiking of salaries. This means generating questionable extra pay in the last few years to inflate what the pension payout will be.

CalPERS is using Pang's last year of wages to calculate his pension. His last year is inflated because of the sick time and vacation payouts.

In 2012, Pang exercised his contractual option to receive a 7.3 percent salary increase in lieu of the district continuing to pay 8 percent into deferred compensation.

In July 2012, El Dorado County Auditor-Controller Joe Harn sent a letter to Miller stating, "Implementing this change will cause an increase to your district PERS actuarial rate for many years to come. Additionally, implementing this change could be construed as income spiking. CalPERS is very sensitive to cases of income spiking and has a research unit dedicated to the review of these potential cases."

Rosanna Westmoreland with CalPERS said while the agency does 20 to 30 audits a year, spiking and other inappropriate actions are usually investigated when someone anonymously calls the ethics hotline – 866.513.4216. Meeks Bay Fire has not been audited, according to Westmoreland.

"Unless it's reported, we don't look to see if there is something inappropriate," Westmoreland told *Lake Tahoe News*.

CalPERS relies on the public agency to provide the salary and compensation information for retirees.

Another issue involving Pang is that he used sick leave hours to buy credit in the CalPERS system. In a letter dated July 25, 2014, Harn questions Miller about the legitimacy of doing this. Pang's final termination pay was worth $503,597. Of that, $302,939 was to be used to purchase additional PERS service from his unused sick leave.

"Since a significant portion of these sick leave hours were awarded to Pang pursuant to his various employment contracts and not accrued by Pang, I believe that it is inappropriate that these hours be used to purchase PERS credits," Harn wrote.

The district has never responded to Harn.

Included in that final half million-dollar payout was $195,012.54 for Nationwide to pay for Pang's post-employment health plan. In other words, part of his ongoing perks are taxpayer funded health benefits for the rest of his life.

Ken Corcoran, a resident of the fire district and retired auditor-controller from Contra Costa County, raised similar and more questions. In a May 28, 2014, letter to the board, Corcoran said at most Pang should have been able to accumulate about 1,900 hours of sick time if he never called in sick. But the district paid out 5,080 worth of hours.

"… it is my belief that the proposed conversion of sick leave hours to service time will create an unfunded liability for the district, resulting in many years of increased retirement rates to cover this shortfall," Corcoran wrote.

In public comments at the May board meeting, Corcoran submitted a letter stating, "I can honestly say that in my extensive work experience in the area of compensation I NEVER encountered a pay package so generous in almost every category. Considering the district has five full time employees, the pay and benefits provided to the chief appear wildly excessive."

(Miller said in the last couple years the board has changed the compensation package for all new hires.)

Corcoran questioned the comp time vs. administrative leave, and the fact the board allowed Pang to accrue 25 weeks of vacation. (He received five weeks per year.)

But these are all things Miller, the board president, said his investigator found to be legal.

The ethics, according to others, is another matter.

El Dorado County has given the district $2,191,172 from fiscal year ending 2001 through fiscal year ending 2010 because Meeks fire cried poor and needed help.

The residents are paying for fire service. Each parcel is assessed $325 per year. Voters approved Measure Z in 1992 at $85 and Measure R in 1998 at $45. The board imposed a fire protection assessment of $195 in 2009.

Nevada County considers limiting outdoor events

By Richard Chang, Sacramento Bee

After selecting wedding rings and finding the right caterer, brides and grooms in Nevada County may soon have to draw up a traffic abatement plan.

The Board of Supervisors plans to vote Tuesday on an ordinance that would limit and regulate outdoor events, including weddings, parties and concerts, that in recent years have become highly popular in the rural region.

Under current rules, permits are required only for outdoor musical events. If the ordinance passes, nearly all outdoor events – with the exception of non-commercial and political gatherings – will be subject to an extensive permitting process through the Nevada County Sheriff's Office.

The permit requirements include drawing up a detailed site plan, providing toilets and access to water. Organizers will also be required to submit plans on parking and traffic, depending on the area.

The ordinance would cap the number of events on any given property to four per year, which wedding-related business owners have called a death sentence for their livelihoods. Violators could face misdemeanor charges, including up to a $5,000 fine or jail time.

Read the whole story

Bottled water coming from drought-stricken Calif.

By Julia Lurie, Mother Jones

Bottled-water drinkers, we have a problem: There’s a good chance that your water comes from California, a state experiencing the third-driest year on record.

The details of where and how bottling companies get their water are often quite murky, but generally speaking, bottled water falls into two categories. The first is “spring water,” or groundwater that’s collected, according to the EPA, “at the point where water flows naturally to the earth’s surface or from a borehole that taps into the underground source.” About 55 percent of bottled water in the United States is spring water, including Crystal Geyser and Arrowhead.

The other 45 percent comes from the municipal water supply, meaning that companies, including Aquafina and Dasani, simply treat tap water—the same stuff that comes out of your faucet at home—and bottle it up. (Weird, right?)

But regardless of whether companies bottle from springs or the tap, lots of them are using water in exactly the areas that need it most right now.

Read the whole story

Landing Resort settles claim involving Yelp

By Rebecca Jarvis, Kinga Janik and Chris James, ABC News

It was the Yelp review that led to Yelp revenge.

After wedding guest Rabih Zahnan stayed the Union Street Guest House in Hudson, N.Y., for a friend's wedding, he turned to the business-review website Yelp to write about what he thought was an abysmal stay.

"There was a musty order, it smelled bad, we kept the windows open for the entire time we were there," Zahnan told "Nightline."

But the Guest House fought back. Zahnan said he received an email from the inn saying there would be a $500 fine to the bride and groom for each negative review posted online by them or their guests.

The bride and groom apparently overlooked the fine print in their wedding contract put forth by the guest house, which said, "A $500 fine will be deducted from your deposit for every negative review of USGH placed on any Internet site by anyone in your party."

As this story went viral last week, a collective consumer fury ensued, and the inn's star rating on Yelp plummeted to a dismal 1.5 out of 5 stars as a barrage of users posted angry, and clearly facetious, reviews about the business. One person even called it "the worst hotel in history."

Over the last few years, the Yelp review has taken on a life on its own, and has truly become make-or-break for businesses nationwide.

James Demetriades owns the Landing Resort and Spa in South

Lake Tahoe. He admits to reading online reviews of his hotel all the time, but he took issue with the one comment he said went too far.

"In one case we had an individual who made extremely derogatory remarks about the manager, about the restaurant, about the food, about myself individually," Demetriades said. "We decided to file suit against this person for defamation."

Court records reveal the case was settled out of court with no money exchanged.

Read the whole story

Tahoe Keys Marina forced to pay debt

An El Dorado County sheriff's deputy spent a couple hours at Tahoe Keys Marina on Aug. 9 collecting $7,000.

"There was a civil judgment against the marina for a debt that was owed. We had a court order – writ of execution – to place a person at the business to seize funds to cover the debt owed. This was done. The debt has now been paid off," sheriff's Lt. Pete Van Arnum told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The deputy was collecting all of the money that was coming across the counter until he had the $7,000.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Nev. casinos in spending war over online game

By J.D. Morris, Las Vegas Sun

Online gaming remains a divisive issue for Nevada casino companies, which are pouring money into lobbying on the issue while they joust over a potential ban.

The proposed ban, contained in a measure championed by Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., and Rep. Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah, has helped trigger hundreds of thousands of dollars in spending from the gaming industry. One side, led by Las Vegas Sands CEO Sheldon Adelson, is in favor of the prohibition. Others, including Caesars Entertainment, are fiercely opposed.

But amid the flurry of spending, congressional action is moving slowly. Legislators left for their August recess without seriously advancing a measure introduced in March that would prohibit online gaming nationwide, and its fate for the rest of the year is uncertain.

If enacted, the Restoration of America’s Wire Act from Graham and Chaffetz would make gambling on the Internet illegal. The legislation was referred to committees in both chambers but hasn’t moved any further.

Read the whole story

New charges filed against ex-

CalPERS chief

By Marc Lifsher, Los Angeles Times

SACRAMENTO — A federal grand jury Thursday handed down new and expanded corruption charges against investment deal “placement agent” Alfred J.R. Villalobos, a central figure in the 2009 influence-peddling scandal that rocked the country’s largest public pension fund.

The new indictment, superseding one last month, accuses the former board member of the California Public Employees’ Retirement System and former deputy mayor of Los Angeles of conspiring with and bribing CalPERS’ then-chief executive to close a $3-billion deal with a Wall Street private equity firm.

Villalobos, 64, of Stateline, also is accused of defrauding the United States, engaging in a scheme to conceal material facts, and conspiracy to commit mail and wire fraud, said Melinda Haag, the U.S. attorney in San Francisco.

Read the whole story

Family of hit-and-run victim still seeks justice

By Matt Vaughan, KOLO-TV

WASHOE VALLEY — One year after a hit and run near Stateline, the family of a former Washoe Valley man is still seeking justice.

A big man with an even bigger heart, that's how family and friends remember Cody Dobson. His mom Daralyn says after her son's death a lot of people came forward to tell her what a generous nature Cody had.

Always willing to lend a helping hand, Cody felt it was his duty to help those in need, whether it was offering kind words or just giving someone a big hug. Cody loved snowboarding, but the one thing he loved even more was spending time with his son Seth.

Unfortunately, Seth will have to grow up without his father. On Aug. 10, 2013, about eight months after moving to South Lake Tahoe, Cody was walking east along the sidewalk on Highway 50 near Lake Parkway just a few blocks from where he lived. Witnesses saw him lying in the road. It's unclear how he got there, but it appears he may have stumbled from the sidewalk. Before anyone could get to him, Dobson was run over by a dark colored pickup truck which fled the scene. He was later rushed to the hospital with fractured ribs and a fractured skull, where he died almost two weeks later. Alcohol did appear to be a factor the night of the accident. Cody's mom says he had received some troubling news that day and decided to go out drinking.

Cody's family says Seth took the loss of his father hard, but they continue to honor his memory by laying flowers at the scene of the accident and reminding Seth of the kind of man his dad was.

NHP is still asking for help in tracking down the driver that hit Cody. The truck is described as a dark colored Dodge pickup, possibly green or blue with an extended cab, matching camper shell and grey molding. Anyone with information or who may have seen something that night is asked to call NHP or secret witness.

Read the whole story