

Caltrans completes massive I-80 road project

It no longer seems scary to drive on Interstate 80 between Auburn and the Nevada state line. Caltrans has finished the \$821 million project.

This 90-mile upgrade was completed over a 15-year period.



Workers form new concrete on a segment of Interstate 80 near Emigrant Gap and Cisco Grove. Photo/Caltrans

Infrastructure improvements included rebuilding seven bridges, improving lighting and drainage and adding new traffic monitoring systems.

Interstate 80 is one of three continuous coast-to-coast highways, and it has served motorists since the 1960s.

The massive construction venture consisted of 15 projects featuring a wide range of improvements. In addition to rebuilding the highway:

- Caltrans rebuilt seven bridges and the Donner Summit and Gold Run rest areas.
- Several chain on/off areas were upgraded.

- New freeway cameras were installed, which Caltrans will use to monitor traffic incidents and weather conditions.
 - New electronic highway message signs on I-80 will provide motorists real-time traffic and weather information.
 - Caltrans enhanced safety for motorists by boosting the lighting around key interchanges.
 - Drainage systems were improved and highway shoulders were widened to modern standards.
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Federal shutdown took months of GOP planning

By Sheryl Gay Stolberg and Mike McIntire, New York Times

WASHINGTON — Shortly after President Obama started his second term, a loose-knit coalition of conservative activists led by former Attorney General Edwin Meese III gathered in the capital to plot strategy. Their push to repeal Obama's health care law was going nowhere, and they desperately needed a new plan.

Out of that session, held one morning in a location the members insist on keeping secret, came a little-noticed "blueprint to defunding Obamacare," signed by Meese and leaders of more than three dozen conservative groups.

It articulated a take-no-prisoners legislative strategy that had long percolated in conservative circles: that Republicans could derail the health care overhaul if conservative lawmakers were willing to push fellow Republicans — including their cautious leaders — into cutting off financing for the

entire federal government.

“We felt very strongly at the start of this year that the House needed to use the power of the purse,” said one coalition member, Michael A. Needham, who runs Heritage Action for America, the political arm of the Heritage Foundation. “At least at Heritage Action, we felt very strongly from the start that this was a fight that we were going to pick.”

Last week the country witnessed the fallout from that strategy: a standoff that has shuttered much of the federal bureaucracy and unsettled the nation.

To many Americans, the shutdown came out of nowhere. But interviews with a wide array of conservatives show that the confrontation that precipitated the crisis was the outgrowth of a long-running effort to undo the law, the Affordable Care Act, since its passage in 2010 – waged by a galaxy of conservative groups with more money, organized tactics and interconnections than is commonly known.

With polls showing Americans deeply divided over the law, conservatives believe that the public is behind them. Although the law’s opponents say that shutting down the government was not their objective, the activists anticipated that a shutdown could occur – and worked with members of the Tea Party caucus in Congress who were excited about drawing a red line against a law they despise.

A defunding “tool kit” created in early September included talking points for the question, “What happens when you shut down the government and you are blamed for it?” The suggested answer was the one House Republicans give today: “We are simply calling to fund the entire government except for the Affordable Care Act/Obamacare.”

The current budget brinkmanship is just the latest development in a well-financed, broad-based assault on the health law, Obama’s signature legislative initiative. Groups like Tea

Party Patriots, Americans for Prosperity and FreedomWorks are all immersed in the fight, as is Club for Growth, a business-backed nonprofit organization. Some, like Generation Opportunity and Young Americans for Liberty, both aimed at young adults, are upstarts. Heritage Action is new, too, founded in 2010 to advance the policy prescriptions of its sister group, the Heritage Foundation.

The billionaire Koch brothers, Charles and David, have been deeply involved with financing the overall effort. A group linked to the Kochs, Freedom Partners Chamber of Commerce, disbursed more than \$200 million last year to nonprofit organizations involved in the fight. Included was \$5 million to Generation Opportunity, which created a buzz last month with an Internet advertisement showing a menacing Uncle Sam figure popping up between a woman's legs during a gynecological exam.

Read the whole story

College students increasingly take unconventional route

By Jeffrey J. Selingo, Chronicle of Higher Education

When the filmmakers behind the animated summer blockbuster *Monsters University* needed inspiration for their fictional campus, they visited three of the nation's best-known colleges: Harvard, MIT, and UC Berkeley.

Such name-brand campuses, having provided the backdrop for Hollywood productions, help shape our collective vision of college as a place where you go once in your life (often at

age 18) and move through in a linear fashion over four years.

But that straight pathway isn't the one taken by about half of the students enrolled in college today, an enrollment pattern that Clifford Adelman, a noted higher-education researcher, says dates back to at least the 1970s. Even so, we still call students "nontraditional" if they attend college later in life or part-time, or if they attend multiple institutions.

Today's students are swirling through higher education more than ever before. They attend multiple institutions—sometimes at the same time—extend the time to graduation by taking off time between semesters, mix learning experiences like co-op programs or internships with traditional courses, and sign up for classes from alternative providers such as Coursera or edX, which offer free massive open online courses, or StraighterLine, which offers cheap introductory courses online.

Read the whole story

Brown gets rid of federal standardized test

By Sharon Noguchi, Bay Area News Group

SACRAMENTO — A bill ending the standardized tests that California public school students have taken in reading, math and social science since 1999 received Gov. Jerry Brown's signature on Wednesday, despite a threat by the U.S. secretary of education to withhold federal funds if the state moved forward with the plan.

Assembly Bill 484 replaces the pencil-and-paper, multiple-choice STAR tests with new language and math tests taken on computers. The new assessments, called Measurement of Academic Progress and Performance, were designed with other states to follow a set of national curriculum standards known as Common Core.

“I’ve said from the beginning, California needs tests that measure how ready our students are for the challenges of a changing world,” said California Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson, who championed the rapid shift away from the STAR tests. “... we have taken a huge step in that direction by creating an assessment system focused on improving teaching and learning and by sending a clear signal about our commitment to this urgent work.”

Read the whole story

Study: Toxic chemicals cause reproductive problems

By Catherine Pearson, Huffington Post

Toxic chemicals in the environment are detrimental to the reproductive health of both men and women, according to a new joint committee opinion written by two major medical organizations.

In an opinion paper published last week in the journal *Fertility and Sterility*, the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists and American Society for Reproductive Medicine called for further research into the potential impact of environmental contaminants on fertility and pregnancy. The

groups also urged policymakers to provide consumers and workers with clear information about potential risks.

“This is a call for awareness,” said Dr. Jeanne Conry, president of ACOG, told Huffington Post. “We want men and women to know there are concerns, but we’re not trying to hit a bell and alarm everyone.”

As of 2006, there were roughly 87,000 chemical substances registered for commerce in the U.S., according to figures cited in the opinion. Common environmental pollutants include pesticides, heavy metals such as lead and mercury, and endocrine disruptors like bisphenol A (BPA).

Read the whole story

USFS firefighting air fleet inadequate

By W.J. Hennigan, Los Angeles Times

The blaze near Yosemite National Park had incinerated scores of acres and was spreading fast. It was time, federal officials decided, to attack it from the air with all the resources at their command.

As the nation’s armada of air tankers began landing at a staging area near here, it was clear that this was a fleet from another era.

The planes showed their age. Propellers coughed to a stop and smoke spewed from their piston engines. Many of these restored tankers were built during the Eisenhower administration.

The Forest Service fleet, which drops retardant to give firefighters on the ground crucial time to put out raging wildfires, is too old, industry and government officials say. Because there are so few planes, critics contend, the fleet is no longer capable of doing all it should to contain fires. Over the last decade, the service reduced its fleet from 47 to just 12, all operated by businesses under federal contract.

Critics also say the planes are dangerous. Since 2001, tanker crashes have killed 22 aviators. Six died last year.

“It’s pathetic,” said Tony Kern, former Forest Service chief of aviation. “We have brave aviators using ancient technologies and as a result they’re losing their lives. It’s a horrifying fact that won’t change unless government action is taken.”

Since 2001, tanker crashes have killed 22 aviators. Six died last year.

Demands that the Forest Service replace these planes have come from former pilots, government officials, firefighter advocacy groups and CalFire.

Read the whole story

Nev. attempting to lower state suicide rate

By Kamille Wong, NPR

Nevada has the fourth highest rate of suicide in the nation. To combat this issue, the Nevada Suicide Prevention Office is forming a committee with 10 members from across the state.

Each member will focus on a different facet of the problem, including how to help veterans and Native American youth.

Suicide Prevention Coordinator, Misty Allen, says the committee wants to look more closely at the factors and trends related to Nevada's suicides.

"We are a very rural state. With ruralness comes isolation, high gun ownership in homes, lack of resources if someone does need help, high stigma about mental health, substance abuse and suicide."

Read the whole story

Poll: Calif. water improvement price tags too high

By Bettina Boxall, Los Angeles Times

Californians say the state's water supply system has serious problems that require improvement, but they are unwilling to spend billions of dollars in ratepayer and taxpayer funds on the task, according to a new USC Dornsife/Los Angeles Times poll.



Shasta Dam is an integral component of California's water system. Photo/LTN file

The results suggest an uphill fight for proponents of a state water bond and for a proposal to replumb the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, the transfer point for Northern California supplies delivered to the San Joaquin Valley and urban Southern California.

Reluctance to pay for big public works projects was reflected throughout the survey, which also questioned voters on the California prison system and the high-speed rail project.

"On all three of these issues voters have very clear concerns and want to see something done – until they see the price tag," said Dan Schnur, director of USC's Jesse M. Unruh Institute of Politics.

In initial questioning, 60 percent of those polled said they would favor a bond to finance statewide water improvements such as levee repair and groundwater cleanup. But when told the bond would require the state to borrow \$5 billion to \$6 billion, support plunged to 36 percent.

Read the whole story

Lake Tahoe attractions on USFS property to close during government shutdown

By Kathryn Reed

With the majority of the land in the Lake Tahoe Basin being owned by the feds, the impact of the government shutdown is starting to be felt.

This will be the last weekend Camp Richardson, Tahoe Tallac Site, Round Hill Pines and Zephyr Cove Resort will be open during the government shutdown. That is because the U.S. Forest Service owns the land.



Activities at Camp Richardson may not continue past this weekend if the federal government shutdown continues. Photo/LTN file

It doesn't matter that independent concessionaires operate those entities on the South Shore.

"We got a 48-hour cease-and-desist notice (Wednesday) night," Ginger Nicolay Davis, president of the Tahoe Tallac Association, told *Lake Tahoe News* on Thursday afternoon. That was the same message delivered by the USFS to the other

concessionaires.

But by Thursday evening the Forest Service had changed its mind. A reprieve was given to the Tahoe entities through the weekend. This means the weddings scheduled at Valhalla will go on, Oktoberfest will happen and the paddle-wheelers will set sail.

However, on Monday all of the concessionaires are anticipating receiving a letter from the USFS explaining the closure procedure. This is assuming Congress has not resolved its differences and the federal government remains in shut down mode.

“This will likely have a major impact on tourism at Lake Tahoe in the short term,” Douglas County Manager Steve Mokrohisky told *Lake Tahoe News*. “There is an important point that should not be missed here: local governments and businesses are becoming increasingly important in providing services and information to our residents at a time when the federal government is literally inoperable.”

The two leaders within the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit of the USFS – Nancy Gibson and Jeff Marsolais – are talking to government and tourism officials, but not to the media.

“If people stay home and don’t travel and tourists don’t come, it affects everyone,” South Lake Tahoe City Manager Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*. “If the federal government can’t get its act together and realize that their decisions affect everybody, they shouldn’t get paid. It’s unbelievable they are still getting their salaries. We have people here who don’t get to work.”

The local economic toll from the shutdown remains to be seen. Federal paychecks have stopped – which means those people are watching how much money they spend. And if concessionaires close up, those employees will be without income. The Tallac Association, which is a small nonprofit, counts on weddings to

fund the summer arts and music festival.

"I truly believe this is coming from way, way up and not a local thing," Davis said of closing Tahoe sites. "I do believe it's a political move to get as much attention around this as they can, to get enough people mad so more people will start calling their congressmen."

Davis had rearranged the two weddings set for this weekend before the reprieve was issued. While she said it was hard to call the brides to tell them a Plan B had to be found just days before the big event, they were understanding. The call to tell them Plan A was back on was a much more pleasant conversation.

The Tahoe Tallac Association has multiple weddings scheduled every weekend in October, so alternative locations need to be found now just in case the shutdown continues.

And with 50 guests for one of the weddings staying at Camp Richardson this weekend, word that the resort is staying open for at least the next three days was welcome news to many.

Kris Knox, general manager for Camp Rich, was not available for comment.

"The city is reaching out to anybody and everyone who has events. We will do whatever we can to accommodate them," Kerry said.

Aramark, which operates Zephyr Cove Resort, and the M.S. Dixie II and Tahoe Queen paddle-wheelers, did not know about this weekend's potential shutdown until *Lake Tahoe News* called. Officials never got back to *LTN* after saying they would.

The Queen would still be able operate because it is docked at a private marina in the city limits.

Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority sent out a special press release Thursday letting people know Tahoe is open for business. North

Lake Tahoe Resort Association officials said they have no intention of doing anything special based on what Congress is doing.

Even though the Forest Service operates many of the trails in the basin, they remain open. There would be no way to close them even though USFS law enforcement officers are not furloughed.

In addition, there are state parks in both states in the basin that are not affected by the feds, as well as other commercial vessels on the lake.

Calif. changing rules for toxics in consumer products

By Marc Lifsher, Los Angeles Times

SACRAMENTO — Hundreds of items found on supermarket shelves, such as shampoos, cleaning supplies, cosmetics and food packaging, could get chemical makeovers under new rules being put in force by California.

On Thursday, state toxic chemical regulators unveiled what they say is the nation's most comprehensive program for identifying and reformulating common consumer products containing hazardous chemicals.

In the past, the state took a piecemeal approach. Lawmakers would ban specific chemicals from particular products, such as bisphenol A in baby bottles and sippy cups.

That's being replaced by a more systematic approach. Under the new rules, which go into effect Oct. 1, the state will identify classes of products for review, such as nail polish. Manufacturers will then have to perform detailed analyses to justify whether hazardous chemicals are needed or whether substitutes are available.

Read the whole story