Lawmakers want Nevada to be sovereign state

By Matt Woolbright, AP

CARSON CITY – Two state senators and a dozen other Nevadans urged a Senate committee Tuesday to tell the federal government that "enough is enough" and declare Nevada a sovereign state, recognizing federal jurisdiction only in areas specified in the U.S. Constitution.

Sen. James Settelmeyer, R-Minden, presented the resolution to claim sovereignty under the Tenth Amendment, which says powers in the Constitution that are not specifically reserved for the federal government are reserved for the states.

"This resolution seeks to protect the citizens of the Silver State from an overreaching federal government," Settelmeyer told members of the Senate Committee on Legislative Operations and Elections.

Nevada state Sen. James Settelmeyer

Senate Joint Resolution 3 proposes Nevada claim sovereignty as a state and order a cease-and-desist for all federal mandates deemed beyond those enumerated in the Constitution.

Settelmeyer provided examples of the federal government deeming 2,500 acres in Douglas County a flood plain, even though there is no record of flooding in the area, and changing arsenic regulations for water. Those changes put an economic strain on the affected locals, Settelmeyer said.

“I feel our federal government has overstepped and is trampling over our state rights – ours and every other state’s,” said Carol Howell of the Carson City Republican Central Committee.

Any future attempts by the federal government that are outside its enumerated powers would be prohibited, as would threatening civil or criminal action for failing to enact one of the non-enumerated mandates. It’s a practice that one Nevadan said has become too common.

“We need to tell the federal government we’re not accepting blackmail,” Richard Brengman said at the meeting. “Nevada needs to be represented by Nevadans, not the federal government.”

Sen. Mark Manendo, D-Las Vegas, told the Associated Press later in the day that there is an argument that states should be independent from the federal government. But he quickly added some forget the good parts of an involved federal government.

“States do receive a lot of assistance from the federal government,” Manendo said. “Whether you agree or disagree, we do get highway money, we do get federal money for different things.”

He added he is undecided on the resolution, but said it does have merit.

“There are pros and cons to it because states do have some benefit from the federal government,” Manendo said. “I certainly wish Nevada owned more of its own territory here.”

Others sought to ensure that the resolution also rejects the United Nations' Agenda 21, a 300-page proposal suggesting a roadmap for the world in the 21st Century. Opponents fear, if implemented, Agenda 21 will remove individual freedoms and usher in a one-world government.

Jim Sallee urged the committee to serve as a line of defense against any sort of encroachment on personal freedoms by the federal government.

"We are looking for you to stand between them and us, and defend the Constitution of the United States," Sallee told committee members via a video feed from Las Vegas.

If passed, the resolution would be sent to the president, vice president, leaders of both houses of Congress and members of the Nevada delegation to be entered into Congressional Record.

"I think we need to remind them," Settelmeyer said of the federal government and states' rights. "I feel they've forgotten the meaning of the Tenth Amendment."

Drugs, mental health, no access to care = South Lake Tahoe's key medical problems

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe has more people per capita dying from

Alzheimer's compared to the nation. South Lake Tahoe's suicide rate is higher than California and the country's. More people smoke in South Lake Tahoe compared to the state.

Those were some of the stats dispersed to the South Lake Tahoe City Council on Feb. 19 by Barton Health officials.

In 2012, the South Lake Tahoe health organization completed a community health needs assessment. All nonprofit hospitals will be required to do these studies every three years as part of the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in the health care reform passed by Congress.

Nine main issues came up in the local study:

• Access to healthcare services

• Cancer

• Dementias, including Alzheimer's disease

• Housing

• Immunization and infectious diseases

• Injury and violence prevention

• Mental health and mental disorder

• Substance abuse

• Tobacco use.

While Barton will address all of them, the three that will be the main focus are substance abuse, access to care and mental health.

Drug use in South Tahoe on a per capita basis is about four times what it is nationally.

“The study reaffirms what we are seeing in the emergency room,” Cline Purvance, Barton’s chief medical officer, told the council. “This started in the late 1990s when pain became the fifth vital sign. Assessing and treating pain became a big priority. We have swung too far.”

He said it’s time health care providers look at what they are doing. With online medical records becoming a reality, medical personnel will better be able to know who has prescribed what for each patient.

In addition to prescription drugs being a problem, marijuana, heroin, opiates, synthetic drugs and alcohol are all local issues.

The report shows a steady trend of local drug-induced deaths since 1999.

There is also a high rate of suicides in this area.

Health officials recognize drugs-mental illness-lack of health care can be tied together.

A psychiatrist was added to the payroll last year. And when the community clinic’s expansion is done this summer a psychologist will be hired.

Police Chief Brian Uhler said his officers see the drug and mental health issues every day. He pointed out how the area does not have a long-term care facility for those with mental issues.

More information about the report may be found online.

S. Tahoe policymakers stall on Lakeview Commons rules

By Kathryn Reed

Lakeview Commons is described as a success beyond anyone's imagination. But it's not a moneymaker. Not yet, any way.

Most events take a few years before they operate in the black. But the city of South Lake Tahoe can't be in the business of subsidizing businesses. That would be called a gift of public funds.

Last year the music and standup paddleboard vendors were able to operate at Lakeview Commons for free. No other city owned venue allows private businesses to operate without paying a rental fee.

Thursday night Live at Lakeview concerts brought out hundreds of people each week. Photo/LTN file

While the events brought locals and tourists to the waterfront location, the city lost money by having to provide personnel for upkeep to the area. That was unbudgeted money.

On Tuesday, the council had before it an item that would have set guidelines for renting Lakeview Commons. Instead of acting as the policymakers they were elected to be, they put off making a decision until the March 19 meeting.

“We received a lot of input. We cannot write a policy that favors one business or person over another,” City Manager Nancy Kerry said at the Feb. 19 meeting. “My job is to protect the city.”

Rob Giustina, who owns On Course Events and put on the free Thursday night Live at Lakeview concerts, said he lost $30,000 in 2012. Chris Brackett with South Tahoe Standup Paddle, said he operated the Wednesday night races in the red – $18,700.

Both men agreed a fee is reasonable. What they take issue with is the proposed amount – $500 to $1,000 each day/night. The range depends on the day of the week and the number of people expected. It’s estimated these events might just need to pay the half-day rental price of $325. However, Giustina mentioned how he needs time for set up and clean up, so he could be tying up the site the better part of the day. How this would affect an event going on at the site earlier in day was not discussed.

The staff report says, “Fees are calculated based on cost of maintaining the facility as a result of events during the inaugural season 2012. Rates are reduced by 35 percent of midweek rental. Private parties or weddings will be charged hourly per approved master fee schedule.”

One of Giustina’s biggest issues was the proposal to not close Lakeview Avenue to vehicle traffic. He said his insurance rates would skyrocket without that provision.

Brackett said his projection for this summer is that the standup paddle races will again be a money-losing event.

“In the future we see it as being sustainable,” he told the council.

What he said the city is not taking into consideration is how the races bring in money to the whole town because it’s not just locals participating. Plus the Race the Lake of the Sky event in June has attracted international attention for South Lake Tahoe. Brackett said his events brought in $26,000 in hotel taxes for the city last year.

Also at the March 19 meeting the council is expected to award the concessionaire contract for Lakeview Commons as well as Regan Beach and Bijou Community Park. Those entities operate seasonally and pay the city a percentage of gross revenue.

This differs from the standup paddle and concerts that at least in 2012 didn’t directly pay the city a dime, but had free access to put on events at a $6 million taxpayer funded venue.

Tahoe Prosperity Center funding divides City Council

By Kathryn Reed

The majority of the South Lake Tahoe City Council on Tuesday decided to spend $10,000 in taxpayer money on the Tahoe Prosperity Center without knowing what it will be spent on.

Councilmembers Tom Davis, Hal Cole and Angela Swanson think increasing the city's allocation to this nonprofit is a good idea. The city has now contributed $30,000 to the group.

Center officials have 60 or 90 days, whatever works for them the majority of the council said, to come back with a clear business plan.

"I would rather see the plan before we give them money," Councilwoman JoAnn Connor said at the Feb. 19 meeting. And she's the city's rep to the center's board.

Councilwoman Brooke Laine took issue with giving one nonprofit cash when the process has not been opened up to others as was done years ago.

Laine went on to say of the center, "It just feels like an additional layer of bureaucracy."

Usually staff makes a recommendation to the council about the action to take. In this case, none was offered. It's also not in the budget. The staff report from City Manager Nancy Kerry says, "If approved, funding would need to come from unassigned excess reserves for 2013."

The Tahoe Prosperity Center's website says this about itself, "Promoting regional sustainability through economic vitality, environmental stewardship and healthy communities in and around the Lake Tahoe Basin."

Tom Greene, chairman of the center, presented to council, along with Christina Proctor. She called herself the interim executive director, while just a month ago she sent out a press release saying she was the flak for the group. There are no employees now – just people working as independent contractors. And there is nothing in the current budget, which operates on a calendar year, for projects – just staff.

"What this comes down to is this is an investment," Greene told the council. "Our desire is not to come here every year."

B Gorman, who is on the TPC board and as leader of the Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce was instrumental in developing the Tahoe Prosperity Plan, said, "Capital generation will be a 10-year project when we dive into that."

What the center has been spending the bulk of its time on is trying to bring broadband to the basin.

Working regionally, the center proponents say, is how best to attract outside capital to get things done. The idea is broadband capability would open doors to potential businesses or entrepreneurs who would relocate to the Lake Tahoe Basin.

In Greene's letter to the council asking for the money, he wrote, "The TPC is also working in coordination with the Tahoe Transportation District to facilitate productive Basin-wide dialogue aimed at fostering regional transportation initiatives."

That and the mention by Proctor of a TTD meeting last week that Swanson attended unbeknownst to her colleagues nearly cost the center the city's contribution. And then it was unearthed that the TPC is going to be the facilitator, while at the same time being a member, of the business group meeting to analyze the fiscal analysis of the loop road.

Cole was clearly unaware there was an analysis going on despite its being mentioned at several meetings and being written about.

In the end, though, it was the belief in broadband that swayed the majority of the council, even though they didn't know how their $10,000 was going to help accomplish that.

In other action:

• The council made appointments to various commissions. Parks and Recreation – Rebecca Bryson, Peter Fink, Steven Noll, Bonnie Turnbull and Scott Valentine; Clean Tahoe – George Alm; TRPA Advisory Planning – Joy Curry; and El Dorado Commission on Aging – Gerry Grego.

• No longer can the council use any electronic device while the meeting is in session – only at breaks. This has to do with adhering to the Fourteenth Amendment and due process.

• People speaking to the council will be given three minutes. No letters will be read into the record.

• Expenses by councilmembers must be preapproved by the other four electeds. The city manager's expenses are OK'd by the mayor.

Study: What's on TV affects aggression level in kids

By Catherine Saint Louis, New York Times

Experts have long known that children imitate many of the deeds – good and bad – that they see on television. But it has rarely been shown that changing a young child's viewing habits at home can lead to improved behavior.

In a study published Monday in the journal Pediatrics, researchers reported the results of a program designed to limit the exposure of preschool children to violence-laden videos and television shows and increase their time with educational programming that encourages empathy. They found that the experiment reduced the children's aggression toward others, compared with a group of children who were allowed to watch whatever they wanted.

"Here we have an experiment that proposes a potential solution," said Dr. Thomas N. Robinson, a professor of pediatrics at Stanford, who was not involved in the study. "Giving this intervention — exposing kids to less adult television, less aggression on television and more prosocial television — will have an effect on behavior."

While the research showed "a small to moderate effect" on the preschoolers' behavior, he added, the broader public health impact could be "very meaningful."

The new study was a randomized trial, rare in research on the effects of media on children. The researchers, at Seattle Children's Research Institute and the University of Washington, divided 565 parents of children ages 3 to 5 into two groups. Both were told to track their children's media consumption in a diary that the researchers assessed for violent, didactic and prosocial content, which they defined as showing empathy, helping others and resolving disputes without violence.

The control group was given advice only on better dietary habits for children. The second group of parents were sent program guides highlighting positive shows for young children. They also received newsletters encouraging parents to watch television with their children and ask questions during the shows about the best ways to deal with conflict. The parents also received monthly phone calls from the researchers, who helped them set television-watching goals for their preschoolers.

The researchers surveyed the parents at six months and again after a year about their children's social behavior. After six months, parents in the group receiving advice about television-watching said their children were somewhat less aggressive with others, compared with those in the control group. The children who watched less violent shows also scored higher on measures of social competence, a difference that persisted after one year.

Low-income boys showed the most improvement, though the researchers could not say why. Total viewing time did not differ between the two groups.

"The take-home message for parents is it's not just about turning off the TV; it's about changing the channel," said Dr. Dimitri A. Christakis, the lead author of the study and a professor of pediatrics at the University of Washington.

"We want our children to behave better," Christakis said, "and changing their media diet is a good way to do that."

Until she began participating in Christakis's trial, Nancy Jensen, a writer in Seattle, had never heard of shows like Nickelodeon's "Wonder Pets!," featuring cooperative team players, and NBC's "My Friend Rabbit," with its themes of loyalty and friendship.

At the time, her daughter Elizabeth, then 3, liked "King of the Hill," a cartoon comedy geared toward adults that features beer and gossip. In hindsight, she said, the show was "hilariously funny, but completely inappropriate for a 3-year-old."

These days, she consults Common Sense Media, a nonprofit advocacy group in San Francisco, to make sure that the shows her daughter watches have some prosocial benefit. Elizabeth, now 6, was “not necessarily an aggressive kid,” Jensen said. Still, the girl’s teacher recently commended her as very considerate, and Jensen believes a better television diet is an important reason.

The new study has limitations, experts noted. Data on both the children’s television habits and their behavior was reported by their parents, who may not be objective. And the study focused only on media content in the home, although some preschool-aged children are exposed to programming elsewhere.

Children watch a mix of “prosocial but also antisocial media,” said Marie-Louise Mares, an associate professor of communications at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. “Merely being exposed to prosocial media doesn’t mean that kids take it that way.”

Even educational programming with messages of empathy can be misunderstood by preschoolers, with negative consequences. A study published online in November in The Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology found that preschoolers shown educational media were more likely to engage in certain forms of interpersonal aggression over time.

Preschoolers observe relationship conflict early in a television episode but do not always connect it to the moral lesson or resolution at the end, said Jamie M. Ostrov, the lead author of the November study and an associate professor of psychology at the University of Buffalo.

Preschoolers watch an estimated 4.1 hours of television and other screen time daily, according to a 2011 study. Ostrov advised parents to watch television with their young children and to speak up during the relationship conflicts that are depicted. Citing one example, Dr. Ostrov counseled parents to ask children, “What could we do differently here?” to make it clear that yelling at a sibling is not acceptable.

He also urged parents to stick with age-appropriate programming. A 3-year-old might misunderstand the sibling strife in the PBS show “Arthur,” he said, or stop paying attention before it is resolved.

Tahoe cops arrest 3 men on drug, weapons charges

Three men spent Presidents Day in the El Dorado County Jail in South Lake Tahoe after being pulled over on a routine traffic stop.

Officer Travis Cabral pulled Brian Morris of Sacramento over about 4pm Feb. 18 when he saw the vehicle going the wrong way on Pioneer Trail. Jeremy Watkins and Michaelann Campbell, also from Sacramento, were passengers in the vehicle.

The combination of the smell of marijuana coming from the car and Morris saying he had no ID and then giving a false date of birth led to all three men being told to keep their hands in view. By this time Officers Jake Herminghaus and Matt Morrison, with his K9 partner Quatro, were on the scene.

“Suddenly, Morris dropped his hands out of view and began reaching under his seat. Officer Cabral drew his handgun and ordered Morris to show his hands, but Morris refused and continued reaching under his seat,” a press release from the SLTPD reads. “Officer Herminghaus also drew his weapon as

Officer Morrison opened the front passenger door and presented his K9, Quatro. It was only then that Morris complied with the orders given by the officers and brought his hands back into view."

A search of the vehicle turned up a loaded handgun under Morris' seat next to 27.9 grams of suspected methamphetamine. An additional 5.2 grams of marijuana was found under the drivers' seat and center console of the vehicle, according to officers.

Morris was booked on charges of possession of a controlled substance with a loaded firearm, possession of a firearm with a prior violent offense, prohibited person possessing ammunition, concealed weapon inside a vehicle, transporting a controlled substance, driving while under the influence, providing false information to a peace officer, resisting arrest and conspiracy to commit a felony. Watkins and Campbell were arrested on charges of conspiracy to commit a felony and transporting a controlled substance.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

California's quest to recover fire fees questioned

By Kevin Yamamura, Sacramento Bee

The fire started with an anchor bolt on a hot October day at a Ventura County reservoir.

A laborer took his chop saw to the half-inch-thick piece of metal, creating a spark that landed on dry brush.

“This thing just took off like a bomb,” recalled Manuel Mendez, whose family concrete business worked on a boat ramp that day at Lake Piru.

No one has been found culpable for the 2007 Angora Fire in Lake Tahoe.

All told, 63,000 acres burned in the 2003 Piru Fire. In 2009 and 2010, Mendez spent more than $2 million compensating federal and state firefighting agencies for the damage, an amount he says left his business “hanging by a thread.”

“We admitted guilt, that one of my guys did start it,” he said. “But I thought it was crazy the amounts they were charging.”

For the last eight years, the state has more aggressively gone after businesses and individuals it blames for starting wildfires. Now those it has targeted are pushing back, arguing that fire officials are overreaching in an effort to secure more money for the state.

At first, fire officials established an off-the-books account in 2005 that paid for specialized training and technical equipment, funded by a portion of wildfire settlements. That only became widely known this year.

In 2008, the state created a squadron of lawyers, fire accountants and investigators now known as the Civil Cost Recovery Program. In state budget circles, the unit is considered a financial success for its high return on investment — so much so that Gov. Jerry Brown is asking lawmakers in his new budget to expand the permanent staff from 14 to 24.

Sen. Jim Nielsen, R-Gerber, who represents a vast section of forestland in Northern California, said the state should limit its recovery to situations where it is "irrefutable beyond a reasonable doubt" that someone caused a fire.

"It's clearly being abused," he said. "The state is going to try to identify as many sources of revenue for government as it possibly can, and that's what's driving it."

Officials of CalFire say the special unit is sticking up for taxpayers by demanding money from people who carelessly sparked wildfires that required tens of millions of dollars to extinguish. They also say cost-sharing agreements with federal and local agencies require the state to pursue money from those who start fires.

The state pays its share of emergency firefighting out of its general fund, and annual costs over the last decade averaged $249 million.

Not all of that money can be recovered. Fire officials like to say you can't bill God for lightning strikes.

But the department recovered less than $2 million annually from 2001 through 2003.

As the state faced a deep budget deficit, the unit recouped a record $35.6 million in 2010-11. The state at the time spent less than $3 million annually on the 14-person program.

"Our ultimate goal is to return the most money to the taxpayers who paid to suppress these fires," said Cal Fire spokeswoman Janet Upton.

Timber industry resists

Environmentalists who battle with timber companies on a range of issues support CalFire's drive to collect money.

"If they cause forest fires, they bear the burden of the cost of those fires, and not the public, especially if they are doing activities that increase the chance of fires," said Susan Robinson, an activist with Ebbets Pass Forest Watch.

But the aggressive approach has drawn criticism from defendants, especially those in the timber industry fighting the state in court.

The state and California's largest landowner, Sierra Pacific Industries, are facing off in Plumas Superior Court over the 2007 Moonlight Fire, which burned 65,000 acres.

In that case, Sierra Pacific and its subcontractors argue that the state manipulated evidence and targeted deep-pocketed businesses able to pay tens of millions of dollars. The state is seeking $15 million from Sierra Pacific and other defendants for firefighting costs, legal fees and interest.

The company settled last year with the federal government over the same blaze for $122.5 million in cash and land, but disputes that it was responsible.

"The defense contends that the explanation for the blatant and intentional failure of CalFire to fully investigate other potential causes of the Moonlight Fire is that its investigators were driven to place blame on Sierra Pacific, a 'deep pocket,'" summarizes Richard Linkert, an attorney for another defendant, in a Jan. 31 court filing.

Sierra Pacific lead attorney William Warne declined to comment on the case last month, and Linkert was unavailable Friday.

One of their central arguments is that CalFire investigators were driven to pursue big judgments because they were directing a portion of the money to an account that financed conference travel and expensive digital cameras.

Chris Parker, a former CalFire administrator who oversaw investigations before retiring in 2006, says his old department is taking an unfair beating.

It was Parker's idea to create the Wildland Fire Investigation Training and Equipment Fund in 2005 after years of seeing his own investigators struggling to build credible cases that would stand up in court against top-shelf lawyers. Before the investigation fund and Civil Cost Recovery Program, CalFire officials had little formal training and treated investigative work as a secondary concern behind their other duties, Parker and Upton said.

"We felt there was an overwhelming amount not being recovered," Parker recalled.

"I said, 'Wait a minute, we need more help,'" he said. "'It'd be a lot less work if I had top-notch investigations, if people had all the equipment they needed. The cameras, the GPS stuff, the training – state-of-the-art training.'"

Parker said his idea for the account came from seeing other agencies use settlement money to pay for training and future investigations. The California District Attorneys Association agreed to manage the fund in exchange for fees that totaled $373,565 over eight years.

The prosecutors group also manages settlement accounts for other state enforcement purposes, such as a training fund for consumer-related prosecutors, as well as funds for environmental prosecutors to work in rural counties, said CDAA assistant CEO Martin Vranicar. Those accounts have the imprimatur of state statutes or court dictates.

Parker said he believed the CalFire account was completely aboveboard, too. A draft audit from 2009 said otherwise.

New audit launched

CalFire auditors found the department had not obtained Department of Finance approval to keep the fund outside state coffers. But the audit also warned that if CalFire went to Finance officials four years after starting the fund, the department might have to repay the money to the state general fund, or its budget could be reduced.

The department removed that finding from a final audit that appeared later on a state website.

CalFire continued using the fund, under new guidelines, ultimately collecting $3.66 million.

The account is being dissolved this month at the request of the District Attorneys Association, in part because the organization faced legal scrutiny last year as part of the Moonlight fire suit. The Finance Department has launched a new audit.

Parker said he didn't consider asking lawmakers for more money directly.

"What's the quickest way to do it? If you want to ask for increased staffing, three years minimum. If you want to increase equipment, you're talking three years. Here you have courts saying, 'We want to help you improve investigations.' I didn't see that as a violation."

After creating the investigation fund, CalFire doubled its wildfire recoveries from $2.8 million in 2004 to $5.6 million in 2005.

And the department saw an opportunity to collect more money. In 2007, when CalFire proposed the special cost recovery unit, it said in its formal request, "For about the last two years, CalFire has embarked on a self-initiated aggressive civil cost recovery effort. Initial indications are that this effort has paid off handsomely. … Unfortunately, CalFire has reached the limits of its capabilities.”

The proposal did not mention the investigation account.

The Civil Cost Recovery Program reaped bigger returns for the state after dedicating 14 staff members to the task. In its first year, 2008-09, it recovered $11.8 million. Then $16.6 million in 2009-10, $35.6 million in 2010-11 and $25.9 million in 2011-12.

In his latest budget, Brown asks the Legislature for $1.7 million for 10 more permanent positions, which he says would result in a return of $6.8 million. The governor wants to fund the program using a new fire fee on mostly rural property owners.

CalFire requested more time to produce a list of all parties who have paid the state for firefighting costs. But a list of those who paid settlement money into the fund includes the state’s major utility companies – Sempra Energy, Pacific Gas & Electric and Southern California Edison. Upton and Parker said power lines have been among the biggest wildfire risks in the past.

Also on the list: Mendez Concrete, which paid $557,454 into the investigation fund, the third-highest total.

Unlike timber defendants in the Moonlight case, Mendez acknowledges his company’s role in sparking the 2003 Piru Fire. But he contends that the state inflated costs and wasn’t concerned about saving money when it housed firefighters in hotels on standby.

At 10 employees, his Santa Paula-based firm has one-fifth the staff it once did, thanks to the lawsuit and the recession, Mendez said.

He said he never before considered how much financial risk his company faced from wildfire liability.

"This was a learning experience for me. Believe me, it turned my world upside down."

Dispute over road at Northstar leads to lawsuit

A group of Northstar homeowners has filed a lawsuit against Placer County, the developers of Martis Camp and others.

The TRUST – Tahoe Residents United for Safe Transit – is seeking to overturn a November decision by Placer County and its Community Development Resource Agency to convert an emergency vehicle access-only road to one for non-emergency use by any vehicle traveling to and from Martis Camp and Northstar ski resort. This road goes through The Retreat-at-Northstar, an exclusive subdivision with 18 lots – one of which has been built on.

"The approvals and environmental reviews for both the 650-lot Martis Camp and the 18-lot Retreat projects provide solely for an EVA connection between the two subdivisions. No one has submitted a plan to open the road connection for non-emergency vehicles," Chris Carr with the law firm Morrison & Foerster said in a statement. "In contrast to the very public, collaborative and time-consuming process to develop, review and approve the Martis Camp and The Retreat projects, the county's attempt to change the status of the road had no public input or environmental analysis, violating the public trust and flouting CEQA and California's planning and land use laws."

Placer County supervisors discussed the case in closed session on Feb. 5.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Byrne autopsy results released

"Probable hypothermia due to prolonged environmental exposure" is the official cause of death for Alyssa Byrne.

The 19-year-old Petaluma woman died New Year's weekend in South Lake Tahoe after having attended the SnowGlobe Music Festival near Lake Tahoe Community College.

South Tahoe residents gathered Jan. 17 at Lakeview Commons to remember Alyssa

Byrne. Photo/LTN file

The autopsy results were released Feb. 18 by the El Dorado County Sheriff’s Department.

Methamphetamines and other drugs were found in her system, according to the toxicology report.

“We had learned from associates and friends she was using drugs. It’s sad, but we think it did contribute to her death,” sheriff’s Lt. Pete Van Arnum told *Lake Tahoe News*. “The hypothermia is probably what killed her first.”

Byrne’s body was found on the east side of Pioneer trail near Al Tahoe Boulevard after she had gone missing for three days. She had discarded her jacket nearby. This is a classic sign of someone with hypothermia; shedding clothing despite freezing temperatures.

— Lake Tahoe News staff report

Owl causes lights to go out in parts of S. Tahoe

Wildlife darkened parts of South Lake Tahoe on Saturday night.

"A good size owl got into the line and blew some fuses," Randy Kelly with Liberty Utilities told *Lake Tahoe News*.

When crews arrived about 9pm Feb. 17 people were standing around the animal on Cedar Street.

Residences and hotels near the state line had their power out for less than an hour.

While critters have caused power outages before, usually it's blue jays or squirrels.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*