Study: Indian gaming affects childhood obesity

By Monte Morin, Los Angeles Times

Apparently casinos are good for losing more than just cash.

A study published Tuesday in the Journal of the American Medical Association found that adding slot machines to California casinos was linked to a modest reduction in obesity rates for Native American children. Specifically, researchers found that for every one-armed bandit added per child, there was a corresponding 0.19 percent reduction in obesity risk.

Study authors based their conclusions on an examination of 117 California school districts that encompass tribal lands.

Read the whole story

Musical employment chairs at Barton Health

By Kathryn Reed

On the one hand Barton Health is struggling because the number of patients is declining. On the other hand based on the agency's 2012 tax return the top 12 people in the organization collectively had annual salaries of more than $3.2 million, with CEO John Williams taking in nearly $600,000.

Those figures don't include benefits or bonuses. And while bonuses were suspended for some in 2012, they were back in vogue in 2013.

Barton Memorial Hospital's numbers continue to decline. Photo/LTN

However, not now and not when Barton laid people off a few years ago did upper management take a pay cut. For someone like Leanne Kankel, vice president of human resources who is No. 6 on the 2012 pay scale at $250,063 a year, she also gets free health insurance because her husband is a retired South Lake Tahoe firefighter.

While substantive salaries and perks are being handed out, so are pink slips. Several positions between Tahoe Medical Group and the Community Health Center have been eliminated. But before people were let go they first had to apply for their jobs. Those not selected were shown the door.

To compound the pain of being out of work some of their jobs have been handed to people from outside the area. They were not given reasons for why they are no longer employed and Barton isn't telling *Lake Tahoe News*.

Three of the people let go at the health center were registered nurses. Two RNs kept their jobs. The difference between those who got to stay is they have a bachelor's degree, are younger and are lower down on the pay scale. Those let go were not offered the opportunity to return to school to get their degree.

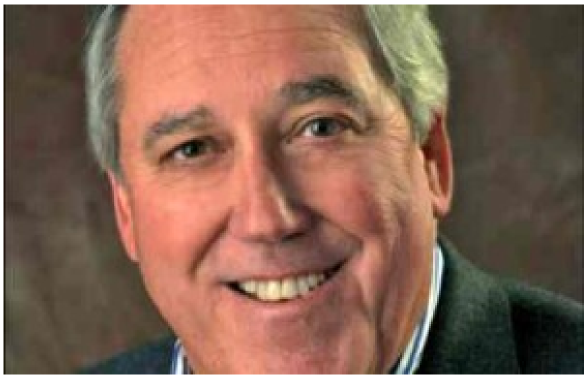
People have already been hired to replace them; some are RNs, some are medical assistants.

"We have hired registered nurses who fit a patient-centered care management model," Monica Sciuto, Barton spokeswoman, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Why the RNs who were let go couldn't fit that model isn't known.

"This was not in an effort to save costs, but rather to put the correct level of expertise into positions to fit the needs of our patients," Sciuto said of the layoffs.

But that in part contradicts a letter Williams sent to staff on Jan. 6. He went through a litany of concerns regarding decreased patient admissions (it's at 78 percent of the volume compared to 1998) as well as a drop in births – 57.7 percent from 1998 to 2012.



CEO John Williams approves layoffs, but has never taken a pay cut. He makes more than a half million dollars. Photo/Provided

"In addition, due to the Affordable Care Act we anticipate payment for services will decrease across the board from our government and private payers," Williams wrote. "To address these shifts, Barton department heads and the executive team will be taking a closer look at how we run our organization."

Novia Strategies has been hired at an undisclosed cost to "objectively evaluate how we do business and where we can be more efficient," the PR department said.

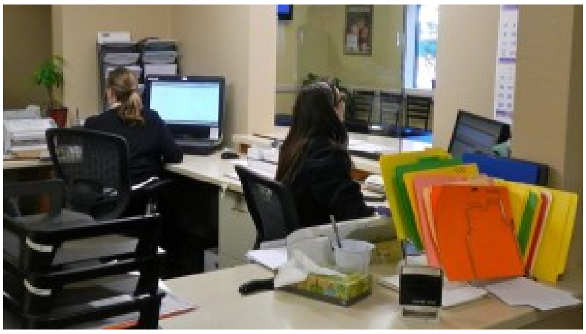
Changes for employees

Hours for the janitorial crew have also been cut. Barton would not talk about these changes.

Nurses who were used to working 10- or 12-hour shifts now have to work five eight-hour shifts, at least at the community center.

Barton would not release the number of people who have been laid off, the number of new hires or the job titles of the people. Many of the workers had been with Barton a decade or longer.

Others have told *Lake Tahoe News* that in addition to the three RNs being let go, seven medical assistants, and one receptionist were released. Some of those positions, though, have been filled.



Front office employees at the health clinic now must be medical assistants. Photo/LTN file

Now all office staff must at least be a medical assistant. This means front desk people will be able to give shots, wound care and assist doctors.

With Barton owning most of the doctors' groups in the area, it means those professionals work for the health care system. They don't have a say in who works in their office, who is hired, who is fired.

"They changed the receptionist to a different receptionist and laid off the one I had. I wasn't consulted," Ronald Roth, a physician with Tahoe Medical Group, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "It was a little disruptive to have spontaneous changes without consultation."

Other doctors are reluctant to talk on the record because of the possibility of retribution. Tahoe Carson Valley Medical Group, which includes 28 doctors, just renewed its contract with Barton. Tahoe Orthopedics and Sports Medicine is in contract negotiations.

Doctors are being evaluated and paid based on productivity. How productivity is evaluated is not being made public.

Going forward

Some of the people who are now in the unemployment line who spoke with *Lake Tahoe News* said what they fear most is the level of care patients will receive.

Barton says there is no reason to be worried.

"(It's) so they can provide more clinical knowledge and facilitate the ongoing care of patients. Barton's front desk staff completed Barton University's accredited National Center for Competency Testing program to qualify to become medical assistants," the PR folks said.

Barton has changed how it recruits for employees. The "career website" is being revamped. In Williams' letter he asked for "individual written testimonials on why you enjoy working for Barton and what in particular you find rewarding about your job."

Some who were let go say Barton is all about the positive, wanting to put a Disney-esque spin on things instead of listening to concerns.

"Though change can be challenging, we see this as an opportunity to create a new environment that holds a brighter, financially sustainable future at Barton. Barton is committed to coming to thoughtful, well informed solutions," Williams wrote to employees.

LTCC pioneers remember the start 40 years ago

By Kathryn Reed

Physically, Jim Duke believes everything Lake Tahoe Community College has become is wonderful. What the state has done to the system, that's another story.

"The philosophy of the community college has changed significantly," Duke told *Lake Tahoe News*. "It was called the people's college."

When he started LTCC in 1975 tuition was free at all California community colleges. Before Proposition 13 was passed, which altered property taxes, there was flexibility with what special districts could do. Back then non-credit community education courses could be offered.

Jim Duke talks March 5 about when Lake Tahoe Community College first started. Photo/LTN

He doesn't like what the state has done to the system financially.

Still, he is proud of his affiliation with the South Lake Tahoe campus.

Duke was one of a roomful of people with long ties to the college who showed up to the old hotel where classes were first conducted. It's now the Econo Lodge on Highway 50.

The significance of March 5 is that 40 years ago on that date the voters in the area agreed to form a college district and elected the first four board members that day. Still serving are Roberta Mason and Fritz Wenck.

Jonnie Crawford and Sally Neitling, two of the 11 students in the inaugural graduating class of 1975, attended the Wednesday celebration. Wendy David, another graduate, was also in the audience.

Duke told *LTN* about some of the applicants for the 14 teaching positions. Peg Kortes, one of the first instructors, was at the gathering. She taught business classes.

There were 1,400 applications. One was hand written in pencil on lined paper by a mom talking about how her son had just graduated and was in need of a job. Another was professionally written. In the first paragraph she told her gender, that she had a Phd and was black and dared the college not to hire her. They didn't.

But Duke said the college did strive for diversity. Hiring in the mid-1970s was much different than it is today. Race, gender and other attributes could openly play a role. And they did. Duke said the goal was to have a balance of men and women from different regions of the country who came from a variety of colleges.

"We offered the bookstore job to a black man. He looked at the community and said, 'No'," Duke said. They same scenario transpired when trying to hire a Latino for another job.

Duke, wearing a windbreaker with the original college logo on it, says he wished there had been more diversity of staff at the get-go. (The college may be creating a new logo for the next 40 years.)

Today LTCC has 40 full-time faculty members and more than 650 adjunct available. About one-third of the instructors have doctorates.

On June 7, the college will have a more formal celebration of its 40th anniversary with a sit-down dinner from 6-8pm, plus the unveiling of the David Allan Barkley Memorial created by former Art Department Chair David Foster. For more info, contact Julie Booth at Booth@ltcc.edu or (530) 541.4660, ext. 245.

Nevada casinos partnering with hotel chains

By Hannah Dreier, AP

LAS VEGAS — Time was, gamblers didn’t even want credit card companies maintaining a record of their time in Las Vegas.

Now, visitors want loyalty points from mainstream hotel chains for the days they spend holed up in Strip casinos.

Casino corporations MGM Resorts International and Caesars Entertainment Corp. have announced loyalty program partnerships with major hotel chains (Hyatt and Starwood, respectively). The independent Strip casino the Cosmopolitan is also partnering with a hotel chain, striking a deal with Marriott.

The deals enable customers to earn and redeem loyalty points with both the hotel and casino chains, and also hold out the promise of enabling visitors to experience Las Vegas like a high roller, if they have enough points.

The Caesars partnership also applies to Harrah’s Reno, Harrah’s Lake Tahoe and Harveys Lake Tahoe. It was unclear Tuesday afternoon if the MGM partnership applied to Circus Circus Reno.

The partnerships give the hotel chains a presence in one of the country’s biggest tourist destinations, and helps the casinos in their effort to market themselves as more than places to gamble.

MGM owns 12 properties on the Las Vegas Strip, including the MGM Grand and Bellagio. Caesars owns nine on the Las Vegas Strip, including Planet Hollywood and the Flamingo.

MGM announced the partnership over the summer, followed by

Caesars in December, and the Cosmopolitan in January.

Caesars celebrated the announcement with a junket for national hotel reporters, including a stay at Caesars Palace, VIP seats at Britney Spears’ Las Vegas show, and free spa service. Rewards programs participants can experience similarly luxurious moments, though it might take a while.

Jeff Zidell, senior vice president of Hyatt Gold Passport said the partnership with MGM has allowed the hotel chain to expand the benefits of joining its loyalty program, and is proving a hit with customers.

“Over time, members had shared their desires for a wider selection of locations for earning and burning Hyatt Gold Passport points –with a particular interest in The Las Vegas Strip. MGM Resorts has nearly half of the hotel rooms on The Las Vegas Strip, and these 12 participating MGM Resorts destinations are iconic,’ he said in a statement to the Associated Press.

Casinos were hit hard by the recession, and have been slower to come back than other businesses. Some in Las Vegas are hailing the new partnerships as a sign that the Strip no longer looks as dubious to major hotel chains.

Two major Strip players remain un-partnered: Wynn Las Vegas, which owns the high-end Wynn and Encore casinos, and Sands Las Vegas, which owns the Italian-themed Venetian and Palazzo casinos.

Leads go cold in fatal Stateline accident

The Nevada Highway Patrol has "exhausted all leads" in the Aug. 10, 2013, fatal accident in Stateline.

Officers are hoping someone will come forward with information about the incident.

An unknown driver hit and killed 31-year-old Cody J. Dobson of Carson City as he was crossing Highway 50 east of MontBleu. The accident happened at 3:13am. He died nearly two weeks later at Renown Medical Center in Reno.

Witnesses stated the vehicle that hit Dobson was possibly either a dark blue or dark green full size Dodge crew cab pickup. The lower portion of the pickup was also accented with silver or grey paint.

Anyone with information may contact Secret Witness in Douglas County at 775.782.7463 or Trooper Doug Hildebrand at 775.689/4623 or dhildebrand@dps.state.nv.us.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Study: Doctors overprescribing drugs

By Lisa Girion and Scott Glover, Los Angeles Times

Doctors are fueling the nation's prescription drug epidemic and represent the primary source of narcotic painkillers for chronic abusers, according to a government study.

The finding challenges a widely held belief that has long guided policymakers: That the epidemic is caused largely by abusers getting their drugs without prescriptions, typically from friends and family.

Tom Frieden, doctor and director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which conducted the study, said the research showed the need for greater focus on doctors who are “problem prescribers.”

Read the whole story

Chateau land under 1 ownership for first time

The Chateau project in South Lake Tahoe is beginning to look like the original designs.

By Kathryn Reed

For the first time in the project’s history, South Lake

Tahoe's "hole in the ground" is now under the control of one owner.

Tahoe Stateline Ventures, a subsidiary of Owens Realty Mortgage, has closed escrow on the nine parcels that encompass 3.4 acres at the site that it did not own. The company paid City National Bank $6 million in cash.

TSV is in the process of developing the retail along Highway 50. The construction fence is expected to come down by June, if not sooner. Stores will open in late summer or early fall, though tenants have yet to be named.

"It's very exciting news that Mr. (Bill) Owens is continuing to invest significant resources into the community and is committed to this project and to see it to fruition one way or another," South Lake Tahoe City Manager Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*. "This is the perfect outcome – one owner who can now design the right project or attract the right capital investors."

It was in June 2007 that construction started at the 11-plus acre site on what was to be the largest redevelopment project in the city's history. At the time it was going to cost $410 million to build two hotels, a convention center, nightclub, retail and open spaces. The opening was to be two years later.

Instead, Lake Tahoe Development Company, run by Randy Lane of Zephyr Cove, went bankrupt. The more than 20 parcels were never consolidated into one map. Locals lost their life savings. And the city was left with an eyesore.

Last year construction started on the first phase. There will be 19,000-square-feet of retail, which does not include the restaurant-night club. (By comparison, Heavenly Village has about 120,000-square-feet of retail.) The restaurant will be the new McP's, which was the original plan. The circular entrance is now visible over the fence at the corner of the highway and Stateline Avenue.

What comes next remains to be seen.

Attorney Lew Feldman, who represents TSV, was not available for comment.

“This acquisition provides ORM the flexibility to make minor project reconfigurations resulting in greater development opportunities, which should enhance the marketability of the project,” Owens said in a statement. What that really means is not known.

Bill would mandate ethnic studies in Calif.

By Roque Planas, Huffington Post

A bill introduced last month by Assemblyman Luis Alejo, D-Salinas, would require the California’s Department of Education to develop a model for implementing a standardized, statewide ethnic studies curriculum for high schools.

Although controversies over Mexican-American studies have roiled conservatives in Southwestern states, Alejo’s bill could put California on the path to adopting one of the most ambitious ethnic studies program for public schools in the country.

Latinos are the largest ethnic group in California schools by far, making up 53 percent of the student body, according to the California Department of Education. They are followed by non-Hispanic whites, at 26 percent, and Asians, at 9 percent.

Read the whole story

Douglas County manager resigns

By Kathryn Reed

Douglas County Manager Steve Mokrohisky has tendered his resignation, with his last day slated for April 11.

Like his predecessor, Mokrohisky is headed to Oregon. He will be the top guy in Lane County, whose county seat is Eugene. It's much larger than Douglas County, with 350,000 residents and 2,100 employees and the county includes the University of Oregon. Douglas County has less than 50,000 residents.

Steve Mokrohisky's last day as Douglas County manager is April 11. Photo/Provided

It's also a county in need of some help. The budget has been hit because of lack of timber revenue and the last administrator was fired for inappropriate operations.

These are the types of challenges Mokrohisky embraces.

"They are enticing to me," Mokrohisky said of the obstacles ahead of him. "I got into public service 15 years ago because

I wanted to make communities better than they were."

He told *Lake Tahoe News*, "Douglas County is in a good position. I felt it was an OK time to step away and the organization and community will continue to function well."

Mokrohisky was hired in February 2009 as assistant county manager. He has been county manager since July 2011.

He is proud of the work he's done in the last five years. He points to the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Regional Plan being adopted, Douglas County's area plan at the lake, trails in the ground, a vision for the South Shore, the community center in the valley, transformation of the Minden airport and a balanced budget as some of the accomplishments during his tenure.

"It's important for people to be reminded that transformative periods for communities or organizations are not the result of one person at the top," Mokrohisky said.

County Commissioner Nancy McDermid said, "It's a blow for us to lose him. He is at his peak."

McDermid said Douglas was competitive with salary, but understands Mokrohisky wanting a bigger stage to work on.

Mokrohisky said he struggled with the decision to leave – for professional and personal reasons. He's married with two young daughters. He and wife believe now would be a better time to move than later. Mokrohisky also knows city and county managers don't often have longevity in a community.

"The people are what I will miss most. I've been overwhelmed by the outpouring of support in this community. I've made lifelong friends. We did not come here five years ago thinking that we would grow roots," he said.

The scenery is the second thing he will miss. He was at Heavenly Mountain Resort on Sunday skiing with friends.

With the announcement of his departure just days’ old, the county has not decided what the transition will be.

McDermid said the commissioners will with work with Mokrohisky and county staff to figure out how best to go forward.

S. Tahoe agrees to 3-year deal for SnowGlobe

By Kathryn Reed

The number of people who spoke Tuesday before the South Lake Tahoe City Council voted to enter a three-year agreement with the promoter could indicate the apparent acceptance of SnowGlobe.

No one from the public spoke at the March 4 meeting. A once contentious event now doesn’t seem to matter to people.

SnowGlobe will be returning to South Lake Tahoe for the next three years. Photo/Lesia Witkowsky

The city agreed to Chad Donnelly’s request to contribute more money. In cash will be a $25,000 sponsorship. Still to be worked out is what that cash will buy. For instance, the $50,000 Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority contributed for the 2013 music festival went toward marketing.

Another $25,000 will be contributed by the city in in-kind costs, covering South Tahoe Refuse's bill and Tahoe Transportation District's costs. However, the council expressed interest in working with entities so the city doesn't have to absorb the entire expense.

SnowGlobe actually saves the fire and police departments in terms of overtime. In past years a substantial amount of resources has been allocated to the revelry at Stateline. The advent of SnowGlobe has almost rendered that spontaneous gathering irrelevant. The city anticipates a cost savings of $5,000 by not paying overtime for employees.

That means the actual cost to the city to bring SnowGlobe to town for the last three days of December is closer to $45,000.

The vote was 4-1, with Mayor Hal Cole in the minority. He was against the $25,000 in cash.

However, cities paying promoters to bring in an event is the norm these days. And it was said Tuesday that what South Lake Tahoe is paying is rather cheap.

Donnelly, who attended the meeting, said he has had offers to go elsewhere with SnowGlobe, but wants to make it work in South Lake Tahoe.

The plan is to use the field at Lake Tahoe Community College for the next three years. The college board still needs to approve this.

It's likely after the contract is up the field will need to be replaced at a cost of $500,000. At that time a new location for SnowGlobe will probably have to be secured.

The city’s belief is the $6 million the event brings into the community is a significant return on investment.

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In other action:

• The plaza area being built as part of the Harrison Avenue project is going to be called Champions Plaza in honor of area Olympians. Details are being worked out.