

California electeds to get bump in pay

California legislators can expect to earn about \$5,000 more in 2014. The 5 percent pay increase takes affect for statewide elected officeholders starting in December.

The California Citizens Compensation Commission made the ruling June 19. While the group was appointed by the governor, it was the voters who created the entity.

Most lawmakers make about \$95,291 a year.

Lawmakers have had their pay cut by about 23 percent since 2008. This is the first increase to bring them back to the level of five years ago.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

Obesity declared a disease by AMA

By Melissa Healy and Anna Gorman, Los Angeles Times

The American Medical Association voted Tuesday to declare obesity a disease, a move that effectively defines 78 million American adults and 12 million children as having a medical condition requiring treatment.

The nation's leading physicians organization took the vote after debating whether the action would do more to help affected patients get useful treatment or would further

stigmatize a condition with many causes and few easy fixes.

In the end, members of the AMA's House of Delegates rejected cautionary advice from their own experts and extended the new status to a condition that affects more than one-third of adults and 17 percent of children in the United States.

"Recognizing obesity as a disease will help change the way the medical community tackles this complex issue that affects approximately 1 in 3 Americans," said Dr. Patrice Harris, an AMA board member.

Tuesday's vote is certain to step up pressure on health insurance companies to reimburse physicians for the time-consuming task of discussing obesity's health risks with patients whose body mass index exceeds 30. It should also encourage doctors to direct these patients to weight-loss programs and to monitor their often-fitful progress.

The federally funded Medicare program, which insures an estimated 13 million obese Americans who are over 65 or disabled, already covers the costs of "intensive behavioral therapy" for obese patients, as well as bariatric surgery for those with additional health conditions. But coverage for such obesity treatments has been uneven among private insurers.

Insurers who are members of the California Association of Health Plans cover many services to treat medical conditions associated with obesity, including bariatric surgery and diabetes, said President and Chief Executive Patrick Johnston.

The AMA's decision essentially makes diagnosis and treatment of obesity a physician's professional obligation. As such, it should encourage primary care physicians to get over their discomfort about raising weight concerns with obese patients. Studies have found that more than half of obese patients have never been told by a medical professional they need to lose weight – a result not only of some doctors' reluctance to offend but of their unwillingness to open a lengthy

consultation for which they might not be reimbursed.

Past AMA documents have referred to obesity as an “urgent chronic condition,” a “major health concern” and a “complex disorder.” The vote now lifts obesity above the status of a health condition, disorder or marker for heightened risk of disease – as high cholesterol is for heart disease, for instance.

“As things stand now, primary care physicians tend to look at obesity as a behavior problem,” said Dr. Rexford Ahima of University of Pennsylvania’s Institute for Diabetes, Obesity and Metabolism. “This will force primary care physicians to address it, even if we don’t have a cure for it.”

The new designation follows a steep 30-year climb in Americans’ weight – and growing public concern over the resulting tidal wave of expensive health problems. Treatment of such obesity-related illnesses as cardiovascular disease, Type 2 diabetes and certain cancers drives up the nation’s medical bill by more than \$150 billion a year, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Projected increases in the obesity rate could boost that figure by an additional \$550 billion over the next 20 years, a recent Duke University study concluded.

In laying out the case for and against the redefinition of obesity, the AMA’s Council on Science and Public Health argued that more widespread recognition of obesity as a disease “could result in greater investments by government and the private sector to develop and reimburse obesity treatments.”

The Food and Drug Administration, which has approved just two new prescription weight-loss medications since 1999, would probably face increased pressure to approve new obesity drugs, spurring new drug development and more widespread prescribing by physicians, the council noted.

“The greater urgency a disease label confers” also might boost support for obesity-prevention programs such as physical education initiatives and reforms to school lunch, the council added. In addition, it speculated that “employers may be required to cover obesity treatments for their employees and may be less able to discriminate on the basis of body weight.”

But the council also said that making obesity a disease could deepen the stigma attached to being overweight and doom some patients to endless nagging – even if they were otherwise healthy or had lost enough weight to improve their health.

It might also shift the nation’s focus too much toward expensive drug and surgical treatments and away from measures to encourage healthy diets and regular exercise, the council wrote in a background memo for AMA members.

Dr. Daniel H. Bessesen, an endocrinologist and obesity expert at the University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus, called the AMA’s shift “a double-edged sword.” Though the semantic change may reflect “a growing awareness that obesity is not someone’s fault,” he worried that “the term disease is stigmatizing, and people who are obese don’t need more stigmatizing.”

40% of food in U.S. ends up as garbage

By Quentin Fottrell, Wall Street Journal

New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg’s plan to require residents to compost their food waste may cause headaches for some families, but experts say it could also help cut their rising

grocery bills.

Under the proposal, by 2016 the city will require residents to separate their food waste for collection. Organic waste in New York City – which could otherwise be recycled for fertilizer or natural gas – currently accounts for 1.2 million tons or 35 percent of landfills, and a pilot program on Staten Island achieved a participation rate of 43 percent, according to the mayor's office. Last year, Vermont introduced a bill to by 2020 require residents to recycle their food waste – and 33 percent of the organic waste in that state already gets composted.

Aside from the environmental advantages of composting, the effort may also be a boon for pocketbooks. Throwing out separate bags filled only with uneaten food could work as a big wake-up call for consumers, experts say. "We have a tendency to overbuy and overcook," says Phil Lempert, CEO of grocery information site SupermarketGuru.com. "Awareness of how much food you're wasting does help people buy properly. As prices go up, people also become more aware."

And consumers today have every reason to be more judicious in the grocery store. The price of food purchased for consumption at home is expected to rise 2.5 percent to 3.5 percent in 2013, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

As much as 40 percent of food goes uneaten in the U.S., according to estimates from the Department of Agriculture and the Environmental Protection Agency. Americans are, in other words, throwing out the equivalent of \$165 billion in wasted food every year, according to a recent analysis by the Natural Resources Defense Council, a nonprofit environmental group. In fact, one study estimates, just 15 percent of wasted food would be enough to feed more than 25 million Americans every year. And one in six Americans currently lacks a secure supply of food, says Dana Gunders, an NRDC project scientist in San Francisco.

Grocery bills are the biggest household expense. The average American family of four spends between \$632 and \$1,252 per month on grocery bills, according to the Department of Agriculture's April 2013 "Cost of Food" survey. Composting forces people to actually see how much food they're throwing away and how much money they're wasting, says Andrew Shakman, president of LeanPath, a Portland-based company that tracks food waste in industrial kitchens. LeanPath helped cut food waste at the UC Berkeley campus by 43 percent.

There are, of course, easier ways to cut one's supermarket bill than composting. Consumers can waste less food by bringing a calculator to the store, making a note of when food goes bad, cooking only what they need and eating their leftovers, experts say. iPhone apps like Green Egg Shopper (\$3.99) and Food Storage & Shelf Life (\$1.99) can help keep track of perishables. One caveat to Bloomberg's plan, however: "Recycling can also give less conscientious people a good excuse to waste," Shakman says.

Fire destroys Tahoe City house



This Tahoe City house was

fully engulfed when
firefighters arrived.
Photos/North Lake Tahoe Fire



Damage was severe, though no
dollar amount has been
placed on it.

An early morning fire Wednesday completely destroyed a house
in Tahoe City.

The occupant and a dog got out without injury.

North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District crews have not
determined the cause of the fire in the 1800 block of Silver
Tip Drive.

There was concern the fire would grow larger because flames
shot into trees.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*

Calif. budget bill threatens access to public records

By Annalise Mantz and Jeffrey Dastin, Sacramento Bee

A budget bill awaiting Gov. Jerry Brown's signature would make it optional for local governments to comply with several key provisions of the California Public Records Act.

The change is intended to save the state money because it typically reimburses local agencies for providing services it mandates.

Brown's administration says it expects little effect on public access to records. Many local governments told the *Bee* they intend to comply anyway and pay the costs themselves.

Yet advocates of open government say the changes essentially would gut provisions that ensure the public and the media get responses to their records requests. They warn it would do the most damage in places where there is a need to protect the public's interests – local governments that already seek to restrict access or have a history of corruption.

Peter Scheer, executive director of the First Amendment Coalition, said citizens and journalists who request public records would now have to trust local governments and agencies to skirt the "very big hole" the bill opens in the Public Records Act.

"I think the biggest cities will continue to comply, or they will say that they are adhering to the provisions, and in practice they may not really be adhering to them," Scheer said. "Once they become optional as a matter of law, I'm not sure how enforceable they will be."

The language of Assembly Bill 76, one of several bills in the

budget package for the coming fiscal year, would make multiple provisions of the records act “optional best practices.” It adds a requirement that local governments who choose not to follow “best practices” publicly announce that they won’t comply with that portion of the act.

Local governments could choose whether to help members of the public craft their records requests to increase the chances they will obtain what they are seeking. The governments could opt to release records on paper rather than electronically.

The measure would eliminate a requirement that governments respond within 10 days with a determination about whether the records are wholly or partially disclosable. It also would eliminate a requirement that governments provide a legal justification for not releasing documents.

The Legislative Analyst’s Office has estimated that removing the mandates would save California tens of millions of dollars.

Terry Francke, general counsel at Californians Aware, said the way the measure is written conceals the effect of the changes.

“(It) allow(s) the governor and the Legislature to say, ‘The CPRA is still there, we didn’t repeal it,’ when the effect is really to gut the act of response to your request,” Francke said.

He said he has concerns about the minority of agencies that are already not fond of releasing information to the public.

“If you tell local agencies that are already rogues under the CPRA that any legal duty they have is no longer present, then it’s going to serve the interest of those who have something to hide most,” Francke said.

Brown’s administration maintains that the backbone of the Public Records Act would remain intact. Department of Finance

spokesman H.D. Palmer said that making those provisions optional would cut the state's costs without infringing on public right to access government records.

"Californians will continue to have a constitutional access to rights of information," Palmer said. "The Legislature only chose to change a few provisions."

Last year's budget deal triggered a suspension of state mandates tied to the Brown Act, which regulates meetings of local agencies that must be open to the public. Palmer said that change was similarly minor and that the administration expects local governments are likely to remain responsive to public records requests.

Jean Hurst, a lobbyist with the California State Association of Counties, predicted that many counties would continue to follow the best-practices provisions in order to avoid backlash.

She said shortages of staff and funding make it unlikely that counties would gamble with the extra expense of a potential lawsuit.

"Why would we waste the time and money on litigation over a records request?" she said.

Hurst also said that responding to requests for records has become routine for most local agencies and that changing their policy would be more of a hassle than complying with the law.

Mike Applegarth, principal analyst in the El Dorado County Administrative Office, agreed with Hurst but noted that records requests can be a burden.

"I think open-government laws like the Brown Act and the Public Records Act are just part of the fabric of local government, and I can't see El Dorado County deviating from that," Applegarth said. "We would definitely have to take it

on a case-by-case basis. We have in the past received very voluminous records requests, and it's very challenging to respond."

Both Placer and Yolo counties also said they would continue to comply with the act. Placer County Supervisor Jennifer Montgomery, who represents District 5, said potential costs would not deter the county from responding to public records requests. "We're going to be sure that we remain committed to being responsive to the public – honest, fair and above board in our dealings," Montgomery said. "If we have to cover those costs, then we will cover those costs."

Several Sacramento area school officials and board members contacted by the *Bee* also said they didn't have much of an appetite for changing the way their districts deal with records requests.

California is not the only state to roll out changes to its open records laws in recent years.

In 2011, Utah legislators passed House Bill 477, which modified the state's Government Records Access and Management Act to prohibit elected officials' text messages, voice mails and communications from being released. The widely unpopular bill also allowed the state to keep more records private and increase fees for viewing public records.

Utah Gov. Gary Herbert eventually asked legislators to repeal the bill, and they complied.

Mark Horvit, executive director of Investigative Reporters and Editors, said both Utah and California represent a nationwide trend toward more stringent records laws.

"In general, the state legislatures have been rolling out these suspensions to public records requests laws," Horvit said. "Now, for some reason, lawmakers are finding a raft of excuses to prohibit the public from finding out what

government is doing.”

Opponents of California’s changes also criticize the bill for being hastily written late in the budget process.

When the Pacific Media Workers Guild sent Brown a letter urging him to veto AB 76, the organization not only objected to the effect the bill would have on journalists making records requests but also to the principle of crafting the “trailer” bill at the last minute.

“Equally egregious is the surreptitious manner in which (the bill) and other trailer bills have been attached to the budget package,” the letter said. “The Guild strongly urges either that you remove the afore-cited sections from (the bill) before signing it into law or that you veto the entire bill.”

Without a full guarantee of legal coverage, open government advocates say citizens would have to take more responsibility for ensuring access to public documents.

Jim Ewert, legal counsel for the California Newspaper Publishers Association, guessed that in cities and counties with active citizens, agencies would feel obligated to continue responding to records requests within 10 days as an act of good faith. The problem, he said, would be in places like the city of Bell, which earlier this year saw the mayor and four City Council members convicted of corruption.

“To the extent that there is a vibrant presence, (the change to the law) may have little impact at all. The expectation won’t change among the constituents,” Ewert said. “In those areas such as the city of Bell where this may not be the case, this has to be very damaging.”

Flynn brothers still searching for their mom

By Stephen Baxter, Santa Cruz Sentinel

SANTA CRUZ — The voice of Deanna Brooks, a 70-year-old Santa Cruz antiques dealer, came to her son in a dream last week.

Brooks has been missing since August 2012, the day she was expected to drive from her home on Berkeley Way in Santa Cruz to her mother's home in San Diego County.

"The dream was a phone call and I was talking to her," said Stirling Flynn, Brooks' oldest son.

"Her voice was so clear. I said 'Do you know you're missing?' And she said, 'I am? I'm at 1230 Benson Avenue in Santa Cruz.'"



Deanna Brooks

Flynn, a 51-year-old who grew up in the Santa Cruz Mountains and now lives in Georgia, hadn't heard of Benson Avenue. After he woke from his dream on June 12, he immediately looked up the address online.

Benson Avenue is near Thurber Lane, but the address does not exist. One of Stirling Flynn's relatives was in Santa Cruz on Saturday and went to the street, but found nothing.

"It made me miss her," Flynn said of the dream.

This week marked nearly nine months since Brooks was last seen. Santa Cruz Deputy Police Chief Steve Clark said there were no new leads.

Brooks was last seen Aug. 24, 2012, the day she planned to drive her gold Chrysler PT Cruiser to Southern California.

The car has not been found, and her bank account has remained idle since her disappearance, police said. Clark said police have monitored her finances since the case began.

"I just can't imagine that she disappeared without a trace," Clark said.

He and other authorities believe Brooks might have driven off a highway as she drove south.

Taylor Flynn, Brooks' 49-year-old son who lives in Lake Tahoe, said he shared that belief. He and other family members searched highways for hundreds of miles in the weeks after Brooks was reported missing.

The brothers talked to pilots of small planes, several law enforcement agencies and ordinary residents as they distributed fliers.

Taylor noted that Brooks' neighbor on Berkeley Way said she talked to Brooks the morning she was supposed to leave. Brooks, a diabetic, said she wasn't feeling well and went inside.

Brooks' PT Cruiser was gone that evening, hours after she originally intended to leave.

Taylor Flynn said he believed Brooks died in a car crash.

"Everyone has their gut feeling," Taylor Flynn said Tuesday. "I think she probably drove off the road somewhere. She left later than anyone thought she would leave. It would have been dark."

Brooks is about 5 feet 3 inches with brown hair and green eyes. She uses a walker.

In part because of the publicity about Brooks' case – and the fact that Taylor wrote about it in his *Tahoe Mountain News* publication – Taylor said people often ask him about his mother's case.

"I have a feeling my mom is in a good place," he said.

Santa Cruz police ask anyone with information to call investigations at (831) 420. 5820 or the anonymous tip line at (831) 420.5995.

Suspect in Robbers Fire rearrested

By Ed Fletcher, Sacramento Bee

The Placer County District Attorney's office announced Tuesday that the man who reportedly started the 2,630-acre Robbers Fire has been rearrested and will stand trial on charges of arson causing great bodily injury and arson of an inhabited dwelling stemming from the July 11, 2012, incident.

Bryon Craig Mason, who admitted to throwing an illegal firework into a remote swimming hole, was released in March after Placer Superior Court Judge Colleen Nichols ruled there was insufficient evidence to hold him to stand trial on the two counts of arson, as well as the enhancements. The judge ordered the defendant released from custody.

The DAs office said Tuesday that it used the grand jury process to secure an indictment last week.

The court allows prosecutors to prove there is enough evidence to warrant a trial through a judge or the grand jury process. Mason is scheduled to be arraigned June 20.

More people = more impacts on environment

By Julie Cart, Los Angeles Times

A federal report looking at trends in population growth, travel patterns and land use and their impact on the environment is predictably sobering.

With the U.S. population expected to grow 42 percent from 2010 to 2050, the report from the federal Environmental Protection Agency offers a glimpse into the crowded world we're in now and how planners of the future might make decisions with less environmental harm.

Among the findings of the current situation: imperiled water supply with at least 850,000 acres of lakes, reservoirs, and ponds and 50,000 miles of rivers and streams soiled by stormwater runoff. Although vehicle emissions standards are more strict, that has been offset by a 250 percent increase in vehicle miles traveled since 1970.

In the same vein, transportation is responsible for 27 percent of domestic greenhouse gas emissions.

The report is an update of the agency's 2001 study and suggests strategies such as clustering development around existing centers and near public transportation, encouraging mixed-use developments and designing streets that welcome

bikers and pedestrians.

China may add life to Calif. dairy industry

By Susanne Rust and Serene Fang, Center for Investigative Reporting

A growing demand for milk and cheese in China has the potential to bring California's beleaguered dairy industry back to life – and with it, renewed concern about its damaging effects on the environment.

As China's middle class grows, so does its appetite for dairy products such as milk, cheese and yogurt. U.S. government data show that Chinese demand for dairy products is growing rapidly. Imports of skim milk powder grew by 49 percent in 2012 over the previous year and are expected to increase an additional 18 percent this year.

California's dairy industry has gone through hard times over the past five years. According to the California Department of Food and Agriculture, more than 300 dairies in the state have gone out of business since 2007.

Feed prices have skyrocketed – the result of competition with the biofuels industry, a severe drought in the Midwest, and increased shipping and transportation costs, according to UC Davis agricultural economist Leslie Butler.

Now the industry sees hope for a potential market in China, said Ross Christieson, a consultant for the California Milk

Advisory Board, a trade group for the state's roughly 1,600 dairy farmers.

"China has been going through a major economic growth boom over the last 20 years, and that has fueled consumption of dairy products," he said. "We know a lot of these markets will grow ten- or twentyfold over the next few decades. By being there now, we can be at the start of the growth."

But this possibility, given the toll California's large dairy farms are having on air and water quality in the Central Valley, is making many environmentalists nervous.

"Definitely, there's a carrying capacity for dairy, and it's air quality," said Brent Newell, legal director for the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, an environmental justice organization that focuses mostly on the San Joaquin Valley. "You can't keep sticking more dairies in the San Joaquin Valley in order to export cheese to China."

California is the nation's largest dairy-producing state. It produced nearly 42 billion pounds of milk in 2011, 21 percent of the nation's total output, according to the Dairy Institute of California.

That success has been attributed largely to the state's model for dairy farming, which maximizes the number of cattle per farm while minimizing the need for on-site food production.

"The traditional dairy-farm model in the rest of the country is one where dairy farmers grow a considerable amount of their own feed," said Bill Schiek, an economist with the Dairy Institute, a dairy processors trade group. In California, he said, dairy operators don't grow grain or hay on site but bring it in. "It's a very specialized operation."

But it's a model that environmental scientists say has wreaked havoc on air and water quality. Critics and scientists point to studies showing that the dairy industry, with roughly 1.8

million head of cattle, is the single largest contributor of smog-forming volatile organic compounds in the San Joaquin Valley.

Government and academic research indicates that gases emitted from fermented feed, cattle and cattle waste combine with other free-floating particles in the air to form smog.

The dairies also have been implicated in the pollution of groundwater. Research has shown that nitrogen produced by cattle waste can seep through soil into groundwater, contaminating water sources and, in some cases, making the water undrinkable.

For instance, dairy manure, which is the largest source of animal waste in California, accounts for more than 200,000 tons of nitrogen every year, much of which ends up in groundwater, according to research by Thomas Harter, a hydrologist at UC Davis.

Nearly 10 percent of public wells in California have more nitrogen than the government deems acceptable, according to the UC Davis study.

Newell of the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment said the poor bear the brunt. "It is fundamentally unfair and unjust to burden low-income communities in the San Joaquin Valley with all of this pollution," he said.

Grego starts El Dorado supervisor campaign

By Kathryn Reed

Gerri Grego has all the paperwork filled out with the state and is ready to start campaigning for a race voters won't go to the polls for until a year from now.

The South Lake Tahoe resident wants to be the next El Dorado County supervisor who represents the basin in Placerville.

"While I enjoy and look for consensus, I don't have to have it. I am pretty independent," Grego told *Lake Tahoe News*. "If it's possible for me to accomplish something, I will go for it. There is more than one way to accomplish things."

The 60-year-old served on the city's Planning Commission from March 2007 to February 2011. During that time the commission tackled the city's General Plan and medical marijuana ordinance before the City Council took up those issues.



Gerri Grego is vying to be an El Dorado County supervisor. Photo/Provided

Grego worked on the General Plan before being appointed to the commission. It was her work on the 56-acre project – which in part is now Lakeview Commons – that launched her civic involvement.

"I am one of those trouble-shooting people," she said. "I will come up with things that need to be accomplished and come up with different ways to accomplish that goal and work until I get it done."

Being an analytical thinker is one of the strong traits she would bring to the full-time job, Grego said. "I have the ability to cut through the junk."

Supervisor Norma Santiago is being termed out after eight years. The election will be in June 2014, with a run-off between the top two vote getters that November if no one receives more than 50 percent of the vote. Sue Novasel is the other declared candidate.

Grego is also part of the Lake Tahoe Sustainability Collaborative that was formed by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

"I certainly see the advantage to a sustainable community. It is where the economy, environment and people work in harmony to the benefit of all," Grego said, adding that she would like to bring that philosophy to the county level.

She is the city's appointee to the El Dorado County Commission on Aging.

The senior center is an area she wants to keep working on. Grego was instrumental in getting the commission to write a letter to the county saying it's time for mental health to find a place other than at the senior center to call home.

"I would like to explore the idea of the seniors being given the deed of the property or the city. That would certainly show support for seniors and the program," she said.

Grego, who is married to former Councilman Bruce Grego, has been the resort manager of the Beachcomber Inn for the last 15 years. Her boss knows if she is elected, a new manager will need to be found.