Net college tuition not keeping pace with inflation

By Douglas Belkin, Wall Street Journal

Nearly half of the nation's colleges and universities are no longer generating enough tuition revenue to keep pace with inflation, highlighting the acceleration of a downward spiral that began as the recession ended, according to a survey by Moody's Investors Service.

The survey of nearly 300 schools reflects a cycle of disinvestment and falling enrollment that places a growing number at risk. While schools for two decades were seeing rising enrollments and routine increases of 5 percent to 8 percent in net tuition, many now are facing grimmer prospects: a shrinking pool of high-school graduates, depressed family incomes and precarious job prospects after college.

The softening demand for four-year degrees is prompting schools to rein in tuition increases while increasing scholarships. Those moves are cutting into net tuition revenue—the amount of money a university collects from tuition, minus school aid.

For 44 percent of public and 42 percent of private universities included in the survey, net tuition revenue is projected to grow less than the nation's roughly 2 percent inflation rate this fiscal year, which for most schools ends in June. Net tuition revenue will fall for 28 percent of public and 19 percent of private schools.

Read the whole story

Health care changes not a big deal in Nevada

By Andrew Doughman, Las Vegas Sun

Republicans nationwide are assailing President Obama for the deeply flawed rollout of his health care law.

But that campaign is muted somewhat in Nevada, where Republican Gov. Brian Sandoval has expanded the federal-state Medicaid program and has embraced a state-based health insurance exchange marketplace to serve about 600,000 uninsured Nevadans. Both programs are tenets of the Democratic president's health care law.

Nevada Democrats were happy with the decisions, and most Nevada Republicans have been mum — with the exception of former Senate candidate Sharron Angle, who led protests against Sandoval's exchange this month.

Such proposals have been controversial in other states with Republican governors. But Nevada is an outlier in both the decisions Sandoval made and the political comity surrounding his decisions.

New Mexico Gov. Susana Martinez is the only other Republican governor to have fully implemented both the Medicaid expansion and a state-run health insurance exchange, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation, a national nonprofit focused on health policy.

Read the whole story

Property owners told to tear out would-be house

This property at 1348 Wildwood Ave. will be restored and not be built on in the future. Photo/LTN

South Lake Tahoe property owners are going to have rip out the foundation and walls they had put in for a house because it has been ruled they did so illegally.

Thang Vu and his now ex-wife Jennifer Khuu bought the Wildwood Avenue property in 2002, were issued a building permit in 2007, had that revoked in 2008 when the easement blocking the building surfaced, and sued the city in 2009. Khuu now owns the property, but Vu based on court records, was the plaintiff.

The permit was revoked because the lot is unbuildable. A 1981 agreement made it so this parcel would always be open space. The plaintiffs knew this, but chose to build any way. Then they sued the city when they were told construction must stop.

The City Council earlier this year opted to not settle the case, but instead take it to court.

The case has been settled with the city winning and all charges against it and individual employees being dropped.

The property owner must remove all evidence of construction and restore the site per Tahoe Regional Planning Agency regulations by July 2014. Because dirt cannot be disturbed in the basin again until May, that is why they have so much time to rectify the problem.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

South Tahoe Olympian's mom going to jail

By Buffalo News

The mother of Olympic snowboarder Elena Hight pleaded guilty Thursday to marijuana trafficking.

Myra Hight, 52, of South Lake Tahoe was accused of being a member of a nationwide marijuana-distribution ring when she was picked up last year and found with more than $77,000 in cash in her vehicle.

She pleaded guilty to conspiracy to distribute marijuana before Chief U.S. District Judge William M. Skretny. She faces between 12 and 24 months in prison.

Read the whole story

Stateline casinos drop health care plans

By Kathryn Reed

The bulk of MontBleu casino employees will be getting their health care through the Affordable Care Act – and not by choice.

The company put a letter in employee boxes that said, "… it became clear to us that the modifications to the medical plan that are mandated by the ACA will drive up the cost for both you and the company. As such, most of our employees would be better served economically if we were to eliminate medical coverage and allow you to purchase your 2014 medical coverage on the health insurance exchange, where many employees would quality for federal subsidies."

Medical and prescription insurance through the Stateline casino will end Dec. 31. Dental and vision will remain.

Stephen Ditchkus, general manager of the casino since the beginning of the month, chose not to speak to *Lake Tahoe News*. Brett Hunn, the marketing manager, also did not return a call. Employees did not want to talk for fear of retribution.

MontBleu has more than 200 employees, many of whom are low-wage earners and not college graduates.

Part of the federal law mandates companies provide health insurance starting in 2015 if they have more than 50 full-time employees. If they don't, the company is subject to a penalty of $2,000 per employee. That penalty, though, in many cases is less than what it costs to provide health insurance to an employee.

The casino’s human resources department is set up to help people with getting on either the Nevada or California health exchange, depending where they reside.

MontBleu is not alone in forcing employees to the health exchanges. Darden Restaurants Inc., Home Depot Inc. and Trader Joe’s Co. will stop offering health insurance to part-time workers starting Jan. 1.

Caesars Entertainment, parent company of Harrah’s and Harveys at Stateline, is also eliminating health care for all part-time staff.

The ACA mandates everyone have health insurance starting Jan. 1. If they don’t, the Internal Revenue Service will penalize them.

A study released in July by Deloitte found that about one in 10 employers in the U.S. intended to ax company plans in favor of the ACA.

The *Wall Street Journal* reported, “Deloitte’s findings differ from estimates by rival firm McKinsey & Co. last year that found 30 percent of employers say they would ‘definitely or probably’ stop offering health insurance after 2014, as well as calculations by the Congressional Budget Office that estimated around 7 percent of workers could lose coverage under the law by 2019.”

Convicted serial killer

sentenced to death

By Gary Klein, Marin Independent Journal

Calling him “an evil and disturbed man,” a Marin County judge sentenced convicted serial killer Joseph Naso to death Friday for the murders of six women, including one from the North Lake Tahoe area.

Judge Andrew Sweet said the evidence proved that Naso inflicted “abhorrent and repugnant levels of suffering and cruelty” on the victims, and humilitated them even more by meticulously documenting the crimes in his diaries and photographs for more than two decades.

“You being in this world, Mr. Naso, has made this world a worse place,” Sweet said.

Naso, who turns 80 in January, insisted that the prosecution had not proved its case, that the DNA evidence was “planted,” that he was the victim of media bias, and that District Attorney Edward Berberian took the case to score political points in Marin.

The case broke open in 2010, when authorities conducted a routine probation search at Naso’s home in Reno. Naso retired there after spending much of his career as a nomadic photographer and property manager in Oakland, San Francisco and rural Northern California.

The probation check revealed piles of incriminating writings and photographs, including a diary that documented a half century of rapes and sex crimes.

In April 2011, Naso was arrested in South Lake Tahoe following his release from the El Dorado County Jail in an unrelated case.

To support their case for the death penalty, prosecutors Dori

Ahana and Rosemary Sloat introduced evidence that Naso also killed two other women: Sharileea Patton, whose body washed up in Tiburon in 1981. Patton, 56, was security guard from the North Lake Tahoe area. Police reported she was strangled and stuffed into two garbage bags. Sara Dylan, a nomadic Bob Dylan groupie who was killed in 1992 in or near Nevada County. The prosecution did not have all the evidence in place to charge Naso with those two murders in time for his trial.

Read the whole story

Cyclist dies; Tahoe man remains in custody

The Colorado bicyclist who was hit Nov. 15 by a vehicle has died.

James Hulett of Boulder was on his bike on Highway 28 going up Dollar Hill when he was struck from behind by a vehicle driven by 53-year-old Vicente Araujo of Kings Beach.

Araujo fled the scene of the accident, but then turned himself in later that night. Initially he was charged with felony hit and run. More charges are likely.

Araujo is on a "no bail hold" because authorities are investigating his immigration status.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Douglas County trying to come up with millions of dollars to repair dilapidated roads

By Anne Knowles

MINDEN – Douglas County is looking for money to repair its crumbling roads.

After years of underfunding road maintenance, and reallocating about $1 million from the current fiscal year's general fund for repairs, the county now wants a permanent fix to an old problem.

This week the county had two public workshops, in Topaz and Minden, to present possible options for raising at least an additional $4 million annually in order to maintain 171 miles of paved roads. An annual budget of $7.7 million, the county estimates, would also eliminate the county's $50 million road maintenance backlog in 10 years.

This sign would be common if Douglas County could find a way to pay for road improvements. Photo/LTN file

A Road Funding Task Force, comprised of about 20 residents created to investigate funding options, has met five times since June and will meet again next month before presenting its recommendations to County Manager Steve Mokrohisky, who will present them to the Board of Commissioners sometime in early 2014.

In the meantime, the county is seeking public input on the issue in an effort to find a solution that sticks and isn't rejected by residents the way a bump in the gas tax has been in the past. In 1994, voters repealed a 5 cent jump in the tax implemented by the Board of Commissioners the year before. Ten years later, voters denied the 5 cent increase again, that time via a 2004 ballot measure.

"One of our concerns is the board doesn't want to implement a gas tax only to have the voters repeal it," said Mokrohisky at the workshop here on Nov. 20.

Residents of the county in Lake Tahoe may not be as aware of or as affected by rickety roads as other county residents. Eight general improvement districts there take care of most local road maintenance and the Nevada Department of Transportation is responsible for the state highways in the area. The county provides signal maintenance and maintains just 2.5 miles of roads, including Lake Parkway, according to the county.

But Lake Tahoe residents may end up paying more in fees or taxes, depending on the mechanisms chosen by the Board of Commissioners to raise the needed cash.

No single option presented at the workshops generates all of the needed funds, so the county will likely settle on a mix of solutions.

"There is no silver bullet," Mokrohisky said. "One option is not going to fix the problem.

The county manager discussed six possible avenues for additional funds:

• More money could be shifted to road maintenance from the county’s general fund, the amount of which would be determined by the public’s tolerance for a corresponding reduction in other services.

• New road GIDs could be created to pay for local roads within each GID. About 60 percent of the county’s maintained roads are local roads in unincorporated areas such as the Johnson Lane area. The other 40 percent are so-called collector roads that are heavily trafficked such as Johnson Lane and Buckeye Road. Town residents, such as those in Minden and Gardnerville, pay a higher property tax than residents in the unincorporated areas to pay for local road maintenance. Property taxes for those residents in the unincorporated areas, which are below the state cap, could be raised to pay for maintenance of their local roads. The amount of money raised is still to be determined.

• A 1 percent increase in the utility operator fee on gas and electricity would raise about $800,000 annually. By law, the county could push up the fee by as much as 2.5 percent.

• The gas tax, by law, could be increased by as much as 5 cents. A jump of 5 cents would generate $900,000 annually.

• An infrastructure tax would be a 0.25 percent sales tax to produce $1.5 million every year.

• A public Transit and Road Maintenance Tax, which would have to be voted on, could bring in $3 million yearly.

The county may post an online survey on the topic. Details on the issue may be found at the county website. Mokrohisky said the workshop presentation would be made available there along with other documents and anyone interested in commenting may email or call his office.

Placerville elder abuse case ends with hung jury

By Marjie Lundstrom, Sacramento Bee

When 77-year-old Johnnie Esco died in 2008 after a short stay at a Placerville nursing home, her husband of 60 years wanted someone held responsible – civilly and criminally.

Don Esco of Cameron Park settled his civil lawsuit against the El Dorado Care Center and its owner in 2010 for $2.9 million. The criminal matter ended quite differently this week, with California’s attorney general declining to seek a new trial against the facility’s former head nurse following a mistrial.

More than five years after the elderly woman’s death, an El Dorado County jury failed to reach a verdict in the case against Donna Darlene Palmer, charged with felony elder abuse.

Palmer, the former director of nursing at the facility, was one of two nurses charged criminally last year by the California attorney general’s office. At the time, Attorney General Kamala D. Harris’ office had announced plans to intensify efforts statewide to bring criminal cases against nursing home administrators and employees whose failings harm vulnerable patients.

Read the whole story

Garbage rates likely to increase on South Shore

Garbage rates on the South Shore are expected to go up Jan. 1.

South Tahoe Refuse is asking for a 2.78 percent increase in South Lake Tahoe and El Dorado County and 2.73 in Douglas County. Per month, this equates to 69 and 79 cents for city and El Dorado County residents and 45 cents for Douglas residents with one 32-gallon can.

First the respective jurisdictions must sign off on the increase, which is based on the Consumer Price Index. That discussion will happen in December.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report