

Tech industry zeroing in on gambling

By David Streitfeld, New York Times

SAN FRANCISCO – Look out Las Vegas, here comes FarmVille.

Silicon Valley is betting that online gambling is its next billion-dollar business, with developers across the industry turning casual games into occasions for adults to wager.

At the moment these games are aimed overseas, where attitudes toward gambling are more relaxed and online betting is generally legal, and extremely lucrative. But game companies, from small teams to Facebook and Zynga, have their eye on the ultimate prize: the rich American market, where most types of real-money online wagers have been cleared by the Justice Department.



Two states, Nevada and Delaware, are already laying the groundwork for virtual gambling. Within months they will most likely be joined by New Jersey.

Bills have also been introduced in Mississippi, Iowa, California and other states, driven by the realization that online gambling could bring in streams of tax revenue. In Iowa alone, online gambling proponents estimated that 150,000 residents were playing poker illegally.

Legislative progress, though, is slow. Opponents include an influential casino industry wary of competition and the traditional antigambling factions, who oppose it on moral grounds.

Silicon Valley is hardly discouraged. Companies here believe that online gambling will soon become as simple as buying an e-book or streaming a movie, and that the convenience of being able to bet from your couch, surrounded by virtual friends, will offset the lack of glittering ambience found in a real-world casino. Think you can get a field of corn in FarmVille, the popular Facebook game, to grow faster than your brother-in-law's? Five bucks says you cannot.

"Gambling in the U.S. is controlled by a few land-based casinos and some powerful Indian casinos," said Chris Griffin, chief executive of Betable, a London gambling start-up that handles the gaming licenses and betting mechanics of the business for developers. "What potentially becomes an interesting counterweight is all of a sudden thousands of developers in Silicon Valley making money overseas and wanting to turn their efforts inward and make money in the U.S."

Betable has set up shop in San Francisco, where 15 studios are now using its back-end platform. "This is the next evolution in games, and kind of ground zero for the developer community," Griffin said.

Overseas, online betting is generating an estimated \$32 billion in annual revenue – nearly the size of the United States casino market. Juniper Research estimates that betting on mobile devices alone will be a \$100 billion worldwide industry by 2017.

"Everyone is really anticipating this becoming a huge business," said Chris DeWolfe, a co-founder of the pioneering social site Myspace, who is throwing his energies into a gaming studio with a gambling component backed by, among others, the personal investment funds of Jeff Bezos, Amazon's founder, and Eric E. Schmidt, Google's executive chairman.

As companies eagerly wait for the American market to open up, they are introducing betting games in Britain, where Apple has

tweaked the iPhone software to accommodate them. Facebook began allowing online gambling for British users last summer with Jackpotjoy, a bingo site; deals with other developers followed in December and this month.

Zynga, the company that developed FarmVille, Mafia Wars, Words With Friends and many other popular casual games, is advertising the imminent release of its first betting games in Britain. "All your favorite Zynga game characters will be there, except this time they'll have real money prizes to offer you," an ad says. "Play online casino games for pennies and live the dream!"

DeWolfe's studio, SGN, is also on the verge of starting its first real-money games in Britain. "Those companies that have a critical mass of users that are interested in playing real-money games are going to be incredibly valuable," he said.

Mark Pincus, the chief executive of Zynga, said the company was just following the market. "There is no question there is great interest from all kinds of people in games of chance, whether it is for real money or virtual rewards," he said. Zynga, which has missed revenue expectations in the last year, is making gambling a centerpiece of its new strategy. It has just applied to Nevada for a gambling license.

Casual gaming first blossomed on Facebook's Web site, where players could readily corral friends into their games. It is now being rethought for mobile devices, so people can play in brief snippets as they wait for a bus or a sandwich.

Some games mimic the slots and poker found in casinos; others emphasize considerably more creativity. The vast majority of casual game players play at no charge. A small number buy virtual objects in the game to speed their play or increase their status.

Tech executives expect an equally small number to play for real money but believe they will bet heavily, making them much

more valuable to the gaming companies. By Betable's estimate, the lifetime value of a casual player is \$2 versus \$1,800 for a real-money player.

Big Fish Studios, a Seattle developer, introduced Big Fish Casino, an iPhone app, in Britain last fall. "We started with a one-pence slot machine," little more than a penny, said Paul Thelen, Big Fish's founder and chief executive. "Now it is up to a maximum of about \$50 a bet." Average revenue per player is exceeding \$20 a day, whereas in virtual currency it was 30 or 40 cents.

"Like in Vegas, some people get lucky and some don't," he added.

The powerful Las Vegas and Indian casinos have mixed attitudes toward online gambling. Caesars Entertainment in 2011 acquired the Israeli start-up Playtika, developer of the popular Facebook game Slotomania, for about \$180 million, offering it a springboard into the digital world. But Sheldon Adelson, the Las Vegas magnate and major Republican Party donor, is opposed to online betting because he thinks children will end up gambling.

In New Jersey, Gov. Chris Christie has had different qualms. He has vetoed two online gambling bills, the second earlier this month. One concern: the state's take, a proposed 10 percent tax, was not large enough.

The measure, which is likely to be refined and successfully resubmitted in the next few months, followed the state Constitution, which mandates that Atlantic City is the only spot in the state where gambling can take place. And so only the casinos were allowed to offer online games, although they could partner with tech companies; the actual computers allowing the gambling would have to be housed in the casinos. And of course players had to be over 21 and physically located in New Jersey.

Meeting those last two requirements seems a tall order to Doug Creutz, an analyst at Cowen & Company who follows online gambling closely. "The Internet isn't bound geographically," he said. "There are other problems too, like preventing money laundering. Online gambling is going to be a complex issue that will take a while to sort out."

In the meantime, though, he notes that games themselves are sometimes changing to incorporate elements akin to gambling. Diablo III, the latest version of the popular role-playing series from Blizzard, was released last year with an in-game auction house where players could buy and sell loot that they had found. If they chose, they could literally take the profits out of the game.

Since the loot was randomly generated, like the numbers on a slot machine, Blizzard had to remove the auction house game from the South Korean version of the game to satisfy the country's strict antigambling provisions.

Cesar and Edgar Miranda are two young developers who have won hackathons, where the goal is to build a game in a weekend. The brothers, who rent rooms from their parents in San Jose, have spent the last few weeks refining their game, Claw Crane.

It is a simple variation of the grabbing game found in amusement arcades for decades: successfully secure a toy from a pile and you win. If Apple approves, the game, offering cash prizes, will be available in Britain later this month. A virtual money version will be available in the United States.

"We saw the opportunity here," said Cesar Miranda, 24. "Anyone can jump in and try and grab a piece of this market while it is still fresh. There's a low entry to failure."

Neither he nor his brother, born in Mexico and raised in California, have even been near Britain. "I think the closest I've gotten is Las Vegas," Cesar Miranda said.

Rate increase creates more profit for NV Energy

By Eli Segall, Las Vegas Sun

Helped by a rate increase and lower expenses, NV Energy had a jump in fourth-quarter earnings and nearly doubled its profit in 2012.

The power company, which serves about 90 percent of Nevada's population, said Friday it earned \$17.2 million of net income, or a gain of 7 cents per share, in the three months ending Dec. 31.



That compares to a loss of \$25.2 million, or a loss of 11 cents per share, in the same period a year earlier.

The Las Vegas-based utility also reported earning \$322 million in profit in 2012, up from \$163.4 million in profit in 2011.

Company executives attributed the fourth-quarter earnings jump in part to a rate increase that took effect Jan. 1, 2012. As part of the hike, single-family homes in Southern Nevada were expected to face a 3.5 percent bump in their power bills.

NV Energy had \$2.98 billion in operating revenue last year and \$2.19 billion in operating expenses. In 2011, it had \$2.94 billion in such revenue and \$2.33 billion in expenses.

Median home price in Tahoe going up

By Dan Spano

We have had a strong start to 2013 in Lake Tahoe real estate. Homes continue to sell at a strong pace and now the median price is starting to rise.

Even with the reducing inventory of homes on the market and the interest rates still at an all-time low, I believe we'll continue to see strong sales. As of Feb. 20, on the Nevada side of the South Shore, there was just one foreclosure and one short sale on the market. The rest of Nevada is still seeing enough foreclosures to keep them as the No. 2 state in the U.S. in the number of foreclosed homes, but that isn't the case in Lake Tahoe. The California side has seven foreclosures and four short sale homes for sale, a large drop from the last two years.



People want a piece of Tahoe real estate.

There has been more activity on the higher-end market of homes for sale. One home just sold in Cave Rock for almost \$25

million and another in Skyland for \$12 million. There is much more trust in the economy and it shows in these large purchases. Buyers are willing to pay for the kind of home they desire.

South Shore, Nevada market summary

On the Nevada side of South Lake Tahoe there were nine closed sales in January, and very interestingly, the exact same number as January 2012. With 30 homes currently in escrow, I expect to see a larger number when February's figures are in. There were 167 homes sold on the Nevada side in the last 12 months, from Feb. 1, 2012, to Jan. 31, 2013. During the previous 12-month period there were 127 homes sold. There are currently 68 condos and 84 houses on the market, with almost 40 percent (60 properties) priced above \$1 million.

Low inventory of homes for sale

The No. 1 conversation among Realtors nationwide is the low inventory of homes for sale, and it is no exception in Lake Tahoe. Larry Sabo, of Paradise Real Estate, says, "In the last six months, the median price of homes for sale in South Lake Tahoe has shown improvement every month, closed sales have been increasing since early in 2009 with a fast increase recently, and the time it takes to sell a home is at its lowest since March of 2007, long before the recession started. We are also seeing the percent of list price received has gone above a six-year high. The month's supply of homes for sale, otherwise known as the inventory, is at a level lower than it's been in more than six years. The number of homes for sale is also at a six-year low, with buyers out there frantically looking because they just can't find the home they're looking for. "

With very low inventory left we really don't know how sales figures will look in the next 12 months in Lake Tahoe.

I had been expecting a slow growth of recovery in Lake Tahoe

but we've taken an accelerated pace, faster than ever expected. I'll be keeping an eye on the situation and keep my readers updated.

Dan Spano is with Paradise Real Estate.

Forest Service: Pyroterrorism a threat in the U.S.

By Ed Ballam, Firehouse

Fire has long been used as a weapon through history and continues to be an effective means of terrorism to this day.

In his keynote address at the Firehouse World conference in San Diego, Robert Baird, deputy national fire director of Fire and Aviation Management for the U.S. Forest Service, said pyroterrorism is something all responders need to be prepared to combat.

"Arson in the [wildland urban interface] is a real threat," said Baird in his keynote comments. "Anything we can do to reduce it is a real accomplishment."



The Lake Tahoe Angora Fire of 2007 was the result of a campfire gone bad.
Photo/LVFPD

Baird gave a quick review of the use of arson and pyroterrorism throughout modern history, starting with the fire balloon bombs Japan launched on the mainland United States during World War II. Of the 9,000 launched, 300 hit the mainland.

It was also identified as a military weapon during the Vietnam War. The attacks on the World Trade Center were also a case of pyroterrorism in his mind, Baird said, noting that Osama Bin Laden was a civil engineer and knew the effect the fuel on the planes would have.

In 2002, federal authorities arrested José Padilla, an New York City native and declared enemy combatant, on suspicion that he was plotting with terrorist Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the architect of the 911 attacks on the United States, to detonate a dirty bomb in Chicago.

During the investigation, Baird said authorities learned that Khalid figured out it would be too difficult to get a dirty bomb into the country and detonate it. So a plan was hatched to solicit volunteers to burn 20 apartment buildings in New York City simultaneously using gasoline.

In 2004, the FBI came upon intelligence and issued an alert to

the National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) suggesting that Al Queda had plans to start wildland fires in Montana, Wyoming, Utah and Colorado, Baird said, noting that all the material he was presenting was unclassified information and his interpretations and analysis were his own.

"I am not going to be some suit out of Washington, D.C., coming out here and telling you how to fight wildland fires," said Baird, who added that his family in California was evacuated during the Camp Pendleton Fire.

And as recently as this past winter, a readily available Al Queda magazine called *Inspire* published an article and photos declaring people have the freedom to light fire bombs against the American enemies, Baird said.

"Terrorists have assessed us and they look for our weaknesses," Baird said.

The threat, however, is not just from outside of the United States borders, Baird said, noting there are plenty of domestic groups who might use pyroterrorism as a method to advance their goals.

Baird pointed to the bombings of domestic terrorist Daniel Andreas San Diego, targeting firefighters and responders in 2003, as evidence of domestic pyroterrorism.

Raymond Lee Oyler, the man charged and convicted for setting the deadly Esperanza Fire in 2006 that claimed the lives of five firefighters, is yet another example of arson as a form of terrorism. Oyler was also suspected of starting as many as 25 other fires.

Even the recent fatal shooting of firefighters in Webster, N.Y., on Christmas Eve, is an example of someone using fire to create terror and kill firefighters, and a stark example of pyroterrorism, Baird said.

The best way to combat pyroterrorism, according to Baird, is to have a “cohesive wildland fire strategy” and to develop partnerships across all agencies to develop good tactical information.

While there may be many challenges to curbing pyroterrorism, Baird said developing “robust intelligence” on suspects and plots will go a long way toward achieving the goal.

It also helps to prevent fuel build-up that can contribute to the severity of wildland fires, Baird said, noting that fire officials need to know when to extinguish fires and when to let them burn to mitigate that potentially threatening fuel build-up.

Ultimately, the goal is to protect the public and responders from any harm pyroterrorists may be trying to inflict, Baird said, adding that watching out for each

other will help.

“When you roll into a fire, make sure everyone is protected and there are no easy targets,” Baird said. “Protect each other and bring everyone home.”

S. Tahoe man arrested after allegedly crashing into parked cars

A South Lake Tahoe man was arrested Thursday night after the vehicle he was driving plowed into two parked cars.



Christopher Catterson, 27, told officers he was not the driver of the vehicle that hit two cars parked in a driveway at 2592 Fountain Drive.

Witnesses told officers Catterson was in the driver's seat of the Volvo on Feb. 22 after the 8:20pm accident. Catterson, whose driver's license was suspended for a prior DUI conviction, was arrested on charges of driving under the influence, and hit and run.

Officers said it appeared from Catterson's cell phone that he was in the process of sending a text message at the time of the crash.

Catterson received minor injuries.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

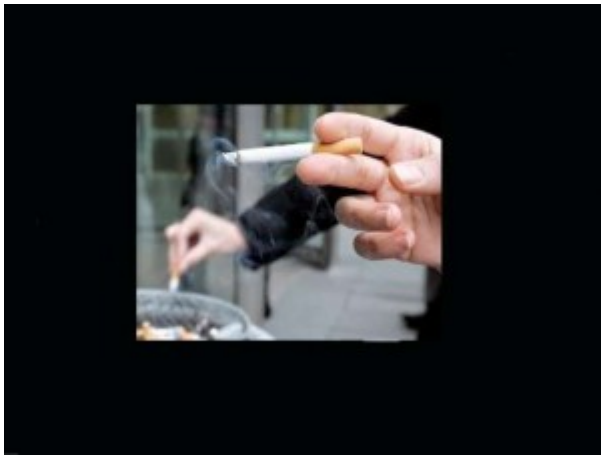
Nevada law would allow smokers to be discriminated against

By Andrew Doughman, Las Vegas Sun

CARSON CITY – A smoking habit could cost you a job opportunity at a hospital or other medical facility under legislation proposed by state Sen. Joe Hardy, R-Boulder City.

It's currently illegal for an employer to discriminate against employees who use a product – such as tobacco – outside of

work that does not affect job performance or the safety of other employees. Hardy's measure, Senate Bill 87, would repeal that law.



"It would appear that this would allow an employer to not hire an employee who smokes or drinks," the Nevada Taxpayer's Association said in a recent newsletter.

At a legislative hearing Wednesday, Hardy introduced an amendment that would allow hospitals, nursing homes, hospice, home health and other medical facilities to specifically factor someone's smoking habit into hiring decisions made after June 30.

Under the amendment, other employers would remain prohibited from basing decisions on an employee's smoking habit.

"The theory is that when you're in the hospital, you don't want someone next to you who is smoking while you're sick," said Hardy, who is one of two physicians in the Legislature. (The other is Assemblyman Andy Eisen.) "Patients who smell smoke many times have problems with the reaction to it."

Renown Health, a Nevada-based health care company, is working with Hardy on the bill. The company wants to factor smoking into its future hiring decisions but does not want any current employee to be fired for smoking, said Fred Hillerby, lobbyist for Renown.

"We just want to be able, if we choose, to not hire smokers," he said. "We think it's better for the health of our employees and our patients."

Smoking cigarettes at home or outside during a break may be the personal choice of an employee, but being exposed to the lingering odor of cigarette smoke clinging to a medical employee's clothing is not a choice for the sick and injured.

"It is their personal decision," Hardy said. "It's also a personal decision to quit smoking or risk some adverse employment activity."

The comfort of the patient may be a noble idea, but it's also now tied to payments hospitals receive from the federal government.

Under the Affordable Care Act, how patients score a hospital on such measurements as communication with nurses and doctors, cleanliness and quietness of the hospital environment factor into federal reimbursements paid to hospitals.

Hillerby, however, said "that was not the reason we started down this path."

Comped meals pits casinos against Nevada

By David McGrath Schwartz, Las Vegas Sun

CARSON CITY – For decades, Nevada casinos paid a tax on the meals they "comped" patrons and employees – the iconic Las Vegas tradition of pit bosses doling out steak dinners to blackjack players, or more recently, slot jockeys cashing in their reward points.

But gaming, Nevada's largest and most influential industry, is pushing for an agreement with Gov. Brian Sandoval and lawmakers to exempt complimentary casino meals from taxes in future years, according to gaming lobbyists, state officials and lawmakers.



The stakes of the negotiations are big, representing a potential budget-busting hole of as much as \$350 million in the state's spending plan.

A lawsuit on the matter, Boyd Gaming Corp. v. the State of Nevada, is pending before the Nevada Supreme Court. If the court rules for casinos, the state could be forced to pay back to casinos an estimated \$230 million to \$350 million for taxes it collected on the meals in the 2000s.

To settle that lawsuit before the court issues an opinion, the industry is offering to forgive the potential \$350 million rebate in back taxes in exchange for the state agreeing not to tax future meals. Not taxing future meals would mean forgoing millions of dollars that otherwise could go to education, public safety and social services.

Agreeing to the settlement is a huge gamble for the state. If the court decides against the state, Nevada would be out the \$350 million as well as any future revenue. If the court decides against the casinos, Nevada would be off the hook for the rebate and could continue collecting tax revenue.

So far, though, Sandoval and his administration have remained firm that the meals are subject to taxes.

Sources said there was a tense meeting at the governor's

office last summer in an effort to settle the issue.

“Both sides think they have strong legal cases,” said one source with knowledge of the case, not authorized to speak on the record because it’s part of ongoing litigation. “It comes down to whether the state and industry want to do a \$350 million coin flip.”

Currently, no casino is paying the tax on comped meals, a state tax official said this month in a legislative committee meeting. The casinos point to a 2008 Nevada Supreme Court ruling that the state owed a rebate to the Sparks Nugget, which spurred the rest of the state’s casinos, big and small, to seek tax rebates.

The gaming industry wants the situation to be resolved soon.

“We’re hopeful we can find a solution that is amenable to both the state and the industry,” said Pete Ernaut, president of R&R Partners, whose clients include the Nevada Resort Association.

One lobbyist for gaming, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said there is likely to be a bill before the 2013 Legislature.

Meanwhile, the Sandoval administration is pressing forward on rules that would allow the state to once again collect the tax.

Sandoval’s chief of staff, Gerald Gardner, declined to comment for this story, citing ongoing litigation. So did Christopher Nielsen, director of the state Department of Taxation.

Advocates for education and state services say Nevada can’t afford to exempt those meals from taxation.

“That would dig a deeper hole,” said Lynn Warne, president of the Nevada State Education Association. “It leaves Nevada that much further behind being able to support kids and schools.”

The dispute and potential hole have been hanging over the state since 2008.

That's when the Nevada Supreme Court first ruled in the industry's favor, saying the "use tax" the state had been charging casinos since at least the 1960s for comped meals didn't apply. Although the case dealt only with the relatively small Sparks Nugget, it set off a feeding frenzy of claims for tax rebates.

But the Supreme Court decision, in a footnote, said the state could argue that it could impose the alternative "sales tax" on comped meals when it could prove "consideration" was given for the meals. Consideration means the state could prove casinos received something of value in return for the meals.

The sales tax would be higher because it would be calculated on the retail price of the meal instead of on the cost of ingredients to prepare the food, as it had been calculated previously.

Clarifying what that footnote meant is at the heart of the pending Nevada Supreme Court case.

Representatives for the Nevada Resort Association first approached former Gov. Jim Gibbons, Sandoval's predecessor, to reach a settlement, according to former administration officials and lawmakers. But his administration, which had an often frosty relationship with the political establishment, resisted overtures from the industry.

In a 2008 special session, soon after the Nevada Supreme Court decision in favor of the casinos, Gibbons tried to clarify the law in the state's favor.

The Assembly passed the bill unanimously, but lobbyists with the Nevada Resort Association helped to quietly kill it in the Senate, where it never received a vote.

Since Sandoval came into office in 2011, industry lobbyists, some with longtime relationships with the former federal judge, have tried again to reach a settlement.

And that's where the tax debate gets political.

Gaming companies are the most influential industry in Nevada.

Gambling and casinos in 2012 gave twice as much in political contributions to Nevada state candidates as the next highest group, lawyers and lobbyists, according to the National Institute on Money in State Politics, a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization that tracks state spending.

Gaming companies and executives donated \$410,000 to Sandoval's political action committee last year, about half of the total he raised, largely to help Senate Republican candidates last year.

But gaming companies also gave prodigiously to Democratic candidates and organizations. MGM Resorts International, Boyd, Station Casinos and Caesars Entertainment all gave tens of thousands of dollars to the Nevada Democratic Party in 2012, according to campaign finance records.

On top of that, gaming companies have their left flank covered by the Culinary Union, a key constituency for Democratic lawmakers.

In the case pending before the Nevada Supreme Court, in which Boyd is suing the state for its rebate, the Culinary Union filed an amicus brief in support of Boyd. When gaming companies and the Culinary Union are together, they present a mighty political front.

Any settlement on comped meals with the governor would also require legislation, gaming lobbyists said.

Sen. Tick Segerblom, D-Las Vegas and chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, said the Legislature should have a say

before any agreement is reached.

The gaming industry “is very powerful – and rightly so,” he said, pointing to its tax contributions to the state and the fact that it’s the state’s biggest employer. “We should look upon them favorably. But we can’t give them a free ride.”

Assembly Speaker Marilyn Kirkpatrick, D-North Las Vegas, said that typically, the state has declined to weigh in on matters pending before the courts. But she added that lawmakers are aware it is a potential liability for the state’s budget.

Conservancy spending millions to improve Lake Tahoe Basin

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Even with millions of dollars being spent in the Lake Tahoe Basin each year, it’s not always easy to identify a California Tahoe Conservancy backed project.

This state agency based in South Lake Tahoe is the major force behind Lakeview Commons, a major contributor to Explore Tahoe, and a constant funder of bike trails on the North and West shores.



Ray Lacey talks Feb. 20 about the California Tahoe Conservancy. Photos/LTN

But it also contributed nearly \$20 million to the Heavenly Village project that went to environmental improvements.

It is a regular contributor to erosion control projects that reduce the sediment reaching Lake Tahoe.

Brokerage of coverage rights is another component of the agency.

In the nearly 30 years since the Conservancy was established, it has acquired almost 5,000 parcels in the basin. Many are sensitive lands that will never be developed. Some are in neighborhoods. If they could ever be sold depends on the money used to buy them. Ones bought with state bond dollars are forever the state's property.

Ray Lacey, deputy director of the CTC, enlightened Soroptimist International South Lake Tahoe on Wednesday at Harrah's Lake Tahoe about what his agency has been up to.

He was an integral player in making Lakeview Commons become a reality. It was \$6 million from the Conservancy that paid for the overhaul of El Dorado Beach.

Now he wants to turn the attention to the other side of Highway 50 so the full 56-acre project is completed.

There is also phase 2 of the Lakeview Commons project to be done, too. That includes revamping the area to the Alta Mira Building. CTC has secured an option to buy that building.

The biggest project in the near future is the Upper Truckee Marsh. This swath of 600 acres in the middle of South Lake Tahoe crosses both sides of the Upper Truckee River at its mouth and then extends to Highway 50. It's bordered by the Tahoe Keys and Al Tahoe neighborhoods.



The long-talked-about South Tahoe Greenway Bike Trail is still on the books. This is the 9.2 miles of former Caltrans right-of-way that one day will become a multi-use path from Meyers to Stateline.

Connectivity is still the goal with bike trails. The North Shore has a better developed system in large part because Placer County has a dedicated allotment of hotel tax dollars going to projects like bike trails.

These days it's more attractive to help fund a project than be the sole financial provider.

"Their bike trail usage is up 15 percent every year," Lacey said, adding that the number of tourists is staying steady and full-time residents is on the decline.

The 60-day comment period for the Upper Truckee Marsh project is open. The draft environmental documents are on the CTC's website. People have until April 8 to comment. There will be two workshops on Feb. 27 – 1:30pm and 6pm – at Inn by the Lake in South Lake Tahoe, along with another March 28 at 6pm in the Aspen Room at Lake Tahoe Community College. The Advisory Planning Commission of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency is scheduled to

He said feedback from riders is that they are discussing the riding bikes for errands that otherwise would project on have required a car. It's not all about leisure March 13, with and recreation, but in part for transit reasons the Governing Board taking it up March people are pedaling.

Today, funding is the major obstacle, Lacey 27. said, for why projects are not going forward. What is in the Conservancy's bank account only covers a fraction of the projects on the table.

In the heyday, the CTC may have acquired 200 properties in a month. Now acquisitions are down to a handful a year.

Safeway testing combined loyalty-debit card

By Mark Calvey, San Francisco Business Journal

Safeway introduced a combined debit card and store loyalty card so that it can pull money directly out of a customer's checking account without paying the hefty fees it incurs when customers pay with a bank's debit card.

Those signing up for the program get a new Safeway Club Card that includes the Fast Forward debit feature.



Customers choosing not to carry their Club Card can still pay with Fast Forward debit by using the phone number linked to their loyalty card account and a PIN.

“This is a unique program. It benefits our customers by offering a secure, convenient way to shop and allow them one card for payment, Club Card discounts and ‘Just for U’ discounts,” said Safeway spokeswoman Teena Massingill. “All personal information is kept completely confidential.”

Fast Forward is a separate program from Safeway’s SmartCheck debit program, which doesn’t have the option of punching in the phone number and PIN to pay for groceries.

Safeway’s Fast Forward debit card is only available in Sacramento so far. The program’s debut was recently covered by my colleague Kelly Johnson at the Sacramento Business Journal. Safeway also offers an extensive FAQ on the program at its website.

Safeway isn’t discussing when the program might expand to the Bay Area and other markets.

From the customer’s perspective, the money is simply deducted from their checking account. But the Pleasanton grocer can send it through as an electronic funds transfer, saving substantially on the fees incurred with a bank debit card.

Like a bank debit card, Safeway’s program also has purchase limits.

Those using Fast Forward debit to pay for purchases get two points in the grocer’s Gas Rewards program for every dollar

spent instead of of just one point.

Safeway, led by Chairman and CEO Steve Burd, is not the only retailer creating programs to avoid hefty fees on transactions using bank debit cards. Customers loading cash onto their Starbucks' gold loyalty card get a free drink or food after 12 purchases.

Warden kills aggressive mountain lion in Placer County

By Ed Fletcher, Sacramento Bee

A popular Placer County hiking trail has reopened after authorities say a state Fish and Wildlife warden was forced to shoot and kill a mountain lion Sunday.

Authorities were first alerted to an aggressive mountain lion early Saturday evening, when a hiker on the Stevens Trail near Colfax, fearing for his safety, called 911.



"He noticed he was being followed by a mountain lion," said Mark Michilizzi, a spokesman for the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. "The behavior was consistent with a mountain lion that is stalking prey."

Fish and Wildlife wardens, Placer County sheriff's deputies and a California Highway Patrol helicopter responded to the call and apparently scared off the mountain lion, Michilizzi said.

Sunday morning, a warden returned to the area to post signs and warn hikers of the threat of an aggressive mountain lion when he noticed a mountain lion, apparently the same one, preparing to pounce on him, Michilizzi said.

While it is illegal to hunt mountain lions in California, at this point the animal wasn't just a risk to public safety – it was a risk to the warden, who shot and killed the cat.

"The officer acted appropriately," Michilizzi said. "The mountain lion wasn't cornered. The mountain lion was actively approaching him."

Michilizzi said a necropsy will be performed to help officials learn more about the health of the animal and what might have triggered the behavior.

"Deer are the primary prey for mountain lion," Michilizzi. "When they start looking to humans, we want to know why."

He said hikers should not call 911 upon spotting of a mountain lion, but this instance was different.

"Mountain lion attacks are rare. This type of behavior is rare," Michilizzi said.

He advised anyone who spots a mountain lion not to run. He said to turn and face the lion while making oneself as big as possible and to throw rocks, stick or leaves.