Owner of Caesars casinos plans IPO

By Todd Prince, Las Vegas Review-Journal

Vici Properties, the owner of Caesars Entertainment Corp. casinos and golf courses, plans an initial public offering of its stock to help pay down more than $4 billion of debt and finance future acquisitions.

The real estate investment trust, created from Caesars' bankruptcy reorganization, will trade on the New York Stock Exchange under the symbol VICI, according to documents filed Dec. 11 with the Securities and Exchange Commission. The documents did not give a time frame or offering size.

Caesars Entertainment is the parent company of Harrah's Lake Tahoe and Harveys.

Read the whole story

Teacher training report: California earns a D+

By Sharon Noguchi, Bay Area News Group

California ranks below 31 other public-school systems and earns just a D-plus in ensuring teacher quality, according to a new report aimed at spurring states to improve teacher preparation.

The Washington, D.C. based National Council on Teacher

Quality's 2017 State Teacher Policy Yearbook evaluated and graded states on teacher preparation, evaluation, compensation and other factors that contribute to successful teaching. Since its last survey in 2015, the nonprofit, non-partisan council found that California and most states stagnated in their progress.

In an emailed response Tuesday, California Board of Education President Michael Kirst called the organization that produced the report "an advocacy group with its own arbitrary criteria for state grades."

Read the whole story

2017 may be best holiday shopping season in years

By Anne D'innocenzio, AP

Shoppers who are feeling good about the economy and spending more than expected on items like kitchen gadgets, toys and coats could make this the best holiday season in several years.

That's good news for retailers, some of which have had few reasons of late to be merry. But there's no question that stores need to keep adapting to how people shop as spending moves online.

Customer sentiment could shift again based on how they feel the tax overhaul is affecting them. Tax cuts mean some shoppers may have more money in their pockets, but they could opt to save it instead of spend it.

Read the whole story

Top 10 causes of death in the Silver State

By Brian Duggan, Reno Gazette-Journal

Like Americans nationwide, Nevadans were more likely to die from heart disease or cancer in 2016 than other causes.

But one cause of death in the Silver State stands out compared with national trends: suicide. The number of suicides increased by 13 percent from 2015 to 2016, according to data provided by the Nevada Division of Public and Behavioral Health.

The other top causes of death in Nevada are often diseases that affect the elderly or stem from risky life choices – like poor diets, alcohol and drug abuse.

Read the whole story

Americans are using a lot less water

By Story Hinckley, Christian Science Monitor

The average American is using a lot less water on a daily basis. Six gallons less, to be exact.

The US Geological Survey's National Water Use Science Project has estimated water use in the United States every five years since 1950. In its most recent estimate published this fall, the USGS found that American daily water use per capita went from 88 gallons in 2010 to 82 gallons per capita in 2015.

Conservation of fresh water is important because it is a limited resource: Less than 1 percent of all the water on Earth can by used by humans. With growing populations and changing climates, fresh water is becoming increasingly valuable, says Edward Osann, a senior policy analyst and water efficiency project director at the National Resources Defense Council.

Read the whole story

Record number in Nev. enroll in health insurance exchange

By Jessie Bekker, Las Vegas Review-Journal

President Trump predicted the Affordable Care Act would "implode," but a record number of Nevadans signed up for health insurance this year through the state's exchange during a shortened enrollment period.

Nearly 91,000 Nevadans enrolled in coverage for 2018 through the state's Silver State Health Insurance Exchange, data released by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services show.

That exceeded the state's enrollment numbers for last year by about 1,900.

Read the whole story

UNR team studies climate change and animals

By Mike Wolterbeek

A team of researchers at UNR has been studying the effects of climate change on the range movements of species, using a woodrat hybrid zone as a model system.

The team, including Professor Marjorie Matocq, Assistant Professor Kevin Shoemaker, and postdoctoral researcher Elizabeth Hunter, published a research paper, "Differential Effects of Climate on Survival Rates Drive Hybrid Zone Movement," in the scientific journal Current Biology.

"This, at its very basis, is a long-term study to understand what factors influence the persistence of populations at their range edges and how they respond to changing conditions," Matocq, in the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences, said.

The findings of this study have allowed for a unique look into the mechanisms' underlying range movements of species and the complex relationship between climate and inter-species competition in determining range limits. A range limit is a species geographic boundary beyond which it does not occur.

The question of how animals will respond to climate change is a major area of research in ecology, with clear implications for biodiversity conservation.

"When conditions change, one way that species may respond is

by shifting their ranges to follow more favorable conditions," Matocq said. "For example, if it's getting too hot or dry, species might move higher in elevation, or further north, but we understand very little about that process."

The interactions that animals have with other species at their range margins may strongly influence species distributions, but such interactions are difficult to study and therefore present a major barrier to understanding how species respond to climate change.

Matocq's woodrat data provided a unique opportunity to study the demography of two species at their range margins and how their populations responded to factors related to both climate and competition.

Strikingly, the researchers in the College of Agriculture, Biotechnology and Natural Resources uncovered a complex mechanism by which competition and climate worked together to favor one woodrat species over another, resulting in intrusion of the favored species into territory previously dominated by the other species.

"This research is a really novel contribution, as it documents a response to climate change that is mediated by species interactions, illustrating something many ecologists have long suspected: species interactions are a really important part of the equation," Matocq said.

"Our woodrat study is very good for this question because the two species hybridize," Hunter said. "So, when we're interested in studying species interactions, hybridizing species are very good for that because they are potentially the most competitively interacting species you can find."

There are many different ways that animals can interact with each other, such as competing with one another for food or territories, but in the case of this research, they can also share their genetic information.

Matocq began working on this study in 2008, but has been working with and collecting data on the woodrat species since 1996. Hunter and Shoemaker are population modelers, and started collaborating with Matocq in 2016.

“This was a nice collaboration to use the data that Marjorie had collected and our expertise in building models to predict how these different factors can affect population survival probabilities, and how interactions cause species ranges to shift,” Hunter said.

“We had genetic data for all individuals, and we also had information for estimating demographic parameters over time, so we had a unique opportunity to link the genetics to demographic rates like survival,” Shoemaker said. “It is a very unique opportunity.”

The team expressed the importance of understanding the effects of climate change on biodiversity.

“Take the example of polar bears, where it’s very easy to see how climate could affect their populations, but we need to think beyond how hotter temperatures will affect polar bears directly,” Hunter said. “They also interact with their prey species, and we need to understand how both of those populations are interacting in order to really know what is going to happen to polar bears.”

The team is on the leading edge of coming up with ways to look at such interactions in order to make better predictions.

“It illustrates the importance of long-term data sets for addressing these major questions, and there are few examples of data sets that can do what we were able to do with this paper,” Shoemaker said. “One of the things that we address in our paper is the need for more data sets that can examine how species respond to climate change at a deeper level.”

Mike Wolterbeek works at UNR.

S. Lake Tahoe ending retiree health care benefits

By Kathryn Reed

Retirees are no longer going to be a drain on the taxpayers of South Lake Tahoe – at least when it comes to their health benefits.

The obligation of retiree health care benefits goes away a year from New Year's Day.

This is the outcome of a protracted effort by City Manager Nancy Kerry to rein in debt, the City Council's desire to stop paying for benefits to retirees and their dependents for decades past their service, and the retirees agreeing to settle a **lawsuit from December 2015**.

Joe Rose, attorney with Rose Law in Sacramento who had represented the retirees, was not available for comment.

The deal affects more than 140 retirees.

For years South Lake Tahoe has been the only public entity in the Lake Tahoe Basin to offer retirees medical coverage.

South Lake Tahoe has always been self-insured, which means it pays all the medical bills incurred by those covered in the plan. About $4 million is spent on health care by the city each year.

"So this year we will look for medical insurance because (the retirees) won't be on there. So, the city could get out of the business of paying medical bills," City Manager Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*. "We took 50 years of obligation off the

locals.”

Several years ago the city created an OPEB – other post-employment benefits – account to help deal with the rising unfunded debt obligations. Kerry a handful of years ago offered to split the nearly $7 million pot of cash among all the retirees in exchange for them to forfeit future health care benefits. Some took it, others sued.

The deal reached this month, which the City Council is expected to sign off on in January, calls for the remainder of that pot of cash to be split equitably. In addition, those younger than 65 will get $12,000 and those 65 and older will get $6,000 each in 2019 and 2020. This money equals what the city had allocated for retiree medical care. They remain on the plan for 2018.

“Everyone gets a varied piece of the pie related to years of service and years to Medicare,” Kerry explained.

Retirees haven’t always had health benefits. Decades ago one got sick, needing some help. The city let him on the plan. This set the precedent and the flood gates were opened.

Through the years it became common practice that the retirees would get whatever health plan the employees agreed to.

It got to the point that retirees and their dependents outnumbered actual staff on the health plan. The people paying that bill were taxpayers. For that contribution locals got fewer services, including roads not being repaired, hours cut at the recreation center and fewer employees to help them. About a decade ago city staff was slashed by one-third. There were a lot of contributing factors, with millions of dollars in retiree medical benefits being one component.

At one point South Lake Tahoe’s unfunded liability for health care was $55 million.

A broker works with the city to decide what is in the health plan. For 20 years, costs were cut by deciding what would no longer be covered.

In 2007, the first substantive change was made under City Manager Dave Jinkens' watch. Anyone hired after Jan. 1, 2008, would not be given health benefits when they retired. But this made it so two people doing the same job were compensated in different ways.

In 2014, the council approved Kerry's plan to radically change health care. The main outcome was that all the employee groups agreed to give up their retiree health care effective Oct. 1, 2014.

These changes brought the unfunded liability to about $20 million.

This change put all employees on a level playing field.

Another hurdle for the city is to deal with CalPERS – the retiree pension system that has a noose around municipalities, with the Legislature holding the rope.

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8 VHR renters, owners hit with $1,000 fines

Eight $1,000 fines were issued within the first four days of the South Lake Tahoe's stricter vacation home rental ordinance.

The new rules took effect Dec. 22.

Four citations were issued for parking, two for exceeding

occupancy, one for parking and noise combination, and one for being an unpermitted VHR.

Depending on the violation, either the renter or the owner is cited.

No longer are warnings given to people.

Owners can lose their VHR permit after three citations in 24 month period.

– Lake Tahoe News staff report

EDC taxpayers pay twice for same roadwork



Tahoma roads disintegrated from a bad chip seal project. Photo/El Dorado County

By Kathryn Reed

The botched roadwork in Tahoma in 2015 ended up costing El

Dorado County thousands of dollars.

Normally government agencies deny claims when they are submitted. Not so with this case.

“These are unique claims in which the allegation of negligent application of emulsion and chips by county forces created an exposure to liability. While the county denies such negligence, there has not been a satisfactory answer to the question of what went wrong with the chip seal,” Carla Hass, spokeswoman for El Dorado County, told *Lake Tahoe News.* “There is no ‘general rule’ rather, all claims are evaluated on their own merits according to the facts and the law.”

Payment on the claims involving this case were at least in part all paid. That is unusual.

Based on numbers supplied by the county, from Nov. 1, 2011, to Oct. 31, 2017, there were 23 road surface condition claims throughout the county. Of those, 23.5 percent were paid; an average of less than three per year. These were road surface condition claims.

As for the Tahoma case, “13 claims have been filed. No claims have been denied; $41,860.05 in claims have been filed, $19,285.84 have been paid,” Hass said. She did not explain the discrepancy between the amount requested and the amount paid.

Western Emulsions was contracted to use a chip seal on about 21 miles of roadway on the West Shore. The following winter it started to deteriorate, especially with snow removal. The sticky oil surfaced. That is what caused much of the damage to personal vehicles and why the claims started being submitted.

Lake Tahoe News nearly two months ago requested all written communications between the county and the emulsion company. The county has refused to provide those documents.

“There is no evidence that the failure of the project

performed in August 2015 was the result of negligence on the part of the county or its employees," Hass said. However, taxpayers were still left with part of the bill from the subpar work.

Western Emulsions, per the settlement agreement with the county, was to pay $8,977.60 for the residents' claims – so, not even half.

The settlement agreement said to fix the mess it would cost $383,900. Of that amount, Western Emulsion was liable for $271,920. So, the county ended up in part paying twice for the same job and then for part of the claims to appease vehicle owners even though the county spokeswoman says the county was not negligent.

In the end, it meant less money for road repairs in other parts of the county.

The settlements states, "This agreement or any payment made pursuant to it, is not and may not be construed as an admission of liability, fault or responsibility by the parties." Parties refers to the county and the contractor.