Brown calls for lofty goals in California

By Normitsu Onishi, New York Times

SACRAMENTO — Emboldened by a brighter fiscal horizon, Gov. Jerry Brown on Thursday recommitted himself to two ambitious projects, a high-speed rail line and a huge water tunnel system, in an optimistic State of the State speech that sought to secure California's long-term future as well as the three-term governor's legacy.

Grasping at California's vision of itself as a land of opportunity and a model for the rest of the nation, Brown said the state was rebounding financially after a difficult period. In a speech citing sources as varied as the Bible, Montaigne and Yeats, Brown said the state's budget was now sound, but he also warned of profligacy, a remark that seemed directed at the Democratic lawmakers listening to him in the State Capitol here.

"The message this year is clear: California has once again confounded our critics. We have wrought in just two years a solid and enduring budget," Brown, a Democrat, said in his third State of the State address since returning to office in 2011. "Against those who take pleasure, singing of our demise, California did the impossible."

Brown spoke of wanting to reform school financing by empowering local school districts, and of continuing to lead efforts to fight climate change, like the cap-and-trade system for carbon emissions that went into effect recently.

Recalling the big infrastructure projects in the state's past, Brown also voiced strong support for two big-ticket items that have drawn strong opposition: a bullet train that would eventually link Los Angeles and the Bay Area, and two tunnels that would funnel water directly from Northern California to more populated areas in the south.

“The London Olympics lasted a short while and cost $14 billion, about the same cost as this project,” he said of the tunnels. “But this project will serve California for hundreds of years.”

Brown’s speech came at what many are describing as a turning point for California after years of economic turmoil. The state’s economy is continuing to show signs of strengthening, with job growth and a housing market revival.

Fiscally, after years of ballooning budget deficits, the state is now projecting a balanced budget. In November, Brown surprised many by winning a hard-fought campaign to pass Proposition 30, a temporary tax surcharge that will pour $6 billion a year into the state treasury for the next seven years.

Still, Brown has repeatedly warned about the need to control spending. With Democrats now having supermajorities in the Senate and the Assembly, they can pass tax increases unilaterally. As experts predict that Democratic legislators will face pressure to increase spending, many are now describing Brown, long known as “Governor Moonbeam” for his eccentricities, as the only adult in the room.

Citing the story of Genesis and Pharaoh’s dream of seven cows, he said: “The people have given us seven years of extra taxes. Let us follow the wisdom of Joseph, pay down our debts and store up reserves against the leaner times that will surely come.”

In interviews, Brown, who served two terms as governor from 1975 to 1983, has brushed aside talk of his legacy. But in recent months, Brown, 74, who was treated recently for prostate cancer, has spoken about his mortality, mentioning the death of a close friend.

“This is my 11th year in the job, and I have never been more excited,” he said.

Mom, daughter found in Amador County pond

By Cathy Locke, Sacramento Bee

The bodies of an Amador County woman and her 5-year-old daughter reported missing earlier this week were found Thursday morning in an ice-covered pond on their Pine Grove property.

Divers recovered the bodies of Karen Diane Anderson, 46, and Amelia Noelle Arago, 5, about 30 feet from the shore of the pond, according to an Amador County Sheriff’s Office news release. Officials said there was no evidence of trauma or foul play.

The Sheriff’s Office received a report about 3pm Monday of a loose llama at 14130 Spring Canyon Lane in Pine Grove. A deputy and a county animal control officer secured the llama, but they were unable to locate anyone at the home. About 12:43 p.m. Tuesday, a deputy was dispatched to to the same address to conduct a welfare check of the residents after neighbors reported that they hadn’t been seen all day. The deputy did not observe anything suspicious at the residence, officials said.

Tuesday evening, a neighbor called to report that the residents still had not been seen and no one had tended to animals on the property. The neighbor said he had checked the property and found a large hole in the iced-over pond north of the home.

On Wednesday, sheriff’s detectives conducted an investigation into the possible disappearance of the residents. They searched the property, including the pond, using a canine. No one was located, but officials said the dog indicated interest in the pond.

Thursday morning, sheriff’s search and rescue personnel assisted by canine teams from Wilderness Finders Search Dogs and California Rescue Dog Association searched the surrounding areas and the shoreline around the pond. These dogs also indicated interest in the pond.

CHP aircraft conducted an aerial search, while a dive team from the El Dorado County Sheriff’s Office trained in ice-covered water recoveries began an underwater search of the pond.

The divers found a rope, which neighbors indicated was used as a lead for the llama. The divers then located the bodies of Anderson and her daughter in the same area. Authorities said the water was about 8 feet deep and the water temperature was 38 degrees.

The Amador County Sheriff Coroner’s Office reported that a forensic pathologist will examine the bodies to determine the cause and manner of their deaths.

Squaw Valley going through

growing pains

By Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee

OLYMPIC VALLEY — Walled in by majestic snow-clad peaks, Squaw Valley USA has long been known as a mecca for downhill skiing.

Now a proposal by the ski area's new owner to build a year-round luxury resort with condos, cabins, an indoor water park and other amenities is stirring conflict and concern.

"All of us have gotten to know Squaw Valley for its beauty, its ruggedness, its outdoorsy feel," said Judy Carini, a longtime Squaw Valley resident. "What they are bringing is artificial. It's too much of a Disneyland feel."

Ski area officials insist it's just not so. Squaw Valley, they say, must change and grow to remain competitive and can do so without harming the environment or community.

"We are very much of, by and for the mountains," said Squaw Valley President Andy Wirth. "Virtually everything we are considering takes into account the aesthetics and function of the mountains."

There is one thing on which most agree: This time of year, the Tahoe area is skiing. Skiing is the magnet that brings people to the mountains, that fills hotel rooms and rings up sales at restaurants. And with casino gambling in decline, ski areas are more important than ever as an economic engine.

What's driving the debate at Squaw is its push to sell more than lift tickets, to strike new gold with off-season attractions, more ski-area-owned shops and restaurants and a lot more cabins, condos and hotel rooms.

Similar developments have already transformed ski areas across Colorado and Utah and are the focus of a critical 2007 documentary: "Resorting to Madness: Taking Back our Mountain

Communities."

"As more people seek a niche of their own in high mountain places, these delicate and singular landscapes are being sullied in what amounts to a modern-day gold rush," the film's narrator says.

Like a slow-motion wave, that trend arrived late in the Tahoe area, where a luxury ski village, Ritz Carlton hotel and second homes have risen in recent years at and near the Northstar ski area.

That boom set off alarms among environmentalists. Now the Squaw proposal is adding to them.

"What are we saying about the future of the Sierra Nevada if what we choose are high-rise developments and indoor water parks?" said Tom Mooers, executive director of Sierra Watch, a Nevada City nonprofit that has helped protect land around Northstar.

But others believe the Squaw plan is the right fit, none more so than Wirth, whose grandfather directed the National Park Service from 1951 to 1964 and who is a fan of environmentalist legends Aldo Leopold and John Muir.

"Environmental stewardship is something we care very deeply about," he said. "It's in the DNA of our staff, my executive team, everything we do here."

At Squaw, interest began to grow last year after the ski area's new owner – Colorado-based KSL Capital Partners LLC – unveiled plans to dramatically expand an existing village at the base of the mountain.

Company officials say they want to build more than a thousand lodging units, more retail space, a large indoor aquatic park and other amenities. If approved, the project – which would rise from a sprawling parking lot at the base of the mountain

– is expected to take 10 to 15 years to complete.

“There are a lot of reasons to come to Squaw Valley in the wintertime. There are not a lot of reasons to come here in the summertime,” said Chevis Hosea, vice president of development at Squaw Valley.

The plan is part of a suite of other improvements that Wirth said are designed to restore Squaw Valley – home of the 1960 Winter Olympics – to its early splendor.

“This is a resort that largely because of the Olympics was world-renowned,” Wirth said. “It was one of the most desired places in all of North America to go on a mountain vacation.

“In the ’70s, the ’80s, the ’90s, and frankly to a certain extent the past 10 years, the mountain itself was not effectively managed,” he said.

But many who live in nearby homes and cabins now topped with mounds of snow and tinseled with icicles are uneasy about a year-round resort. One big concern is safeguarding the rustic character of the community.

Quaint and isolated, Squaw Valley (which is officially called Olympic Valley) lies about 10 miles south of Truckee just off Highway 89. Bustling in the winter, sleepy over the summer, the place is home to fewer than 1,000 permanent residents, many of whom have known each other for decades.

“It isn’t going to be a community anymore. It’s going to be Disneyland at the end of the valley,” said Ed Heneveld, a physician who has lived in Squaw Valley since the 1970s.

“This developer is dictating our future,” Heneveld said. “It should be the community through the (Placer County) general plan process and forums that makes the case of what we want here, and then they (KSL) accommodate that or not.”

Residents fear the promise of more tax dollars for Placer

County, which has its government seat in Auburn on the other side of the Sierra, will drown out their voices. Some are talking about the possibility of incorporation to gain more leverage.

“That’s the only way this community will have a way to dictate its fate and not be at the mercy of KSL,” said Rick Sylvester, a longtime valley resident.

Others welcome the change of pace a year-round resort would likely bring.

“There will be something to do in the spring, summer and fall, which was sorely lacking for decades,” said Fritz Hoffman, who has lived in the valley since 1974. “I’m all for it as long as they do it right and protect the environment.”

An environmental impact report that would vet effects on water, wildlife and other natural resources will be prepared. Some feel possible economic fallout should be scrutinized, too.

“What if they build this and nobody comes?” said Heneveld. “We’re left with the village. Their investors lose some money. They walk away. And I’m still here. My kids are here. My grandkids are here. And we’ve got this empty shell.”

That concern is shaped by the failure of other ski-area-related developments in the region in recent years.

“Don’t look at other failed projects. Look to the track record specific to KSL,” Hosea said, ticking off a list of successful KSL resorts in Hawaii and California.

“The reason this company has not left vacant, blighted buildings is it is a very fiscally disciplined company,” Hosea said.

The fate of the project is uncertain. After a series of meetings with valley residents, KSL has made some changes, including lowering the height of some buildings.

“We are a company that not only respects but aggressively seeks everybody’s opinion,” said Wirth. “We celebrate those opinions.”

More opinions are sure to be aired at a Squaw Valley Property Owners Association meeting set for this Saturday. Jennifer Montgomery, a Placer County supervisor who represents the valley, plans to attend.

“This project has some real possible positive outcomes, both economically and environmentally,” Montgomery said.

But she added: “There are at least as many potential negative outcomes. It probably needs to be pulled in farther than it has been. And they really need to listen to the voice of the community.”

Master plan to set a route for Lake Tahoe Airport

By Joann Eisenbrandt

The South Lake Tahoe City Council on Tuesday made two decisions regarding operations at the Lake Tahoe Airport: the potential outsourcing of airport management and the selection of an outside consultant to prepare an airport master plan.

In October 2012, the city put out request for proposals asking for submissions from airport management companies to manage and operate the Lake Tahoe Airport, with the goals of maximizing the uses and users of the airport, and lowering the airport’s operating costs. The airport is currently managed by city staff consisting of Airport Director Sherry Miller and four airport maintenance technicians.

It operates at an approximate annual deficit of $325,000. The idea of outsourcing airport management was suggested by former City Manager Tony O'Rourke in March 2011 as part of the city's five-year plan to reduce personnel costs.

Lake Tahoe Airport's future is tied to the next master plan. Photo/LTN

RFPs were received from two airport management companies, GCR Inc. from New Orleans and ABS Aviation headquartered in Atlanta. ABS manages operations at the Minden-Tahoe airport. The management fees in these proposals ranged from $300,000 to $500,000 annually.

These proposals were evaluated to see if they would create "a reduction in the negative cash flow." In her staff report to the council, City Manager Nancy Kerry indicated that they would not and recommended the council reject both bids. The report noted, "The airport is managed well with a very minimal staff."

Another reason for rejecting outsourcing of airport management at this time is that the city is about to undertake the preparation of a new airport master plan, a long-range planning document dealing with all aspects of airport operations, which Kerry indicated would be assessing a wide range of viable economic alternatives for managing the airport.

“The studies and analysis provided through the master planning process,” the staff report noted, “will provide guidance to conduct a more informed decision on this matter.”

Sherri Thompson, ABS Aviation COO, and airport manager at the Minden-Tahoe Airport noted that ABS wants to stay “engaged” in the process, is involved in the Tahoe community and wants to see the airport succeed. Michael Golden, owner of Mountain West Aviation, the airport’s fixed base operator, spoke, encouraging the council to increase utilization of the airport and set “tangible milestones for staff” such as ensuring that all hangars on the airport are leased out.

The council accepted the staff recommendation and rejected both bids for outsourcing airport management at this time. (Councilwoman Angela Swanson was not at the meeting.)

The council then considered the selection of an outside consultant to produce a new airport master plan. The last airport master plan was completed in 1992 as part of the Lake Tahoe Airport Master Plan Settlement Agreement. This agreement among the city, TRPA, California Attorney General’s Office and League to Save Lake Tahoe ended years of contentious disagreements and resultant lawsuits regarding appropriate noise restrictions, commercial flight levels and other operational issues at the airport. It put in place a complex set of requirements and restrictions regarding commercial service.

During the last 20 years, a cavalcade of commercial air carriers served the Lake Tahoe Airport under the terms of the settlement agreement, but none of them lasted. There has been no scheduled commercial service at the airport for more than a decade.

The city has continued to maintain the economic importance of the airport to the community, and has retained its FAA-issued Part 139 Air Operating Certificate, required of airports with scheduled commercial service.

There has been considerable discussion, with varying viewpoints, of what are the guidelines for commercial service now that the settlement agreement has expired. There are no simple answers. Some parts of the 1992 master plan and accompanying environmental impact report carry over. Which ones they are depends on who you ask. As City Manager Nancy Kerry noted at the council meeting, “We still operate under that umbrella,” but did not go into any specifics.

TRPA External Affairs Chief Julie Regan told *Lake Tahoe News* in June 2012 that, “If the current (master) plan expires before a new plan is in place, the status quo would continue, i.e., the city would continue to operate the airport as a general aviation facility until a new plan is developed and put in place.”

General aviation airports do not have scheduled commercial service.

Kerry indicated that an airport committee, comprised of herself, Miller and councilmembers Tom Davis and Swanson has been reviewing these issues over the last year, and determined that the city’s best course was to complete a new, comprehensive master plan now.

Under FAA guidelines, the city had to first put out a request for qualifications to be sure a qualified consultant was selected before any agreement regarding the costs of the master planning process could be entered into. An RFQ was put out by the city in August, and three responses were received: from Mead and Hunt Inc., C&S Companies and Vanir in Association with RBF Consulting. Staff recommended the city select Mead & Hunt, and enter into negotiations with them to prepare the airport master plan. This recommendation was based on the criteria that the firm had the necessary technical expertise, their staff had familiarity with this specific airport, local regulations and environmental issues, had experience preparing master plans at similar airports as well as past success in actively engaging local communities in the master planning process.

Once the consultant is selected, then the city, the consultant and the FAA enter into negotiations. The FAA will pay 90 percent of the costs, up to $318,000. The city must pay the remaining 10 percent. The city has already allocated its share in the 2012-13 budget. These amounts do not include preparation of the environmental documentation, which is estimated to be about $250,000. The city will conduct a cost benefit analysis to determine whether it is best to hire a consultant for this phase or hire one or two short-term in-house environmental planners.

The council accepted the staff recommendation and directed that the city enter into negotiations with Mead & Hunt. A formal agreement will come back to the council for approval at a later date.

Master plans historically can take up to two years to complete. Kerry noted that the city is hoping in this case to have an "expedited" master planning process.

The city has been actively seeking proposals from regional air carriers flying new generation, quieter aircraft to begin serving the Lake Tahoe Airport. Mayor Tom Davis added, "We might have an airline interested within a year or year and a half."

If the new master plan were not completed at that point, then the city and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency officials would have to sit down and decide on what noise, flight levels and other requirements had to be satisfied in order for the city to get a TRPA permit. Kerry said the city would need to complete environmental documentation if they changed the “current use” of the airport by adding scheduled commercial service. She added that she believes TRPA would respond positively to a proposal from an airline with three to five flights a day using quieter aircraft that met the decibel levels established under the 1992 Settlement Agreement.

Ex-El Dorado County man pleads guilty in wire fraud case

Daniel Chartraw, 39, formerly of El Dorado County, pleaded guilty today to wire fraud in connection with a multimillion dollar investment fraud scheme.

According to court documents, between Jan. 1, 2007, and Nov. 30, 2011, Chartraw defrauded numerous investors by falsely representing investments in mines, mining and refinery equipment, oil commodities, precious metals concentrate, and multimillion dollar certificates of deposit.

According to the plea agreement, Chartraw stole $1 million by fraudulently posing as an owner and manager of a company selling “dore” bars, which Chartraw claimed contained precious metals. Chartraw arranged for an investor to tour the company and managed to limit the investor’s interaction with the company’s true owners and prevent discovery of the scheme. When the investor placed $1 million into an escrow account for the purchase of the dore bars, Chartraw used a forged letter to get the escrow company to send the money to accounts that he and others controlled.

It’s estimates investors lost more than $3.5 million.

Chartraw’s 2011 Escalade was seized by the government and sold for $50,500. The proceeds will go to the defrauded investors.

Chartraw is scheduled to be sentenced on May 2. He faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison, to be followed by three years of supervised release, and a $250,000 fine. As part of his plea agreement, Chartraw will also be ordered to pay restitution to his victims.

California lawmakers revive early abortion provider bill

By Jeremy B. White, Sacramento Bee

More medical professionals, including nurses and midwives, would be permitted to perform certain early abortions in California under a bill unveiled Tuesday.

In a news conference at the Capitol that served to both introduce the bill and mark the 40-year anniversary of the Supreme Court’s landmark Roe v. Wade decision, lawmakers and women’s health advocates said the measure is necessary for women in communities without abortion providers.

They said 52 percent of California counties do not contain a provider, other than hospitals, which often have only limited services.

“California will not go back. We are going to go forward,” said Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson, D-Santa Barbara. “And we are doing that by making sure that reproductive health care, that abortion services are available to every woman, to make sure that we all have access, whether we live in rural areas or urban centers, whether or not we are able to afford the procedure or whether we require assistance.”

Assembly Bill 154 by Assemblywoman Toni Atkins, D-San Diego, would revive last year’s push to expand abortion access by allowing nurse practitioners to perform nonsurgical early abortions.

Gov. Jerry Brown ultimately signed a diluted version of the bill that allowed only non-doctor clinicians trained through a specific pilot program to perform the procedure. The bill extended that program, jointly administered by the Office of Statewide Health Planning and Development and UC San Francisco, until Jan. 1, 2014.

The California Nurses Association opposed the initial version of last year’s bill, saying it would be premature to expand beyond a pilot program before researchers at UC San Francisco completed a multiyear study. The organization also had concerns about providing proper training and ensuring that the bill provided for an early first-trimester technique.

That landscape has changed now that UC San Francisco has completed its study and seen the results published in the American Journal of Public Health, Amy Everitt, state director of NARAL Pro-Choice America, said at the rally.

The study concluded that trained nurse practitioners, physician assistants and certified nurse midwives could safely perform early abortions.

The nurses association is pleased that the study has been completed but is still developing its position on the bill, said Bonnie Castillo, government relations director. She said the organization has already held "productive" meetings with the bill's sponsors aimed at clarifying some of the bill's language.

"We anticipate that's going to be achievable, but right now we believe that it's just a process," Castillo said.

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7 people in running for 1 South Tahoe council seat

Updated: Jan. 24 11:35am

By Kathryn Reed

The four South Lake Tahoe council members will have at least seven people to choose from to fill the vacant seat.

Five had turned in papers, with two more turning in papers today – Brooke Laine and Bruce Grego.

Laine is a former council member, having stepped down in 2002. That was the year Kathay Lovell was elected. Lovell also wants back on the council. She chose not to run after eight years on the council.

Grego was on the November ballot for re-election – to which voters said no to him.

Bill Crawford, another ex-councilmember, is also contending for the seat. He, like Lovell, also chose not to run in 2010.

Austin Sass, who has been on the Planning Commission, but did not seek reappoint this week is running. He has been on the ballot twice and voters have not selected him.

Lake Tahoe Community College instructor Scott Valentine and chiropractor Howard Bittner are the two political newcomers vying for the seat.

People have until 5pm Jan. 25 to fill out the application.

The seat came open when Claire Fortier in December quit two years into her four-year term. Laine was Fortier’s campaign manager.

All candidates will be interviewed starting at 9am Jan. 29 at Lake Tahoe Airport.

“I will be conducting a randomized alphabet drawing similar to the process the California secretary of State uses which is set forth in the California Elections Code to determine the order of interviews,” City Clerk Suzie Alessi said in an email.

The council will set the interview process that morning. Mayor Tom Davis will be participating via teleconference, which means all votes will be by roll call. The four could use a coin flip to decide who the fifth candidate is or some other method if there are not three votes for one candidate, or they could call for an election in June.

4.0 quake hits south of Markleeville

A shallow magnitude 4.0 earthquake was reported Thursday morning 13 miles from Markleeville, according to the U.S. Geological Survey.

The temblor occurred at 12:21am at a depth of 8.1 miles.

According to the USGS, the epicenter was 18 miles from Alpine Village, 18 miles from Dardanelle, 32 miles from South Lake Tahoe and 99 miles from Sacramento.

In the past 10 days, there have been no earthquakes magnitude 3.0 and greater centered nearby.

— *Los Angeles Times*

California park passes can be bought when filing tax return

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

Californians can purchase a state parks annual pass on their income tax return for the 2012 tax year.

The pass costs $195 and provides unlimited day-use access for one year to 130 state parks, or about half of all parks in the California Department of Parks and Recreation system.

Taxpayers can also contribute more than $195 and the additional amount is tax-deductible and will go to support park operations.

The program was created by AB 1589, a state law approved in September and authored by Rep. Jared Huffman, D-San Rafael, then in the Assembly.

Only one pass can be purchased per tax return, and only if the taxpayer expects a refund at least equal to the price of the pass.

The passes cover daily admission fees, not additional fees such as camping and boat launching.

The "Contributions" section of the 540 and 540a tax returns contains a new line to enter the price of the parks pass, and a description is found on Page 15 of the instructions for the forms.

For more information, including a list of parks that accept the annual pass, go online.

Courts rule social media is form of free speech

By Steven Greenhouse, New York Times

As Facebook and Twitter become as central to workplace conversation as the company cafeteria, federal regulators are ordering employers to scale back policies that limit what workers can say online.

Employers often seek to discourage comments that paint them in a negative light. Don’t discuss company matters publicly, a typical social media policy will say, and don’t disparage managers, co-workers or the company itself. Violations can be a firing offense.

But in a series of recent rulings and advisories, labor regulators have declared many such blanket restrictions illegal. The National Labor Relations Board says workers have a right to discuss work conditions freely and without fear of retribution, whether the discussion takes place at the office or on Facebook.

In addition to ordering the reinstatement of various workers fired for their posts on social networks, the agency has pushed companies nationwide, including giants like General Motors, Target and Costco, to rewrite their social media rules.

“Many view social media as the new water cooler,” said Mark G. Pearce, the board’s chairman, noting that federal law has long protected the right of employees to discuss work-related matters. “All we’re doing is applying traditional rules to a new technology.”

The decisions come amid a broader debate over what constitutes appropriate discussion on Facebook and other social networks. Schools and universities are wrestling with online bullying and student disclosures about drug use. Governments worry about what police officers and teachers say and do online on their own time. Even corporate chieftains are finding that their online comments can run afoul of securities regulators.

The labor board’s rulings, which apply to virtually all private sector employers, generally tell companies that it is illegal to adopt broad social media policies — like bans on “disrespectful” comments or posts that criticize the employer — if those policies discourage workers from exercising their right to communicate with one another with the aim of improving wages, benefits or working conditions.

But the agency has also found that it is permissible for employers to act against a lone worker ranting on the Internet.

Several cases illustrate the differing standards.

At Hispanics United of Buffalo, a nonprofit social services provider in upstate New York, a caseworker threatened to complain to the boss that others were not working hard enough. Another worker, Mariana Cole-Rivera, posted a Facebook message asking, “My fellow co-workers, how do you feel?”

Several of her colleagues posted angry, sometimes expletive-laden, responses. “Try doing my job. I have five programs,” wrote one. “What the hell, we don’t have a life as is,” wrote another.

Hispanics United fired Cole-Rivera and four other caseworkers who responded to her, saying they had violated the company’s harassment policies by going after the caseworker who complained.

In a 3-to-1 decision last month, the labor board concluded that the caseworkers had been unlawfully terminated. It found that the posts in 2010 were the type of “concerted activity” for “mutual aid” that is expressly protected by the National Labor Relations Act.

“The board’s decision felt like vindication,” said Cole-Rivera, who has since found another social work job.

The NLRB had far less sympathy for a police reporter at the Arizona Daily Star.

Frustrated by a lack of news, the reporter posted several Twitter comments. One said, “What?!?!?! No overnight homicide. … You’re slacking, Tucson.” Another began, “You stay homicidal, Tucson.”

The newspaper fired the reporter, and board officials found the dismissal legal, saying the posts were offensive, not concerted activity and not about working conditions.

The agency also affirmed the firing of a bartender in Illinois. Unhappy about not receiving a raise for five years, the bartender posted on Facebook, calling his customers “rednecks” and saying he hoped they choked on glass as they drove home drunk.

Labor board officials found that his comments were personal venting, not the “concerted activity” aimed at improving wages and working conditions that is protected by federal law.

NLRB officials did not name the reporter or the bartender.

The board’s moves have upset some companies, particularly because it is taking a law enacted in the industrial era, principally to protect workers’ right to unionize, and applying it to the digital activities of nearly all private-sector workers, union and nonunion alike.

Brian E. Hayes, the lone dissenter in the Hispanics United case, wrote that “the five employees were simply venting,” not engaged in concerted activity, and therefore were not protected from termination. Rafael O. Gomez, Hispanics United’s lawyer, said the nonprofit would appeal the board’s decision, maintaining that the Facebook posts were harassment.

Some corporate officials say the NLRB is intervening in the social media scene in an effort to remain relevant as private-sector unions dwindle in size and power.

“The board is using new legal theories to expand its power in the workplace,” said Randel K. Johnson, senior vice president for labor policy at the United States Chamber of Commerce. “It’s causing concern and confusion.”

But board officials say they are merely adapting the provisions of the National Labor Relations Act, enacted in 1935, to the 21st century workplace.

The NLRB is not the only government entity setting new rules about corporations and social media. On Jan. 1, California and Illinois became the fifth and sixth states to bar companies from asking employees or job applicants for their social network passwords.

Lewis L. Maltby, president of the National Workrights Institute, said social media rights were looming larger in the workplace.

He said he was disturbed by a case in which a Michigan advertising agency fired a Web site trainer who also wrote fiction after several employees voiced discomfort about racy short stories he had posted on the Web.

“No one should be fired for anything they post that’s legal, off-duty and not job-related,” Maltby said.

As part of the labor board’s stepped-up role, its general counsel has issued three reports concluding that many companies’ social media policies illegally hinder workers’ exercise of their rights.

The general counsel’s office gave high marks to Wal-Mart’s social policy, which had been revised after consultations with the agency. It approved Wal-Mart’s prohibition of “inappropriate postings that may include discriminatory remarks, harassment and threats of violence or similar inappropriate or unlawful conduct.”

But in assessing General Motors’s policy, the office wrote, “We found unlawful the instruction that ‘offensive, demeaning, abusive or inappropriate remarks are as out of place online as they are offline.’ ” It added, “This provision proscribes a broad spectrum of communications that would include protected criticisms of the employer’s labor policies or treatment of employees.” A G.M. official said the company has asked the board to reconsider.

In a ruling last September, the board also rejected as overly broad Costco’s blanket prohibition against employees’ posting things that “damage the company” or “any person’s reputation.” Costco declined to comment.

Denise M. Keyser, a labor lawyer who advises many companies, said employers should adopt social media policies that are specific rather than impose across-the-board prohibitions.

Do not just tell workers not to post confidential information, Keyser said. Instead, tell them not to disclose, for example, trade secrets, product introduction dates or private health details.

But placing clear limits on social media posts without crossing the legal line remains difficult, said Steven M. Swirsky, another labor lawyer. “Even when you review the NLRB rules and think you’re following the mandates,” he said, “there’s still a good deal of uncertainty.”