Outlook good for real estate in Tahoe-Reno for 2013

By Anne Knowles, Northern Nevada Business Weekly

Real estate professionals are hopeful a recovery in the Northern Nevada residential market that began to take hold in 2012 will take off in 2013.

"We had our strongest sales since 2005," says Helen Graham, president-elect of the Reno-Sparks Association of Realtors and an agent with Keller Williams Realty in Reno. "Optimism is high. We see all the trends going in the right direction."

In the first 10 months of 2012, sales of existing single-family homes in Washoe County increased 5 percent, from 4,892 in 2011 to 5,057, according to the association.

The median home price in October rose 23 percent to $181,750 from the same month a year earlier. In October, 338 existing single family homes in Reno sold, a 2 percent increase from the 2011 and a 9 percent jump from September; 170 sold in Sparks, a 13 percent gain from a year earlier and a 12 percent bump from the previous month; and in Fernley 48 homes sold, a 12 percent increase from last year a 30 percent rise from September. The low end of the market is doing better than the high end, says Graham.

"There's a two-week supply for houses priced $100,000 to $199,000 and 4.9 months of inventory for homes priced at $400,000," she says. "The higher the price, needless to say, the higher inventory we have."

Graham attributes that in part to a tightening in credit, making it more difficult for potential buyers to qualify for pricier properties.

She says real estates and brokers have other concerns about the year ahead, including the effect of any tax changes now being worked out in Washington, the expiration of the federal debt-forgiveness bill, which exempts homeowners from taxes owed on mortgage debt forgiven by banks during short sales or foreclosures, and Nevada’s Assembly Bill 284, the 2011 robo-signing bill that resulted in a drop of bank notices of defaults on homes and fewer foreclosure properties on the market. Graham, as well as others, is confident interest rates on home loans will remain at rock bottom.

“We really do expect rates to stay historically low and not rise not until 2014,” says Graham. “Even then we’re only expecting them to rise to 4 percent.”

Carson City is reporting similar trends. Through Dec. 12, 657 single family homes were sold there, a 12 percent jump from 585 sales in the same, nearly 12-month period in 2011, according to Heidi McFadden, president of the Sierra Nevada Association of Realtors and an agent with Realty Executives. The median home price in 2011 was $134,000 compared to $130,000 in 2012.

“I don’t want it to reflect that our prices have gone down. We have 75 more transactions this year than we did last year, which would change our median, obviously,” says McFadden. “Prices have stabilized and we’re seeing multiple offers on properties under $250,000. There is a demand for housing under this range.”

McFadden says she’s even seen a return of bidding wars at the low-end of the market, especially in Carson City and south Reno.

In Lake Tahoe, signs are positive, too. Sales of home rose 2 percent in the 12-month period from December 2010 to November 2011, and jumped 27 percent, to 731 sales, from December 2011 to November 2012, according to the South Tahoe Association of

Realtors.

Meanwhile, the inventory of homes on the market has been cut almost in half in two years, from a 10.5-month supply in 2010 to 5.5-month supply in 2012.

The median home price for South Lake went from $228,000 in November 2011 to $289,500 last month, a 27 percent jump, while the average days on the market fell from 126 days to 108.

More laws to be imposed on Californians starting Jan. 1

By Patrick McGreevy, Los Angeles Times

SACRAMENTO — Californians will no longer be able to carry handguns openly in public, buy alcohol at self-serve checkout stands or purchase shark fins for their soup under hundreds of new laws that take effect Jan. 1.

Other measures bar minors from tanning beds, allow students to be suspended for cyber-bullying and require booster seats for children in cars until they are 8 years old or at least 4 feet, 9 inches tall.

Despite another year of budget shortfalls, the 760 bills that Gov. Jerry Brown signed into law in 2011 included several that cost money. Among them: new funding for a bullet train and a campaign to boost enrollment for food stamps as the economy remains sluggish.

Some bills took effect immediately after the governor signed them. One allows an NFL stadium proposed for downtown Los Angeles to receive expedited legal review of any challenges over environmental issues. Another prohibits cities and counties from outlawing male circumcision.

Brown faced a backlash for signing some of the proposals, including one allowing illegal immigrants to receive private financial aid administered by California’s public colleges. (Another permitting access to taxpayer-provided aid takes effect in 2013.)

Known as the California Dream Act, the pair of measures drew fire from the public and some lawmakers who consider them unfair to students born in the United States. But Assemblyman Gil Cedillo, D-Los Angeles, said his legislation recognizes the value of young people who graduate from high school in California regardless of where they were born.

“It’s important for California and the future of our economy to take advantage of the investment we have made in these young men and women,” Cedillo said.

Brown was also criticized for signing a law requiring public schools to include the contributions of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people in history lessons and instructional material, although new textbooks for lower grades are not planned for three years.

One of the most contentious issues was the ban on the open carrying of handguns, which put California in the minority of states that have adopted such restrictions. Some gun-rights advocates say the new law will not keep them from appearing in public with weapons that are not covered by the ban.

“Law-abiding citizens will start openly carrying unloaded long guns in public because their basic and fundamental civil right to self-defense, as enumerated in the Second Amendment, is clearly being infringed upon,” said Yih-Chau Chang, a spokesman for the firearms advocacy group Responsible Citizens of California.

Assemblyman Anthony Portantino, D-La Canada Flintridge, said he introduced the measure in response to law enforcement officials who felt that public safety was jeopardized by gun owners wearing firearms on their hips at coffee shops and other public venues as they called attention to a right to bear arms.

Laws taking effect also include:

Athlete safety: requires school districts to develop a process for identifying cases in which students suffer concussions in sports mishaps and require a parent to give written permission for the athlete to return to the lineup.

Audits: gives the state auditor broad new powers to investigate misuse of taxpayer funds by cities and counties, in response to the financial scandal in the city of Bell.

Autism: requires health insurers to include coverage for autism.

Baby food: bans stores from selling expired infant food and formula.

Bail: requires that people extradited to California to face criminal charges face $100,000 in bail in addition to any bail already issued for the underlying offense.

Ballot measures: requires all ballot initiatives and referenda to be decided in November general elections, which typically have higher turnout – and more liberal voters casting ballots – than do June primaries. Excludes measures placed on the ballot by the Legislature.

Beer: bars the importation, production and sale of beer to which caffeine has been directly added as a separate ingredient, in response to incidents in which young people have been hospitalized with severe intoxication after drinking the beverages.

Bullet train: provides $4 million for planning work on a section of a high-speed rail system proposed between Los Angeles and San Diego.

Child actors: streamlines the process for obtaining state permission for minors to work in the entertainment industry by allowing parents to get temporary permits online rather than through the mail.

Clemency: requires governors to give prosecutors a chance to weigh in at least 10 days before acting on requests for commutation of prison terms. The law was proposed after former Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger acted on his last day in office to reduce a prison sentence for the son of former Assembly Speaker Fabian Nunez.

Cyber-bullying: allows schools to suspend students for bullying classmates on social networking sites such as Facebook.

California wants to find owners of millions of dollars worth of goods

By Claudia Buck, Sacramento Bee

It’s a cross between grandma’s attic and Fort Knox.

In a tiny, unmarked room inside the state’s unclaimed property office in Rancho Cordova, there’s a veritable treasure trove just waiting for the right people to claim it.

Set up like a department store jewelry counter, the 200-

square-foot room is rimmed with glass cases displaying an eye-popping, yet oddball, collection of unclaimed goods.

There’s everything from a well-aged bottle of cognac to Hank Aaron baseball cards, from glittering diamonds and jade jewelry to American Indian beaded belts, from a $100,000 stack of gold ingots to a single sardine can.

All of it belongs to Californians who either died or simply forgot about a long-ago safe deposit box.

And collectively, it represents just a fraction of the $6.1 billion in money and property that California is holding until the rightful owners come forward.

Standing amid the abandoned riches one recent weekday, state Controller John Chiang said his mission is simple: to get rid of it. “Our first objective … is to reunite people with their property,” he said.

Over the past six years, Chiang’s office has ramped up its efforts to do so. In fiscal year 2011, it sent more than 1 million notices to Californians that their property was about to be sent to the state. In that same period, it took in $557 million and returned $207 million to claimants.

By law, unclaimed property – from banks, financial institutions, utilities and other money holders – must be transferred to the state for safekeeping if there’s been no activity on an account for three years. That includes stock shares, uncashed payroll checks, utility refunds, life insurance payouts. It’s intended to prevent banks or others from taking unclaimed funds into their own accounts.

Chiang says it’s not surprising that so much winds up in the state’s hands. The popular TV show “Storage Wars,” where the contents of unclaimed storage units are auctioned off, is telling, he says. “People have a lot of stuff and it’s easy to lose track of.”

Since 2003, the state no longer auctions off the contents of safe deposit boxes or other property.

Some of what’s been abandoned is purely sentimental: crocheted baby booties, children’s books and sepia-toned family photographs.

Some is pop-cultural: a 1988 Michael Jackson concert ticket; old Hollywood movie star photos of Clint Eastwood, Marilyn Monroe, John Travolta, the Marx Brothers.

Some is historical: a Civil War diary; an 1865 New York Herald announcing President Abraham Lincoln’s assassination; an early 1900s check from the Bank of Italy’s Sacramento branch; a 1906 newspaper headlined “SF in Ruins” printed on the only press to survive the earthquake; a letter from a nuclear engineer aboard the USS Nautilus, the first submarine to reach the North Pole.

And, of course, hundreds of baseball, basketball and football trading cards, from Mickey Mantle to Gale Sayers to Kareem Abdul-Jabbar.

And it’s not just California that’s sitting on unclaimed property. Nationwide, about $41.7 billion is waiting to be returned, according to the National Association of Unclaimed Property Administrators. In fiscal 2011, 2.5 million claims worth $2.25 billion were returned to owners nationwide.

In California, most of the financial accounts are turned over to the state in June and December. Safe deposit boxes – about 4,000 a year – are turned over on a bank-by-bank schedule. Just last week, a box yielded a collection of Robert Kennedy campaign photos from the 1960s.

All of the property is either in a highly secured vault room or the tiny display space, both of which are accessed only through multiple locked doors. Entry requires dual key swipes by two employees. Once inside, surveillance cameras monitor every movement.

But while the storage area is virtually impenetrable, it's easy for anyone to search for unclaimed property, in California or other states.

And just about anyone could be on the state's list. Former first lady Maria Shriver has $12.17 in unclaimed wages from Sony Pictures Entertainment. Gov. Jerry Brown has 18 shares of U.S. Bancorp stock, plus $61.26 in fractional shares, waiting for him to claim.

"I'm sure we have sent a notice to him," said Gary Qualset, unclaimed property division chief. He said Capitol officials and legislators as well as local governments get alerted to unclaimed property.

Until the owners file their claims, all money stays in the state's general fund. Since 2003, the state no longer pays interest on funds it holds. Shares of stock and mutual funds are cashed out after 18 months and the proceeds held.

With a staff of 250, the state's unclaimed property office issues payouts daily to individuals and institutions. Last year, the average return was $728.

Amounts vary from as small as $1 to one of the largest: a pair of solid-gold candlesticks valued at about $1 million that were left in an elderly couple's safe deposit box. The couple's intended heir: the University of California system and UCLA's nursing school. After UC's ownership was established, an armored car came to collect the candlesticks, Qualset said.

Controller Chiang says his most memorable return was a Medal of Honor that was awarded by President Harry Truman to a World War II Navy officer for heroism during the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The medal sat in his late daughter's safe deposit for years, until it was transferred to the state in 2006. After locating the officer’s extended family members, the medal was returned to them at a Navy ceremony in San Diego.

Some consumers have complained that the process to reclaim their property is cumbersome and not worth the effort.

But Chiang said there’s a reason that verification is strict: “We’re seeing increasing instances of fraud,” he said, by people using forged documents. Sometimes, a legitimate heir comes forward to claim a parent’s money but conveniently forgets there are siblings entitled to a share.

In all cases, the state does extensive research and requires proof of ownership, such as Social Security numbers and certified death certificates.

There’s no fee or charge for calling California’s unclaimed property unit or using its “claimit.ca.gov” website. But so-called “asset locators” or “heir finders” will offer to find and claim property for you – for a fee. By law, they cannot charge more than 10 percent of the returned property’s value.

Clearly, at $6.1 billion, there’s still a lot of stuff in the state’s attic.

“The goal is to return it all,” said Qualset. “That’s what all the staff is working on since 1959.”

El Dorado County, small farmers find compromise

By Cathy Locke, Sacramento Bee

An advocate of grass-roots family farming says a newly adopted El Dorado County ordinance is a compromise, but it boosts efforts to reduce state and federal restrictions on small agricultural operations.

“The big thing for me is it has established the family farm as having a valued place,” said Pattie Chelseth, co-owner of the 10-acre My Sisters’ Farm in Shingle Springs. “It needs to be cherished and nurtured.”

Chelseth earlier this year sought the Board of Supervisors’ backing for a campaign against regulations that hurt small farmers.

This month the board adopted a “local food and community self-governance” ordinance, which prohibits the county from establishing licensing and inspection requirements on what are termed “family farms.”

The county counsel’s staff report notes that the definition of family farms is quite restrictive. It essentially means a farm that maintains only a one-to-one relationship with its patrons.

The definition excludes farms that have commercial aspects to their operations, or that sell to anyone for resale.

Chelseth sought the board’s support for the rights of small farmers after she was issued a cease and desist order by the California Department of Food and Agriculture. She was selling shares of cows on her farm in an attempt to deal with rules that prohibited her from selling raw milk directly to consumers.

Fifteen people own shares of two cows that she keeps on her property, but to comply with state regulations, Chelseth said, those people would have to consume the milk on her property.

Chelseth is part of a group that is working on state legislation to create a home dairy exemption for operations with three cows or fewer.

The El Dorado County ordinance, adopted Dec. 18, does not exempt family farms from general licensing and inspection requirements, such as those associated with zoning, building and business license codes.

The staff report also stresses that it does not affect the applicability of state or federal law in the county, and county personnel will continue to carry out their functions and duties to enforce such laws.

The ordinance states, however, that the county may, but is not obligated to, challenge legislation or regulations in court in appropriate cases.

Kirkwood ski resort still evolving at age 40

By Kathryn Reed

It was 40 years ago that a dream came true for Dick Reuter and Bud Klein. The ski pioneers created Kirkwood Mountain Resort.

Today, the ski resort celebrates its roots without its founders. Reuter and Klein both died in 2011 – both in their 80s. But what they have left is a legacy, a mountain that often gets the most snow in the greater Lake Tahoe area, a place that isn't for the meek, a place that embraces its ruggedness as well as its place along Highway 88 that isn't always easy to get to no matter the direction one approaches from.

The Reut chairlift is named after Reuter.

"From the beginning, Kirkwood was a special place and it still is. Our task is to maintain that," Blaise Carrig, president of Mountain Operations for Vail Resorts, told *Lake Tahoe News*.


Kirkwood Mountain Resort opened 40 years ago. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Kirkwood's Dec. 31 anniversary events

2pm

Torchlight parade tickets on sale at Guest Services (tbc)
2-6pm
DJ Village Plaza – DJ Berkmon
4pm
Lifts close
5:15pm and 5:45pm
Fire

performances in Village Plaza
5:30–6pm
Torchlight parade skiers are loading chair
6–6:30pm
Torchlight parade
6:30–7pm
Fire performance – Village Plaza
7–7:30pm
Speeches – Kirkwood Past, Present & Future
7:30–7:45pm
Fireworks
7:45pm
Fire dancers lead guests to party at Red Cliffs
8pm–1am
After Party at Red Cliffs – (full bar plus appetizers available)
8pm–1am

DJ – SMURKO
9pm–12:30am
Gogo dancers
10pm
Aerial performance at Party
Midnight
Countdown in Red Cliffs
12:05am
Aerial performance at Party
1am
Party ends

The Colorado-based company bought Kirkwood earlier this year for $18 million from Mountain Springs Kirkwood.

Carrig said the goal of the new owners is to retain the passion and spirit Reuter and Klein had for the area.

“Kirkwood is about great skiing and it’s about the special landscape,” Carrig said.

When Klein and Reuter developed the resort that is mostly in Amador and Alpine counties, but has a slice in El Dorado County, too, the land was undeveloped and cows were grazing in the meadow.

“I flew over it a couple times. I could taste it, smell it,” Klein told this reporter on the 35th anniversary of the resort of what Kirkwood would become.

Klein was at the resort for the groundbreaking of Expedition Lodge. He never got to see that come to fruition. The recession derailed the project.

Kirkwood Mountain Development retained most of the rights to the real estate assets, while Vail Resorts has the mountain to operate.

“Looking ahead, I am extremely excited to work with the very talented and committed staff of Kirkwood to kick-off the next 40 years. The mountain is incredible, the snow is unbelievable and the possibilities are many. My priority is to get behind the scenes to understand where the opportunities are to provide the best experiences for our guests,” Casey Blann, general manager of Kirkwood, told *Lake Tahoe News.* “While I won’t be around to see the entire next 40 years, I can at least get the ball rolling toward improvements which we hope will resonate with our both our guests, as well as staff.”

Vail Resorts is still in the process of assessing what improvements to make first.

Better lift service – Kirkwood has two high-speed quads, with one being on a beginner run – is a big goal. Carrig said looking at alleviating choke points would be on the priority list.

More food service on the mountain is also likely to be forthcoming.

Today, various events will take place to commemorate the resort turning 40, as noted above.

“We want to honor those individuals who had the vision and the passion to make Kirkwood a reality. Without their dedication and rugged determination; Kirkwood would not have persevered and prospered for all these years,” Blann said.

Fine print limits nonprofits' access to grant funds for state parks

By Matt Weiser, Sacramento Bee

The grand act of atonement that state leaders signed into law to correct a financial scandal at the California parks department may not turn out to be the healing gesture it first appeared to be.

The new law signed by Gov. Jerry Brown in September, AB1478, allocates $10 million to provide "dollar-for-dollar" matching grants for private donations to the state parks system. The intent, in part, was to reassure wary parks supporters that at least some of the $54 million in "hidden money" discovered in the scandal would go back to the parks and not be diverted for some other government purpose.

The $10 million was appropriated from the State Parks and Recreation Fund, one of two special funds where California Department of Parks and Recreation officials were found to be hiding the $54 million for many years. (Another $10 million, and other money, are targeted to cover operating and capital costs.)

This vast amount of hidden money, first reported by the *Bee* on July 20, would have been more than adequate to cover the $22 million in budget cuts that required the state to close 70 parks. Yet department leaders kept the money hidden even as they signed complex and unprecedented contracts with local governments and small nonprofits that agreed to operate the threatened parks.

Many of those groups viewed AB1478 as a reprieve – a chance to use some of the hidden money to cover the enormous costs they incurred by agreeing to rescue the parks.

But none of the $10 million will be given to them in cash. The state's lawyers determined that doing so amounts to a "gift of state funds" that would violate the California Constitution.

Instead, rules released by state parks on Nov. 13 specify that grants will be provided only "in kind" – meaning use of state employees or services – to match a financial donation.

"My position is it's going to undermine the partnerships, for obvious reasons," said Caryl Hart, director of Sonoma County Regional Parks, which took over Annadel State Park near Santa Rosa when it was threatened with closure. "We need a dollar-for-dollar match to pay our staff to operate the parks."

In many cases, she said, rather than easing the financial burden of operating a park, the rules may require a nonprofit to invest more money.

"They should operate the parks themselves if they have the staff," Hart said of the state's rules.

The troubling fine print is a reminder that the scandal engulfing America's largest state parks system is far from over. The state still has a lot of damage control to do – and big questions to answer – before California's legion of park lovers are again ready for a group hug.

The new director of the state parks system, former Marine Corps Maj. Gen. Anthony L. Jackson, seems to understand this.

"We know we're going to take a beating," Jackson said in a recent meeting with the *Bee*'s editorial board. "In the next year, we’re going to earn your trust back and we’re going to do some really good things out in the parks.”

Separate investigations by the state controller’s office and the Department of Finance, released in December, came with a list of reforms proposed for state parks. Jackson said most of these have already been adopted.

Those investigations also found $3.9 million in additional unallocated funds, as well as potentially tens of thousands more that was inappropriately paid to employees working outside their job classifications.

Two more investigations are expected early in 2013: One by the state auditor, and another by the attorney general’s office. The latter is expected to outline whether any laws were broken, and may finally explain why the department hid so much money for so long.

Amid all the tumult, one fact has been overlooked: Today, despite financial scandals and budget cuts, only one of the state’s 278 parks is closed to the public.

Closures were avoided at all the rest because local and federal governments, dozens of nonprofit groups and even private businesses stepped forward to keep parks open when the state could not.

“We want to keep these facilities available to the public,” said Ted Schlosser, who with his wife Karen now operates Brannan Island State Recreation Area in Sacramento County as employees of American Land & Leisure, a Utah company that signed an operating agreement with the state. “We as a company are tickled that we have the opportunity to come in and show the state what we can do with the same resources.”

Another provision of AB1478, signed into law after the “hidden funds” discovery, mandates that no state parks will be closed through July 1, 2014.

The department now maintains a status list on its website of the 70 parks formerly slated for closure. Of those, 42 are open with reduced services or some form of partnership agreement, 23 are open with agreements in progress, and five are still seeking partners.

Only Providence Mountains State Recreation Area is closed. Possibly the most remote of all the state parks – 16 miles off Interstate 40, deep in the Mojave Desert – it actually closed before the July 1 deadline because it was crippled by maintenance problems.

And Providence soon suffered a fate that advocates feared would befall other closed parks: Thieves used bolt cutters to enter a locked gate, steal equipment and vandalize park buildings.

“I felt very sad,” said Dennis Casebier, of the Mojave Desert Heritage and Cultural Association. “The state promised they’d take care of it, and they didn’t.”

Many state park advocacy groups would like to get their share of the $10 million in grants to save their local park from the neglect that occurred at Providence.

Brian Cahill, the department’s assistant deputy director of park operations, acknowledges the constitutional limitation on spending that money is a concern. But he does not foresee any problem distributing all $10 million.

“The interest is tremendous,” Cahill said. “I think they’d prefer cash. But from where I sit, it’s not even negotiable. We’re just trying to be very creative on what we offer in kind.”

The first such deal was signed Dec. 19 to support Henry Coe State Park, near Gilroy. The state agreed to match $279,000 donated by the Coe Park Preservation Fund earlier this year to prevent the park from closing.

The deal was relatively simple, as state parks will commit an equal amount of money to pay its staff to keep operating the park, essentially saving the preservation fund from having to raise more money.

Friends of China Camp is another group that hopes to benefit. It is operating China Camp State Park in Marin County by using volunteers to collect visitor fees. It then uses that money to pay the salaries of six state park employees – rangers and maintenance staff – who do much of the heavy lifting to keep the park running.

“I think there’s a reasonable chance we’ll get matching funds,” said Ernest Chung, chairman of Friends of China Camp. “Because we can just use the money to pay for state employees we already have contracted, we have a very easy way of utilizing the money. Most other people have not been able to figure out how they can use the funds.”

Brannan Island represents yet another operating model in the brave new world of state park survival.

The Schlossers, both in their 70s, are the park’s caretakers now. They retired from earlier professional careers to travel full time in their motor home. It still serves as home – parked behind a service building at Brannan Island.

The couple has worked for American Land & Leisure for four years. The company operates more than 450 parks and campgrounds in 13 states, mainly under contract with the U.S. Forest Service.

Now, it also operates Brannan Island and two other California state parks: Turlock Lake and Woodson Bridge.

The contract is a first for the company and for state parks. California has never before allowed a private business to operate an entire state park, though it has always had concession agreements with businesses to provide specific park services, such as kayak rentals and horseback rides.

“All the reports we’ve had say it’s working fine,” said Cahill. “Most of these companies that operate a park have been a park concession business, so they know the background. They know how to operate a park and not just sell widgets.”

On a recent tour of Brannan Island, the only full-service state park in the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, Ted Schlosser described some of the challenges.

Recent storms toppled a number of willow trees, and the company doesn’t have a chain saw big enough to handle them. Schlosser plans to bring in a California Conservation Corps crew to deal with that, along with larger park vegetation cleanup issues.

The park’s 10-lane boat launch ramp – the biggest public ramp in all of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta – is perpetually clogged by drifting water hyacinth, an invasive weed.

Schlosser tries to keep two lanes clear, but it’s a daily battle. He has to use a tractor to clear the launch ramp, then haul pickup-truck loads of the weed to a disposal area in a remote corner of the park.

Recent visitation has been scarce. This is not surprising during the holidays, but it has the Schlossers wondering how the park will cover expenses.

On the day before Christmas, only two of the park’s more than 100 campsites were occupied. One of these campers paid no fees because he qualified for a special disabled veteran state parks pass.

In late summer when the Schlossers arrived, however, the park was busy. One weekend day, for instance, the campground was bustling and the park was simultaneously hosting a wedding, a baptism and a Boy Scout troop.

Based on its experience running hundreds of other campgrounds, and data on annual visitation at the park, the company is confident it will make enough money to operate Brannan Island using existing revenue sources.

It does not plan to seek any of the new grant funds.

Prior to American Land & Leisure taking over, the park had been reduced to weekend operation only due to state budget cuts.

Now the campground, launch ramp, fishing areas and other amenities are back open seven days a week.

“We’ve got an awful lot of public that are real happy we are here,” Karen Schlosser said. “There’s a lot to be learned, and we’ve pretty well got a handle on it. We just take it day by day.”

AB 1478 was the first major effort by the state’s political leaders to clean up a financial scandal within the California Department of Parks and Recreation.

A major thrust of the law is to allocate $20.5 million from the State Parks and Recreation Fund for new purposes. This money is part of the $53.5 million in “hidden funds” discovered at the parks agency.

The fate of the remaining $33 million, which resides in the Off Highway Vehicle Fund, has yet to be decided but will likely be settled in coming months by the Legislature.

The new law provides for:

• $10 million for “dollar-for-dollar” grants to match private-sector donations to state parks. (State lawyers later ruled that matching donations with cash is a “gift of state funds,” which violates the California Constitution. So parks officials instead will match donations only with in-kind services provided by state parks employees.)

• Another $10 million to cover routine state parks operating costs, helping close the gap caused by recent budget cuts.

• As much as $500,000 for the department to pay for ongoing audits and investigations as directed by the Joint Legislative Audit Committee, the attorney general’s office, the Department of Finance or other state agency.

• Another $10 million from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Water Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006, to pay for capital projects in state parks.

• An existing program at state parks to enhance revenue through new fee-collection systems is required to preserve half of the new revenue in the local park district where it is generated (an increase from 40 percent). Additional accountability measures are imposed on this program.

• The department shall not close, or propose to close, a state park in the 2012-13 or 2013-14 fiscal year.

Placer County has new judge

By Ed Fletcher, Sacramento Bee

Gov. Jerry Brown on Thursday filled three Northern California judgeships, appointing a former assemblywoman and two area lawyers — all Democrats — to fill court vacancies.

Former Assemblywoman Alyson Huber, 40, was appointed to a seat on the Sacramento Superior Court bench. Huber, of El Dorado Hills, completed her second term in November. Amid personal and financial issues stemming for her divorce proceedings, she abandoned plans to move to Rancho Cordova to seek a third term.

Folsom attorney Michael W. Jones was appointed to the Placer County bench. Jones, 56, was a senior partner at Hansen Kohls Jones Sommer and Jacob LLP. He previously served in various capacities in the Shasta and Los Angeles county district attorney's offices.

Linda Sloven, 58, of Nevada City was appointed to the Superior Court in Nevada County. She has run a private law practice since 1994.

The salary for Superior Court judges is $178,789.

Study: Teens who drink alcohol impact their brain tissue

By Kathleen Miles, Huffington Post

A teen who consumes alcohol is likely to have reduced brain tissue health, but a teen who uses marijuana is not, according to a study.

Researchers scanned the brains of 92 adolescents, ages 16 to 20, before and after an 18-month period. During that year and a half, half of the teens – who already had extensive alcohol and marijuana-use histories – continued to use marijuana and alcohol in varying amounts. The other half abstained or kept consumption minimal, as they had throughout adolescence.

The before-and-after brain scans of the teens consuming typically five or more drinks at least twice a week showed reduced white matter brain tissue health, study co-author Susan Tapert, neuroscientist at UC San Diego, told HuffPost. This may mean declines in memory, attention, and decision-making into later adolescence and adulthood, she said.

However, the level of marijuana use — up to nine times a week during the 18 months — was not linked to a change in brain tissue health. The researchers did not test performance; they only looked at brain scans.

The study was conducted by researchers at UC San Diego and is scheduled to be published in the April issue of the journal Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research.

The damage occurs because white matter brain tissue develops throughout adolescence and into a person's 20s, Joanna Jacobus, postdoctoral fellow at the UC San Diego, and co-author of the study, told HuffPost.

Part of that still-developing brain tissue is where decision-making ability comes from, which can exacerbate substance use. "It becomes a cycle. If teens decrease their tissue health and cognitive ability to inhibit themselves, they might become more likely to engage in risky behavior like excessive substance use," Jacobus said.

While studies showing the deleterious effect of alcohol on adolescents and adults have been more consistent, studies of the effect of marijuana have not, Tapert said. "One reason is that marijuana can really vary. Different strains contain different levels of THC and other marijuana components. For example, some studies have suggested one component, cannabidiol, may actually have neuroprotective effects," she said.

The researchers are not sure why alcohol had an effect and marijuana did not. They said the study results cannot be considered definitive without more research. They also said they do not know if the reduced brain tissue health is permanent.

Still, Duncan Clark, a medical doctor who was not involved in the study and who studies teen substance abuse, said the study is valuable because similar research has only conducted a one-time test instead of tests before and after a period of substance use.

Clark, associate professor of psychiatry at the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, said that because white matter brain tissue development may be the basis for greater self-control, researchers hope to be able to eventually use brain scans like those in this study to predict young individuals' likelihood of substance abuse.

Because the researchers followed the subjects for 18 months, they were able to at least partially monitor preexisting differences in the two groups. But Jacobus conceded that eliminating other factors – such as genetics, home environment, and even minimal use of other drugs – is very difficult.

Each teen in the study received brain imaging, a detailed substance-use assessment, and toxicology screening at the beginning of the study and at the end of the study – as well as substance-use interviews every six months.

Tapert led another study published in 2009 that looked at people ages 12 to 14 before and after they started to drink. Tapert's team found poorer performance on tests of thinking and memory in the teens who had begun to drink. The researchers reported that alcohol particularly compromised boys' attention span, and girls' comprehension and interpretation of visual information.

While this latest study examines marijuana’s effect on physical brain tissue, a Duke University study earlier this year examined the drug’s effect on intelligence and performance. That study found that teens who routinely smoke marijuana before turning 18 risk a long-term drop in their IQ.

Teen use of marijuana continues to be high, while teens’ perception of the drug’s harmfulness is down, according to a University of Michigan study published Wednesday. Nearly 23 percent of high school seniors polled in the study said they had smoked marijuana in the month prior.

“It is clear that more research is needed into the long-term effects of marijuana on the brain,” Tapert said. “Especially because use is up.”

Body of missing El Dorado County man found

By Bill Lindelof, Sacramento Bee

The body of a man missing for more than a month has been found in El Dorado County.

When David Clement, 30, of Camino was thought to have gone for a jog on the morning of Nov. 6 and never returned, his father worried that he might have been attacked by a mountain lion.

Searchers looked many times for the Army veteran, but had no luck.

Then, on Dec. 19, his father and other searchers tried again and found Clement’s remains in the Snows Road area of Camino.

The body was found by his father and searchers Shelli LaMadrid of El Dorado County Search and Rescue and Jody Finne-Frock. The young man's body was located in an area searched earlier.

"I found him," said David Clement. "But I could not go look at him close enough. It's hard for a dad to do that. Shelli and Jody came over and identified him and we called 911. He did shoot himself."

The body was off the side of the road in an area of low-growing shrubs.

John Clement said his son spent two years in the Army and was discharged in 2001. He pursued acting for a time, serving as an extra in movies, before taking an information technology job with the California Highway Patrol – a position he left two years ago.

David Clement had been depressed for a time as he struggled to pay bills while developing a computer game, "but he had worked through that," his father said in November.

When he was unable to reach his son by phone last month, John Clement went to the house. His son's motorcycle was there, but the weather was bad so his father figured he had gone somewhere with friends.

A couple of days later, John Clement again went to the Camino house David shared with a roommate. The roommate hadn't seen David either, but assumed they had just been missing one another.

David Clement's new running shoes and a jacket were gone, along with a pistol he usually carried as protection against mountain lions when he ran in the woods. His cellphone and wallet were still at the house.

Clement wanted to thank searchers and others in the community who helped the family.

“We had huge support from friends,” said John Clement.

A fund has been set up to assist the Clement family with burial expenses.

Donations may be sent to the David Clement Memorial Fund at El Dorado Savings Bank or John Clement, P.O. Box 2161, Shingle Springs, CA 95682.

California sales tax rate increases Jan. 1

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF THE SALES & USE TAX RATE		
Rate	**Jurisdiction**	**Purpose**
3.6875%	State	State General Fund
0.25%	State	State General Fund
0.25%	State	State’s Fiscal Recovery Fund (2004 Economic Recovery Bonds)
0.50%	State	Local Public Safety Fund (1993)
0.50%	State	Local Revenue Fund (Health and Social Services)
1.0625%	State	Local Revenue Fund 2011 (Public Safety)

0.25%	State	Initiative Constitutional Amendment (Proposition 30)
0.25%	Local	0.25% County Transportation Funds
0.75%	Local	City or County Operations
7.50%	**State/Local**	**Total Statewide Base Sales and Use Tax Rate on January 1, 2013**

California’s sales tax on Jan. 1 goes from 7.25 percent to 7.5 percent.

The passage of Proposition 30 on Nov. 6 is why it is going up. This increase is set to expire Dec. 31, 2016.

Sales tax in some locations will be 10 percent because voters in cities and counties can choose to levy a higher local rate.

In South Lake Tahoe, the rate will be 8 percent. The 0.5 percent additional tax has been in place since 2004. It goes to the city’s general fund.

– *Lake Tahoe News staff report*