Calif. climate fight gets harder soon

By Julie Cart, CalMatters

By most measures, California has earned the right to brag about how much it has cleaned up its environmental act. The air in much of smog-shrouded Southern California has been scrubbed. A passenger car for sale here today is 99 percent cleaner than one on offer in the early 1970s. The fossil fuels required to power the state's economic engine have decreased by a third since their peak in 2001, while economic activity has expanded in that time by an equal measure.

In addition, California's response to climate change is a one-of-a-kind hybrid, knitting together market-based programs such as the cap-and-trade system for reducing carbon dioxide and other harmful emissions; strict regulations to promote energy efficiency in buildings; and generous financial incentives for "green" projects, drawn from more than $6 billion in carbon-trading proceeds.

It's working. California is poised to meet its goal to reduce greenhouse gases 33 percent, to 1990 levels, by the year 2020. Its targets for use of more renewable energy by that date are, in some cases, already exceeded.

So take a bow, California; you've done the easy stuff. But hold on tight for what comes next. The state's overarching plan was intended to ease industry and consumers into a carbon-free future bit by bit; ten years in, the training wheels are off.

Emissions-reduction must hit 40 percent by 2030 and twice that by 2050. In 12 years, half the state's energy must come from renewable sources such as wind and sun. California's 14 million buildings must operate twice as efficiently, and the number of electric cars on the road will have to multiply more than 10 times. Failure would likely mean more extreme measures in later years and, many experts say, could affect public health.

The scope of the state's approach is all-encompassing. By law or executive order, every state agency must consider climate change when making any planning decision. Developers must take into account how far motorists travel to reach a destination, forests will be managed so that trees store more carbon dioxide and highway builders have to calculate the possibility that rising seas might inundate the roads.

The near term looks good. But for the 2030 goals and beyond, normally upbeat officials are guarded.

"Getting a 40 percent reduction [by] 2030 is no small thing. There will be lots of challenges," said Ken Alex, director of the state Office of Planning and Research, who sees the entire field when it comes to emissions reductions. "Sometimes I'm optimistic, sometimes I'm pessimistic. I'm pessimistic about the political will it takes to get there."

The most difficult work begins with California's single most polluting sector: transportation, which accounts for nearly half the state's greenhouse-gas emissions.

Mary Nichols, who chairs the California Air Resources Board, acknowledged that squeezing emissions from transportation will be the most difficult lift of all the 2030 standards, saying the gains require no less than a "deep transformation."

That will include cutting gasoline use in half, reducing the miles that car-centric Californians drive, dramatically ramping up the adoption of electric vehicles and building a network of readily available charging stations.

"There's no question that transportation is a critical piece, maybe the critical piece, in solving our energy problems," said Sean Hecht, co-executive director of UCLA’s Emmett Institute on Climate Change and the Environment.

One reason it’s difficult is that transportation emissions are produced largely outside the clutches of state regulation: think airplanes, trains, and ships. Another is sluggish technological change for heavy-duty and medium-duty trucks, buses and shuttles, although adoption of all-electric municipal buses is growing as costs come down.

Although California has decreed that auto manufacturers sell a percentage of zero-emission vehicles, there is no mandate that drivers purchase the pricey cars. Regulators and legislators have been reluctant to force consumers to buy them, as they have with TVs, heavy appliances and other products.

That would change with legislation proposed by Assemblyman Phil Ting, a Democrat from San Francisco. Ting’s bill would ban the sale of gasoline-powered cars in California by 2040, mirroring bans proposed by some European countries. The idea went nowhere when Ting proposed it last year, and its prospects now are unclear.

While gas-sipping hybrids such as the Prius are nearly ubiquitous and certainly helpful, only true zero-emission vehicles can bring about the scale of change the state’s goals require, experts say.

“There’s no way to get there without significant reduction in passenger-vehicle emissions,” said Ting, who drives an electric car. He said that more access to charging stations would be transformational.

“People talk about the lack of infrastructure, yet there’s electricity everywhere they park their car, unless they are in the forest,” he said. “People park their car much nearer to electricity than they do to gasoline. In transportation they talk about ‘the last mile.’ Here we have the ‘last foot’ issue. We just need the extension cord for the last foot.”

Much of that work falls to the California Energy Commission, which has tied together charging stations that trace a north-south, mainly coastal path. The easier task of attracting electric car buyers in Southern California and the Bay Area has been accomplished. The challenge now is engaging inland drivers, in places such as Bakersfield, Fresno and Redding.

John Kato, deputy director of the commission’s Fuels and Transportation Division, agreed that the new benchmarks are “challenging, but we believe the private sector will take up the baton,” with automakers producing a wider variety of vehicles, across a broad price range, appealing to more buyers.

An unexpected private-sector benefit comes from Volkswagen, which settled an emissions-cheating case by agreeing to spend more than $800 million building charging stations (from which the company will also profit) throughout the state.

National trends are cause for optimism, said Paul Cort, an attorney with the environmental group Earthjustice. “There is an acceleration in acceptance and uptake among car buyers,” he said. “It took us 10 years to get to the first million electric vehicles; the second million was achieved in two years; the third million will be on the road in one year.”

One success story has been the state utilities’ swift integration of renewable energy into the state electric grid, partly because of a dramatic decline in the cost of solar energy. Emissions from power generated in the state fell by more than 19 percent last year, partly due to the ramping up of hydroelectric power with last year’s heavy rains. The Public Utilities Commission that regulates energy companies reports that they have met or will soon meet the 2020 targets.

State Sen. Kevin de León, a Democrat from Los Angeles who is currently running to unseat Democratic Sen. Dianne Feinstein, recently set an even higher bar, proposing 100 percent renewable energy throughout the state by 2045.

It will be more difficult to find further savings from existing energy-efficiency programs, long a bulwark of California’s carbon-reduction efforts. The state is phasing out incandescent light bulbs and the building codes for new construction continue to mandate efficiency. But still to be tackled is the thorny problem of retrofitting millions of old and outdated homes and businesses.

At least one analysis calculates that natural gas used in hot water heaters and to warm residential and commercial buildings is causing nearly the same emissions as the state’s power plants. Converting gas-fired buildings to fully electric is daunting, and hugely expensive.

With so many reductions required, the Air Resource Board’s post-2020 strategy is one element—a critical one—of the state’s multiagency approach to climate change. That strategy elevates the cap-and-trade system, in which companies can pay to pollute by buying credits, to a much more significant role. Cap and trade limits emissions on 80 percent of California’s polluters.

The agency has never precisely quantified cap and trade’s contribution to greenhouse-gas reduction. Officials projected it at 17-20 percent in a planning document in 2008—a year before the program launched—but are unable to say if those assumptions have been borne out. The board has not conducted the complicated analysis required to determine the program’s actual role in cutting emissions.

Nonetheless, last month it adopted a plan to reach post-2020 objectives that ups the ante: It forecasts that cap and trade, which lawmakers recently extended to 2030, will be responsible for nearly 40 percent of California’s emissions reductions by that time, a figure disputed by some as unrealistic.

Some critics of the program say another factor could cause the state to miss its 2030 emissions targets: the banking system that allows individual companies to hold tens of millions of carbon credits in reserve.

According to separate analyses by the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst’s Office and independent economists, refineries, cement plants and other major polluters could produce emissions in the next decade that are well above the state’s ever-tightening limits and use their banked credits, purchased cheaply, to offset their excess.

Chris Busch, an economist and research director at the think tank Energy Innovation, said his analysis showed that because of the oversupply of allowances the “effectiveness of the program could be compromised.”

Ross Brown, who analyzes cap and trade for the LAO, said in an interview that there’s a “decent to good chance” that banked credits could vault emissions to more than 30 percent over legal limits in 2030.

The issue has the attention of the state Legislature, which has directed the air board to investigate. So far, the agency has shrugged off the concerns.

Rajinder Sahota, who oversees the cap-and-trade program for the air board, said that although the analyses may be correct in that emissions may exceed the cap in any given year, the agency is confident that the cumulative emissions between 2021 and 2030 will fall and California will meet its goals.

“We expect to see fluctuations over time,” she said. “There are a number of factors that account for emissions in any given year—the economy, business decisions. In a perfect world, you’d like to see a decline over time. But it doesn’t always work that way.”

Sahota said the analyses of banked credits are a “paper exercise.”

“Most of the allowances in the program are still in the ARB’s account,” she said. The LAO’s calculations would require a company to spend hundreds of millions of dollars for credits now on a bet that the price will rise as emissions limits get stricter, she said.

“The data show that is not happening,” Sahota said.

Nevertheless, she and air board chairwoman Nichols said the plan is open to revisions.

Gov. Jerry Brown’s personal investment in California’s climate-change policies has been a force multiplier, spurring the myriad state agencies to adopt, and state industries to adapt to, the prospect of a carbon-less future. But Brown is in his final year in office, and the Legislature’s to-do list is crowded with other enormous issues, such as poverty and housing.

Whether lawmakers will continue to invest in programs that, to some, don’t seem to immediately improve the lives of Californians, is an open question.

One critic is state Sen. John Moorlach, a Republican from Costa Mesa who is also an accountant.

“I come from a world where you measure things so you can manage it,” the senator said. “It’s a matter of priorities. Sacramento is pumping itself on the chest, thinking it is going save the world. I’m not convinced this is the right use of our resources.”

Such doubts could present hurdles as the global-warming clock winds down.

“We are running out of time. That’s clear,” said Ken Alex. “To me, it’s about political will and scale. We feel confident that it’s doable. But do we have the political will to get there?”

Hidden homelessness among high school students

By Stacey Havlik, The Conversation

One in 30.

That’s what a new first-of-its-kind study found was the number of students ages 13 to 17 who have experienced homelessness in the past year. The figure represents about 700,000 young people nationwide.

When a student is homeless in high school, it can cause high levels of stress and anxiety. While other students are able to focus on getting good grades and planning for college, students who are homeless often worry about basic necessities, such as food, clothing and shelter.

In order to turn things around and help homeless students succeed and have a decent shot at college, school counselors should be seen as our first line of support. I say that based on years of experience as a researcher who has focused on the critical role that school counselors play in helping low-income and first-generation college students make it to college.

Unfortunately, what I have found through my research is that school counselors often feel helpless despite their desire to help students who are experiencing homelessness. They also feel underprepared to support the needs of such students. With increased preparation and knowledge on homelessness, school counselors would be in a much better position to help homeless students succeed.

School counselors may meet homeless students' basic needs by collecting school supplies, clothing or food items for students in need. This can be done by coordinating community or school donation programs, collecting monetary donations from the community, or applying for grants through the Department of Education. They may also identify resources in the community and collaborate with stakeholders, such as social workers and teachers to form a supportive system. But my research has found that school counselors often lack knowledge about students who are homeless, and have limited training to support their needs. This in turn puts the educational future of students experiencing homelessness in jeopardy.

One of the reasons homeless students can be difficult to identify is because homelessness is often thought of as individuals living on the street or in a shelter. The reality is that homelessness can also take many other forms. In fact, the federal definition of homelessness includes those who lack a "fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence." This includes individuals and families who are living with others due to a loss of housing, often referred to as "doubling up." Those living in shelters or locations such as motels, hotels, trailer parks or campgrounds because they lack other consistent housing options may also be considered homeless. Individuals who are under 18 and living without a parent or guardian and lack consistent housing are considered "unaccompanied homeless youth." Through having a clear understanding of the various definitions, school counselors can identify students experiencing homelessness quickly and educate others so that if there is a housing loss, students can be provided with the supports they need.

Counselor contact is critical

Research indicates that students from low-income backgrounds are more likely to go to college after they graduate when they have a series of contacts with their school counselors, as opposed to seeing their counselor only once. Unfortunately, my work suggests that school counselors are often forced to focus on meeting homeless students’ basic needs. This leads counselors to offer homeless students the kind of general college support that they would give all students. Consequently, many counselors may neglect the highly specialized college planning needs of students who are homeless. Further, one report suggests that although school counselors are in a position to positively impact students’ career and college readiness, they need more extensive graduate and in-service training on college and career counseling.

Generally speaking, students who are homeless face emotional distress in the form of anxiety or low self-esteem and lower academic achievement. School can be a place of consistency that can support their postsecondary planning, but only if schools are mindful of the unique needs of high school students experiencing homelessness. Schools must provide individualized support that focuses on enhancing students’ expectations of college attendance and their belief in their ability to attend.

When they are identified, students experiencing homelessness can be supported through the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act. The federal law includes provisions meant to remove barriers, such as by providing transportation for students who move out of a district because they became homeless. It also allows for quick enrollment for students experiencing homelessness regardless of the required paperwork, and funding for programming such as academic support or after school programs. It also allows for a local liaison to ensure students are identified and receiving supports they need. Further, when McKinney-Vento was recently revised under the Every Student Succeeds Act, it specifically stated that school counselors and local liaisons must provide “individualized” college support for students who are homeless. But ultimately, the federal law by itself won’t do anything to help students experiencing homelessness. It’s all about how well the law is executed at the school level.

Information is crucial

Schools should also include information about McKinney-Vento and college planning that would be directly beneficial to homeless youth on their websites. Unfortunately, few schools are doing so.

Schools can also develop systems of support in the community to support homeless students’ basic needs. This will allow them more time to focus on other things, such as college planning.

When advising about college, counselors must determine things such as whether students need campus housing during breaks, if the school has affordable meal plans and if the university has support systems in place for additional counseling, advising, mentoring or tutoring. Directing students to apply to universities that are a good fit will help them to be more successful.

With intentional planning, schools can be a resource for students experiencing homelessness that helps them to stay on track, graduate and go on to college. But if we continue to neglect the specific needs of homeless students, we run the risk of consigning them to lives of uncertainty and placing their college dreams further out of reach.

Stacey Havlik is assistant professor of education and counseling at Villanova University.

Placer County deputy involved in Tahoe shooting

A Placer County sheriff's deputy on Sunday shot a man in Carnelian Bay after the suspect allegedly tried to stab him.

Officers went to the North Shore residence on Jan. 14 at 4am when someone at the residence called to say someone else there was acting "bizarre."

According to deputies, the suspect lunged at the deputy with a barbecue skewer. The officer shot the person in what is being called self-defense.

It is not known how many shots were fired or where the person was hit or how many times. The officer's name has not been released.

The suspect was taken to Renown Medical Center in Reno.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Nevada medical board to revise new opioid law

By Kimber Laux, Las Vegas Review-Journal

The Nevada Medical Board of Examiners is delaying implementation of a new opioid prescription law after dozens of doctors complained that the change is burdensome and enforcement is confusing.

Assembly Bill 474, which went into effect Jan. 1, requires

Nevada licensing boards to create regulations that outline disciplinary actions to be taken against doctors who prescribe opioids in violation of the bill, which requires physicians to perform a risk assessment on patients before writing opioid prescriptions, limit initial prescriptions of the drugs to two weeks and get the patient's consent to random drug testing if the prescription is extended to a month.

Read the whole story

La Nina peaks, snowpack on the line

By Don Jenkins, Capital Press

A weak to moderate La Nina in the tropical Pacific has probably peaked, though it may have enough punch left to swell snowpacks, climatologists reported last week.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said that the cooler-than-normal ocean likely will begin warming, but won't reach average temperatures until the spring. Climatologists estimated the chances of La Nina sticking through the winter at 90 percent.

La Nina stacks the deck in favor of cool and wet weather for the next few weeks, Washington State Climatologist Nick Bond said.

Read the whole story

U.S. outspends other countries on health care

By Austin Frakt and Aaron E. Carroll, New York Times

The United States spends almost twice as much on health care, as a percentage of its economy, as other advanced industrialized countries — totaling $3.3 trillion, or 17.9 percent of gross domestic product in 2016.

But a few decades ago American health care spending was much closer to that of peer nations.

What happened?

A large part of the answer can be found in the title of a 2003 paper in Health Affairs by the Princeton University health economist Uwe Reinhardt: "It's the prices, stupid."

Read the whole story

Nevada resort revenue hits record levels in 2017

By Thomas Moore, Las Vegas Sun

Nongaming spending on the Strip drove resort revenue in Nevada to record levels in 2017, according to numbers released today by the Nevada Gaming Control Board.

Each January, the board release its Nevada Gaming Abstract, a review of the previous year’s financial results from resorts grossing $1 million or more in gaming revenue.

Overall revenue – gaming, rooms, food, beverage, attractions – throughout Nevada increased 3.7 percent in 2017 compared to fiscal 2016.

Read the whole story

Indictment in Stateline murder

A transient was indicted this week in the murder of a man last fall at the Hard Rock casino in Stateline.

Jose Rodriguez-Quezada, 44, is accused of murder with a deadly weapon.

Douglas County sheriff’s deputies found Kevin Edwards, 56, deceased in a Hard Rock hotel room on Oct. 3.

Rodriguez-Quezada is scheduled to be arraigned Jan. 23.

Details of the murder and the connection between the two have not been released. It is not known why the suspect was in Tahoe when he had been homeless in the Reno-Sparks area before then.

Bail was set at $1.5 million for Rodriguez-Quezada, who also is being held in Washoe County on a re-entry hold by Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Report: Trump lawyer bought porn star silence on alleged sexual encounter at Tahoe golf tourney

By Heidi M. Przybyla, USA Today

WASHINGTON — A lawyer representing President Trump arranged a $130,000 payment to a former adult film star one month before the 2016 presidential election to prevent her from discussing an alleged sexual encounter between her and Trump some 10 years earlier at Lake Tahoe during the American Century Championship celebrity golf tournament, the *Wall Street Journal* reported.

The *Journal*, citing anonymous sources familiar with the matter, was the first to report on the agreement between Trump's longtime attorney and the woman, Stephanie Clifford, whose stage name is Stormy Daniels.

Michael Cohen, who was a lawyer for the Trump Organization at the time, did not directly address the latest report of the payment, but said "these rumors have circulated time and again since 2011."

Read the whole story

Bay Area group to buy former KMS site

By Kathryn Reed

A group out of the Bay Area has offered to buy the former Kingsbury Middle School site for above what it was listed for.

The Douglas County School District board this week accepted the offer of $3.75 million by Palo Alto-based Pioneer Mountain. The 22-plus-acre site in Stateline had been listed for $3.4 million.

"We do not and have not made any absolute concrete decisions on the property. Nothing is solidified. They have a lot of ideas," Katie Foster, the real estate agent representing the buyer, told *Lake Tahoe News*. "I can guarantee it won't be a housing development or hotel. It will be used for the community of Douglas County and Lake Tahoe."

A representative at the Jan. 9 meeting told the school board the plan is to make it a youth Christian facility.

Escrow opened Jan. 11. A $50,000 deposit has been made. The buyer has a 75-day due diligence period. This means the deal could close this spring.

This Bay Area company has expressed interest in the school site at other times, but this is the first time a formal bid has been made.

Zoning and other regulatory issues involving Douglas County and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency will have to be addressed by the buyer.

DCSD has been saddled with the basic upkeep and utilities of KMS since it closed after the 2007-08 school year because of declining enrollment.

The district thought it had a buyer a year ago. That deal fell through when the person could not come up with the money. His proposal to build affordable housing was met with opposition from those who live down the street in Lake Village.