

Supreme Court declines online sales tax case

By Robert Barnes, Washington Post

On one of the busiest online-shopping days of the year, the Supreme Court declined Monday to get involved in state efforts to force Web retailers such as Amazon.com to collect sales tax from customers even in places where the companies do not have a physical presence.

The multibillion-dollar issue – which could end tax-free online shopping for many Americans – is one of the most important in modern retailing. Traditional bricks-and-mortar businesses say the online retailers receive an unfair advantage by not having to collect sales taxes in some areas.

It is the second time the court has opted against hearing such a challenge.

All but five states impose sales taxes on purchases, whether online or not, and an increasing number have passed legislation to force online retailers such as Overstock.com and eBay to begin collecting those taxes from customers.

The court's decision to stay out of the issue for now may put more pressure on Congress to come up with a national solution, as both online and traditional retailers complain about a patchwork of state laws and conflicting lower-court decisions.

Read the whole story

Politically-charged Briggs family at center of land deal to build courthouse in Placerville

By Kathryn Reed

El Dorado County supervisors are proceeding with buying the land for a courthouse in Placerville even though it is mired in controversy.

On today's meeting agenda is a closed session item to discuss allowing the county to go forward with negotiating buying property owned by John Briggs. He is the father of Supervisor Ron Briggs, grandfather of Placerville Planning Commissioner Brian Briggs and father-in-law of Superior Court Judge Steve Bailey. John Briggs is also the former state senator who is famous for the 1978 proposition called the Briggs Initiative that had it passed, would have meant all employees in California's education system who are gay or lesbian and their supporters would have been fired.

While the courthouse project has been in the planning phase since 2008, earlier this fall an anonymous letter was sent to the Judicial Council of California outlining a tangled web of conflicts of interest that would financially benefit the Briggs family.

The county needs to buy some of the land owned by the Briggs Family Trust, which is controlled by John Briggs. Ron Briggs owns two nearby parcels.

Ron Briggs did not return a phone call.



This is the courthouse in Placerville that would be replaced.

Curt Child, chief operating officer of the Judicial Council, told *Lake Tahoe News* his office sent the county a series of questions and is in the process of reviewing the responses. A decision whether the parcel in question is deemed a controversial site is expected by the end of the month. Steven Jahr, administrative director of the courts, will make that determination.

If it's deemed controversial, then the entire Judicial Council will review the matter. If Jahr says there is no controversy, the process moves forward.

"Courthouses are important to communities. Often there is some difference of views of where it should be located," Child said. "The anonymous letter raised some other issues beyond location."

The letter says, "Ron Briggs and his son purchased several nearby parcels of land adjacent to and abutting the 26.5 acre courthouse site that are also benefiting from all of these government funded improvements, in essence, they are land speculating with a guaranteed outcome paid for by the taxpayers."

Briggs, during his tenure on the board since 2007, has recused himself anytime courthouse matters have been before the board. However, the anonymous group contends Briggs "has been quite

busy behind the scenes making things happen for this project. He often shows up at redevelopment meetings and other meetings pushing the project.”

John and Ron Briggs signed legal documents for the Judicial Council stating in essence they have done nothing unethical.

El Dorado County Counsel Ed Knapp responded to Judicial Council, saying, “The county is aware of no conflicts that should impair the ability of the county, city of Placerville, and the state to move forward with the construction of this much needed courthouse. Nor is the county aware of any legitimate reason this should be considered a controversial site.”

The anonymous group says twice it has asked the grand jury to investigate whether improprieties have occurred and each time the jury was prevented from doing so. The 2012-13 grand jury was disbanded midterm. Bailey was the presiding judge of the grand jury at the time.

The group said in its letter, “As concerned citizens and taxpayers for honest, open and transparent government, and in light of the current state budget problems, we request that the state Office of the Courts not fund this site acquisition or any further construction costs until the matter has been fully investigated to be assured there is not illegal activity, misuse of government funds, profiteering, favoritism or impropriety and that taxpayers, the state and federal government are not paying for the private real estate development interest of the Briggs family.”

The new facility would replace the two Placerville buildings now being used by the court. One is the courthouse built in 1913 on Main Street. The court also uses a portion of a building in the county government center. Neither building has adequate security nor do they meet current regulations such as seismic and Americans with Disabilities Act rules.

The Main Street courthouse is the oldest of the five court facilities in the county.

If all goes forward, the building could be completed in the third quarter of 2018. The 87,642-square-foot facility would contain six courtrooms – the same number Placerville now has. The new building would be able to handle any type of case, have holding cells for defendants, and secure parking for judges as well as 240 spaces for on-site parking for support staff, visitors, and jurors.

The expected cost is \$91 million.

The money comes from assessments on traffic and criminal convictions – not from the budget of the trial court. The cash is supposed to be put in a trust fund, but the Legislature more than once has tapped into the account for its own purposes.

Nevada child care costs among highest in nation

By Paul Takahashi, Las Vegas Sun

Aaron Trujillo wasn't expecting sticker shock when he started searching for an affordable day care center for his 1-year-old daughter last month.

Trujillo, 30, and his wife both work for a Las Vegas apartment management company and make a combined \$72,000 annually. When his wife returned to her job as a real estate agent in November, Trujillo began looking at putting their toddler, Bealla, into day care.

The Trujillo family looked at three preschools near their central valley home. The first charged \$240 a week. That's \$960 a month – the equivalent of a rent or mortgage check for many Southern Nevadans.

“It was ridiculous,” Trujillo said. “That's really not affordable.”

After much searching – even checking Craigslist for cheaper child care – the Trujillos settled on a Kidz Kidz Kidz preschool near Tropicana Avenue and Jones Boulevard. The family was swayed by a special deal of \$140 a week.

Still, with their older son Andres, 10, in a Safekey afterschool program and Bealla in preschool, Trujillo estimates he will spend about \$800 a month for child care on his two children. “It's still really pricey,” Trujillo said.

His observation is on the mark.

A national study found that Nevada has among the highest child care costs in the country. The Silver State is among 31 states nationally where child care costs could exceed the cost of college tuition and fees, according to a 2013 report from the advocacy group Child Care Aware of America.

Read the whole story

School stress taking a toll on kids

By Patti Neighmond, NPR

When high school junior Nora Huynh got her report card, she

was devastated to see that she didn't get a perfect 4.0.

Nora "had a total meltdown, cried for hours," her mother, Jennie Huynh of Alameda says. "I couldn't believe her reaction."

Nora is doing college-level work, her mother says, but many of her friends are taking enough advanced classes to boost their grade-point averages above 4.0. "It breaks my heart to see her upset when she's doing so awesome and going above and beyond."

And the pressure is taking a physical toll, too. At age 16, Nora is tired, is increasingly irritated with her siblings and often suffers headaches, her mother says.

Teens Talk Stress

When NPR asked on Facebook if stress is an issue for teenagers, they spoke loud and clear:

"Academic stress has been a part of my life ever since I can remember," wrote Bretta McCall, 16, of Seattle. "This year I spend about 12 hours a day on schoolwork. I'm home right now because I was feeling so sick from stress I couldn't be at school. So as you can tell, it's a big part of my life!"

"At the time of writing this, my weekend assignments include two papers, a PowerPoint to go with a 10-minute presentation, studying for a test and two quizzes, and an entire chapter (approximately 40 pages) of notes in a college textbook," wrote Connor West of New Jersey.

"It's a problem that's basically brushed off by most people," wrote Kelly Farrell in Delaware. "There's this mentality of, 'You're doing well, so why are you complaining?' " She says she started experiencing symptoms of stress in middle school, and was diagnosed with panic disorder and generalized anxiety disorder in high school.

"Parents are the worst about all of this," writes Colin Hughes

of Illinois. “All I hear is, ‘Work harder, you’re a smart kid, I know you have it in you, and if you want to go to college you need to work harder.’ It’s a pain.”

Parents are right to be worried about stress and their children’s health, says Mary Alvord, a clinical psychologist in Maryland and public education coordinator for the American Psychological Association.

“A little stress is a good thing,” Alvord says. “It can motivate students to be organized. But too much stress can backfire.”

Read the whole story

Not a great shopping weekend for retailers

By Matt Townsend, Bloomberg

The first spending decline on a Black Friday weekend since 2009 reinforced projections for a lackluster holiday, increasing chances retailers will extend the deep discounts already hurting their profit margins.

Purchases at stores and websites fell 2.9 percent to \$57.4 billion during the four days beginning with the Nov. 28 Thanksgiving holiday, according to a survey commissioned by the National Retail Federation. While 141 million people shopped, about 2 million more than last year, the average consumer’s spending dropped 3.9 percent to \$407.02, the survey showed.

The survey results, if borne out at cash registers in American

malls and on website checkout screens, herald retailers' likely return to Black Friday-type discounts this week and suggest added stress for several chains. Wal-Mart Stores Inc. and Target Corp. already cut profit forecasts after tepid sales gains in back-to-school shopping.

"Retailers didn't get what they wanted from Black Friday and they will need to make it up in the next three weeks," Poonam Goyal, an analyst for Bloomberg Industries, said in an interview. "There will be some panic sales."

Read the whole story

Firefighting capabilities a concern at Fallen Leaf

By Kathryn Reed

Firefighting capabilities at Fallen Leaf Lake are not great, but they might get a little better soon.

On the Dec. 7 community services district board's agenda is a resolution supporting the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors' proposal to fund a new pump for the fire boat.

The current pumping capacity is so minimal that it is causing some residents of the South Shore enclave to pay extremely high homeowner insurance rates, while others don't qualify for coverage in case there were a fire.



Fallen Leaf Lake is trying to become better equipped to fight a fire. Photo/LTN file

The Insurance Service Office, better known as ISO, gives areas a rating, which then plays a role into the cost of insurance.

“Many on the west side of the lake are paying exorbitant property insurance or can’t get it,” board President Tom Bacchetti told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Fallen Leaf Lake is also looking at obtaining a used pumper truck from CalFire that would replace one of its four older apparatuses.

While the area has never been flush with a large operating budget, the county took away \$60,000 in 2009. That was the Aid to Fire program. To make up the difference the board raised the special tax from \$395 per parcel to \$595 a year. Still, there is a systemic deficit.

Bacchetti said the community doesn’t want to raise that fee, so likely when it’s up for a three-year renewal next summer the fee will be the same.

“There’s always a shortfall. We have reserves,” Bacchetti said. “There are things that should be done that are not getting done.”

The dismal financial situation has also gotten the attention of the Local Area Formation Commission, which has some

oversight of the community service district.

In the staff report from this fall's LAFCO meeting it says, "The fire chief indicated that the district had made deep across-the-board cuts in its equipment and other unspecified line items. For example, the district has stopped purchasing turnouts and [personal protective equipment] and has not made any repairs to its radios, hoses and apparatuses to bring them up to compliance with [National Fire Protection Association] standards."

Ironically, the Fallen Leaf Lake Community Services District was formed in 1982 to provide better fire suppression to the area. It was another five years before the district incorporated parks and recreation into its purview.

While the mostly volunteer department doesn't get that many fire calls, the threat is there. There were six structure fires between 2003 and 2012. However, there were 49 non-structure fires in that 10-year period. And had firefighters not stopped the 2007 Angora Fire on the ridge, it would have swept through the Fallen Leaf Lake community.

South Lake Tahoe Fire Department has a longstanding agreement to provide aid when necessary. The city also handles Fallen Leaf Lake's dispatch needs.

Knowing Fallen Leaf Lake is having issues, South Tahoe Chief Jeff Meston told *Lake Tahoe News* he plans to reach out to Chief Gary Gerren to see if the city could do more.

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Notes:

- The board meets Dec. 7 at noon at the El Dorado Hills Community Center.
- New officers will be named to the board. Bacchetti will remain on the board, but is stepping down as president.

Kings Beach utility work continues in December

The Kings Beach Commercial Core Improvement Project continues to move forward.

AT&T has completed the utility relocation work at the Bear Street intersection and all traffic control equipment has been removed from that site.

For the next two weeks starting Dec. 2, road work will continue in the Kings Beach area near Plumas Bank. Highway 28 access to the bank will be closed Dec. 2-6, however bank customers will have access via Brook Avenue.

Winter utility relocation schedule will be weather dependent, and road work will cease during peak holiday periods. Utility relocations are necessary before the road work begins in spring.

Wealthy Russians, Putin

bicker about Olympics

By Stephanie Baker and Ilya Arkhipov, Bloomberg

In August, Russian President Vladimir Putin flew to the Black Sea resort of Sochi, where his country is spending a record \$48 billion on the 2014 Winter Olympics. A regular visitor, with an official residence in town, Putin watched mixed-martial-arts contests at Oblaka nightclub with Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and Kazakh President Nursultan Nazarbayev.

After the first fight, the leaders suddenly were plunged into darkness for almost three minutes, giving them a taste of the blackouts that have plagued Sochi for years. Putin, poker faced when the power returned, strode into the ring to congratulate the fighters as the tournament concluded.

“Here in Russia, we have always valued and respected men who know how to stand firm to the last,” he said.

Putin is bracing for a fight of his own in the mad rush to the Feb. 7 opening ceremony, Bloomberg Markets magazine will report in its January issue. With concerns about terrorist attacks, lack of snow and anti-gay laws dominating headlines, Sochi has endured its share of pre-Olympics tension.

Yet another, potentially longer-lasting battle is playing out behind the scenes – involving Putin’s government, some of Russia’s wealthiest industrialists and a state-owned bank. The government is demanding that the country’s biggest companies stand firm on commitments to bankroll the games.

Read the whole story

Contractor at center of carbon monoxide death case

Truckee police detectives expect to soon forward the carbon monoxide death case to the Nevada County District Attorneys Office.

Albert Senzatimore, 69, of San Jose and Gary Trovinger, 57, of Los Gatos died in October from carbon monoxide poisoning. The heater in the Tahoe Donner house Trovinger owned was the source of the gas, according to authorities.

Police say the contractor, whose name has not been released, did not have a building permit.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Expanding N. Shore electric lines being studied



Proposed route changes to Liberty Utilities' North Shore lines.

By Kathryn Reed

Five routes for a massive electrical line on the North Shore are being studied in the environmental documents that were released in November.

CalPeco – short for California Pacific Electric Company – wants to strengthen its ability to provide power to that area. CalPeco is the parent company of Liberty Utilities, the electric company for the California side of the Lake Tahoe Basin, Truckee and Alpine County.

For Northstar to be able to grow it needs to be able to tap into more power. These upgrades would allow for the ski resort to grow as outlined in its master plan.

CalPeco officials had expected the process to move faster.

The draft environmental documents that are out for circulation

are a joint effort between the U.S. Forest Service, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and California Public Utilities Commission. Much of the land involved with the project is on Forest Service property.

The project also includes Truckee, Kings Beach, Tahoe City, Martis Creek Lake Recreation Area and Burton Creek State Park, as well as private property.

The existing lines run in a northeast-southwest direction between Kings Beach and Tahoe City and then parallel to Highway 267 from Truckee to Kings Beach.

CalPeco wants to remove that first segment and replace it with a higher voltage line. The second line would be realigned. Where exactly will be determined through the environmental analysis. Six substations on the Truckee-Kings Beach route could be upgraded or eliminated.

The current lines are 60 kilovolts and new ones would be 120 kilovolts. Substations would also be upgraded to the increased voltage.

"These improvements would increase the ability to maintain the current maximum system loads during an outage on any of the four key power lines within the North Lake Tahoe Transmission System, increasing the system's reliability," according to the three entities that released the draft EIR/EIS.

A year ago this month planners didn't know if the line would require Tahoe Regional Planning Agency approval – it does.

The Advisory Planning Commission of TRPA will hear the proposal Dec. 4, with the Governing Board discussing it Dec. 18. Public comment will be taken at both meetings. These meetings were pushed back from earlier this fall because of the federal government shutdown.

Informational meetings are set for Dec. 10 from 2-4pm at the

Tahoe National Forest Truckee Ranger District Office at 10811 Stockcrest Springs Road, Truckee and Dec. 10 from 6-8pm at the North Tahoe Events Center, 8318 North Tahoe Blvd., Kings Beach.

The 971-page draft environmental impact report and draft environmental impact statement are available online. Public comment is being accepted until Jan. 7.