

Voter turnout expected to be healthy in El Dorado, Placer counties

By Loretta Kalb, Sacramento Bee

The polls will open at 7am Tuesday, but this presidential election already is notable for the volume of vote-by-mail ballots flowing into county offices and for the large number of registered voters.



With polls staying open until 8pm, election officials predict a healthy turnout in the region.

Placer County is estimating a turnout of registered voters in the 80 percent range. In El Dorado County, the hope is for close to 85 percent. In Yolo County, about 78 percent is projected.

Sacramento County as of Friday had not projected turnout. But in the last presidential election, turnout was 79 percent.

Whatever the expectation, most of those voting won't show up at polling places.

Most registered voters in the four-county area have shown they prefer voting by mail. And thousands of the ballots have already been returned to their respective counties' elections offices.

In all, more than 1.1 million people are registered to vote in Sacramento, Placer, El Dorado and Yolo counties, say election officials.

The breakdown: A record 699,000 voters are registered in Sacramento County; another 208,600 are registered in Placer County; 110,700 in El Dorado County; and 102,000 in Yolo County.

Here's how those counties stack up in the vote-by-mail category:

In Placer and El Dorado counties, approximately two-thirds of registered voters have requested vote-by-mail ballots.

In Yolo County, 55,000 vote-by-mail ballots were issued. And by midday Friday, more than 40 percent of those had been returned to the elections office, said Tom Stanionis, chief of staff for the Yolo County clerk-recorder.

In Sacramento County, elections offices have been "inundated with a wave of vote-by-mail ballots pouring in," spokesman Brad Buyse said.

By midday Friday, more than 146,000 ballots had been returned by mail.

Officials say it's too late to mail those ballots in if you want them to be counted. At this point, all vote-by-mail ballots must be dropped off at either your county election office or at any polling place on Election Day.

To be counted in this election, all the ballots must be received by 8pm Tuesday, Buyse said.

Sacramento County began processing vote-by-mail ballots on Oct. 26.

And while the final votes will take time to tally on election night, Buyse said the ballots that arrived in the elections office before Saturday should be largely tallied.

As a result, very preliminary vote-by-mail results ought to be available for viewing on the county's website shortly after

polls close at 8pm Tuesday.

Nurse pleads no contest in Placerville elder abuse case

By Marjie Lundstrom, Sacramento Bee

A nurse accused of providing shoddy care to a 77-year-old woman at a Placerville nursing home pleaded no contest Thursday to felony elder abuse and agreed to help prosecutors with the criminal case against her former supervisor.

Rebecca LeAn Smith, 39, returned to El Dorado County last week from her Louisiana home and negotiated a plea with California's attorney general over her role leading up to the 2008 death of Johnnie Esco of Cameron Park.

The elderly woman, whose devoted husband and family members visited her daily, deteriorated rapidly during her 13-day stay at the El Dorado Care Center in Placerville, court documents show.

She died on March 7, 2008, at nearby Marshall Medical Center, and her family subsequently settled a civil lawsuit with the nursing home's former owner, Horizon West Healthcare Inc. of Rocklin.

In March of this year – four years after Johnnie Esco's death – the California attorney general took the extraordinary legal step of charging Smith and the facility's then-director of nursing, Donna Darlene Palmer, 58, with felony elder abuse. Both nurses also were charged with the special allegation of

inflicting "great bodily injury" which, for victims over 70, adds five years to a prison sentence.

The nurses' preliminary hearing was scheduled to begin Thursday in El Dorado Superior Court, but Palmer's attorney was granted a postponement – while Smith's attorney struck a deal.

"I have responsibility, and I have to own up to my responsibility," Smith told the *Bee* after Thursday's hearing, speaking softly and holding back tears. "There were things that were missed. Things could have been done better.

"My heart aches," said the mother of five, who will return to Louisiana until her sentencing in January.

Palmer's attorney, Patrick K. Hanly of Sacramento, said he was surprised by Smith's plea because "there was no evidence from discovery that she committed a crime."

His client is preparing to go to trial, he said.

Deputy Attorney General Steven Muni, who is prosecuting the case, called Thursday's settlement "a positive step."

Muni had worked closely for months with Johnnie Esco's husband of nearly 61 years, Don Esco, a retired Air Force veteran who anguished over his wife's death – and pressed for justice in the criminal courts.

Don Esco died Oct. 8 in Sacramento at age 82 after undergoing surgery to relieve his chronic back pain. Because of his declining health, Esco was allowed to testify before the court in August. He told the *Bee* in one of his last interviews that he was "living on borrowed time" and worried he would not see the criminal case to its conclusion.

"This (plea agreement) complies with the wishes of the late Mr. Esco, who regarded Ms. Smith as a ... mother who was just working to make ends meet for her kids," said Muni, noting

that Esco “felt considerable compassion” for Smith.

Don Esco was more blunt in his assessment of Donna Palmer and Horizon West management, whom he blamed for his wife’s death. Esco’s civil suit, which was settled in 2010 for nearly \$3 million, accused the company of understaffing the facility to maximize profits.

Last year, Horizon West Healthcare Inc. sold its 27 nursing homes, including the El Dorado Care Center, to a San Marcos-based chain. The Placerville facility since has been renamed.

The state’s criminal case contends that both nurses failed to perform their duties or to adequately supervise staff members caring for Esco. The woman, who suffered from dementia, had been sent to the facility in February 2008 to recuperate after being hospitalized with pneumonia.

While there, Johnnie Esco developed a severe fecal impaction. Hospital staff also documented injuries that Don Esco had found two days earlier, including bruising along his wife’s chin, jaw line, chest and wrist, and a wound on her right pinkie finger. She died less than 17 hours after being transported to the hospital.

By pleading no contest to one count of felony elder abuse (treated the same as a guilty plea), Smith agreed to a county jail term of 270 days, which will be suspended. The special allegation was dismissed. Smith, who had been a licensed vocational nurse, also agreed to “fully cooperate” in the AG’s ongoing investigation of Palmer, and to testify against her, if called, according to court documents.

The deal also calls for her to perform 200 to 300 hours of community service, and to comply with any decisions of California’s vocational nursing licensing board.

Smith told the *Bee* she has not practiced nursing since she suffered from “burnout” in mid-2010 and returned to her home

to focus on raising her children.

Smith voluntarily agreed months ago to perform no official nursing duties, pending the criminal case's outcome. Palmer got approval to continue working as a consulting nurse for a group of nursing homes but not provide "hands-on" patient care.

Palmer, a registered nurse, was director of nursing at the El Dorado Care Center when Johnnie Esco was there.

Smith said Thursday that while she accepts responsibility she did contend with a "high patient caseload."

"Me and the other nurses – we felt overwhelmed," she said, dissolving into tears.

South Lake Tahoe taking its message to the people

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe is embracing that government is supposed to be of the people, by the people and for the people.

"We are increasing the information we get out to the public," explained Tracy Franklin, public information officer for South Lake Tahoe.



Ultimately this should mean a more informed community.

The effort started in 2011 with the redesign of the city's website. The one before was not user-friendly and it was near impossible to find anything.

Now people can sign up online to receive a variety of notifications. (This feature eliminates anyone from ever being able to say they didn't know about a city-sponsored meeting.)

Facebook and Twitter are other ways South Tahoe is getting out its message.

But it's not just the typical, predictable government press releases that are being sent electronically. South Lake Tahoe is beginning to tell its story, what is going on within its borders – and a bit beyond, instead of just relying on others to be the messenger.

In April, the inaugural monthly newsletter was released. For the first three months a print version was distributed, though now it's only available electronically. One day it may come out twice a month.

With people getting information in various ways, the city is doing a mix of email blasts, buying ads and sending traditional press releases. The latter is in hopes media will pick up the information as a story – so then there is no cost to the city.

"We do want to do more videos and not just as a commercial, but when we have events," Franklin said. "The idea behind the video is it reminds folks of the different activities they can participate in on the South Shore."

The city has partnered with Lake Tahoe TV, which is part of Outside TV, to create some of the videos. Various spots are being developed that then get picked up in the Bay Area, where much of the basin's drive-up market resides. Lake Tahoe TV will take footage from three cameras that will be set up (one at the airport, another at Lakeview Commons and a yet-to-be determined spot) to be able to feed to its viewers.

This is one of Lake Tahoe TV's videos:

Residents are also getting more involved – which in turn makes them more informed. The Citizens Academy started this year, and will resume in the spring. Neighborhood meetings are ongoing. A volunteer corps has been created. Information about these functions of government have been provided in the past by *Lake Tahoe News*, but are also items people would be aware of if they signed up for alerts directly from the city.

Staffing limits what the city can do in terms of events, but partnerships could make more of them a reality. The air show and lifestyle festival are examples of partnership events.

These and other events are popular with locals, but also give tourists something to do. Franklin would like to see an event every weekend on the South Shore.

With an eye on boosting the city's coffers via room taxes, one reason Live at Lakeview was on Thursdays was to try to lure out-of-towners to Tahoe for a long weekend.

"At the city, our public information officer's efforts are to promote community events that promote our community pride, character and the unique place we are lucky enough to call home," City Manager Nancy Kerry told *Lake Tahoe News*. "As we work to achieve those goals, the community will in turn be the best promoters of the community because a more informed community, a closer-connected community, and more caring community, demonstrates a welcoming spirit to tourists who travel here to visit where we live and leave with a longing to

return.”

Placerville's homeless camp to stay – for now

By Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee

PLACERVILLE – Gene Lambert, a Navy veteran and former roofer who was disabled in a fall that crushed his skull and fractured his hip, is known among the homeless population in this old Gold Rush town as “the undertaker.”

At 56, Lambert is the tall doorman who helps maintain the peace at a city-authorized homeless encampment called Hangtown Haven. With his blue trench coat, turkey-feathered hat and a gentle nature that belies the tattooed flames flickering from his eyes, Lambert is also a guardian of Placerville's great experiment.

Last summer, faced with local homeless people taking over city parks and lighting potentially dangerous fires in more than a dozen colonies in the woods, the Placerville City Council accepted an offer from community volunteers and a local property owner. It agreed – for 90 days – to let them erect and operate a fenced homeless encampment on a forested slope a few miles east of the city's historic downtown.

Last week, the City Council voted to let Hangtown Haven live

on, with reviews every 90 days, which could allow the homeless camp to stay open until Nov. 15, 2013.

As Sacramento and its homeless advocates grapple with proposals for a tent city or cabins for the hundreds of people who camp in the brush along the American River, Placerville has enacted at least a temporary, functional solution to the intractable homeless issues faced by numerous cities and counties.

In this town of 10,400 residents, born as a rough-hewn mining camp in 1849 and known in recent years for its rock-ribbed conservatism, sanctioning a homeless haven stirred considerable doubt.

The City Council yielded to homeless advocates by granting a permit to allow the encampment in the 1600 block of Broadway Street, a modest walk from a community center where homeless people receive counseling, job referrals and help with medical appointments. But it set a deadline: The experimental colony was to close Oct. 26.

Instead, the city granted an extended reprieve based on glowing reports. The camp – with 38 tents, 40 residents and land capacity for 60 people – had succeeded in getting homeless people out of the forest and parks without producing a din of crime or vagrancy.

“There has been a concerted effort to make this work,” said Placerville Vice Mayor Wendy Mattson as the council voted 4-0 last week to let Hangtown Haven live on. “This could have exploded in our face. But it didn’t.”

The council made clear, however, that a permanent site for the homeless colony needs to be found away from its current location near a busy transit route alongside Highway 50. It voted to reach out to El Dorado County supervisors on a regional plan to address homelessness in the county seat.

Lambert likes to think Hangtown Haven earned a stay because homeless people and supporters proved capable of maintaining a clean and orderly camp, with people in tents getting along and helping each other in the heat, cold and rain.

The Navy vet, homeless for several years, is one of six members of the Hangtown Haven camp council who seek to maintain harmony by addressing camp grievances and writing tickets for troublemakers. Get caught boozing outside your tent, that's a ticket. Fail to clean up your mess, that's another. Punch someone, and you'll get written up.

Three times, camp leaders have held community votes on the fates of accused multiple offenders. In each case, Lambert said, the colony voted out bad actors "for being obnoxious," giving them 24 hours to pack up and head out.

Placerville Police Chief George Nielsen said the camp has resulted in no overall increase in crime, though he said officers respond to about six calls there a month for public intoxication, "a couple of fights," and to help people in medical need.

He said the colony has eased authorities' fears of fire danger and other disruptions at camps scattered in and around Placerville. In 2010, a fight at a vagrants settlement behind a shopping center on Missouri Flat Road, just outside the city limits, ended with a 69-year-old man shot dead.

Jannette Taylor, 37, has found a sense of security at Hangtown Haven. Taylor used to run a housecleaning business. The business failed. She couldn't pay her rent and was evicted from her apartment, she said.

Now Taylor shuttles between the camp and computers at the Community Resource Center, where showers are provided and volunteers help with résumés and job searches. Taylor said she hopes to find an assembly or cleaning job so she can reunite with two children staying with friends and family. Kids are

not allowed in the homeless camp.

"This has helped a lot," Taylor said, seated in her tent at Hangtown Haven. "It has given me an up – a way out."

Property owner Barry Wilkinson agreed to provide 1.5 acres for the homeless colony in July, furnishing filtered well water and electricity under a lease with a local nonprofit, Hangtown Haven Inc.

Community Resource Center staff members interview would-be residents under criteria that ban registered sex offenders or people considered dangerous. Marie Cook, the resource center's operations manager, said campers must be from Placerville. She checks recent addresses or interviews local homeless people to ensure they're not outsiders.

Volunteers from local churches bring lunches to the camp. A nearby charity kitchen offers dinner. And campers, with donated food or shared provisions bought with food stamps, cook meals that have included hot dogs and grilled shark.

Two residents have moved on to enroll in trucking school. Some have gone into drug treatment. Meanwhile, Lambert is organizing camp Alcoholics Anonymous and Narcotics Anonymous meetings.

There are also movie nights on a 27-inch television. By camp vote, action films are a yes, romantic comedies a decided no.

Hometown Haven council member Kenneth Green, an unemployed house painter, says the camp is compliant with the Americans With Disabilities Act. Green helped carve ramps for the motorized wheelchair used by Michael Guthrie, 54, who has cerebral palsy. He moved to the colony after a caregiver passed away.

"Ken said, 'We've got a nice warm tent here,'" Guthrie said. "They've helped me out tremendously. I'm a very spiritual

person, and I know I've been blessed."

But Police Chief Nielsen made clear to the City Council – and the panel agreed – that Hometown Haven eventually has to move.

Nielsen said the camp, as well as the Community Resource Center and a cluster of homeless services, is incompatible with fast-moving cars on a hilly stretch of Broadway – "a major artery in our community" – with no sidewalks.

Still, more than 30 people from the camp came to the City Council meeting last week to hail its reprieve.

They stood and waved as Art Edwards, a retired aerospace worker who formed Hangtown Haven Inc. to support the colony, announced: "The homeless men and women of Hangtown Haven have asked me to thank you."

"It's our haven," echoed Lambert, "our home."

South Tahoe Raley's workers part of strike

By Dale Kasler, Sacramento Bee

Raley's went on strike early today, the first time in its long history, after three days of marathon negotiations failed to produce a new contract.

Leaders of the United Food and Commercial Workers told their members to head to the picket lines at 6am, when most Raley's

and Nob Hill Foods stores across Northern California opened.

The company said every one of its 130 stores would open.



Raley's workers at the Y in South Lake Tahoe assemble about 9am to get instructions on picketing the store. Photo/Provided

"We expect all our employees who are scheduled to work on Sunday to show up for work. We have plans in place to deal with any job actions to keep our stores open and operating," the company said in a statement shortly before 6am.

UFCW officials said health insurance remained the main sticking point. The company was proposing changes to the plan, including elimination of coverage for Medicare-eligible retirees.

"For 15 months Raley's has tried to dictate a laundry list of takeaways including devastating members' and retirees' health and welfare plan and nothing has changed," said Local 8 President Jacques Loveall in a memo to his members. "It's clear from their actions it's time to teach them the meaning of respect."

Striking workers said they were willing to take concessions to help the struggling grocer regain profitability, but Raley's demands are too steep.

"We know that things are competitive. That's why we gave up things," said Lori Thurm, a picket captain at the store on West Capitol Avenue in West Sacramento, barely a mile from Raley's headquarters. "We offered numerous concessions."

For instance, workers were willing to forego bonus pay for Sunday shifts, she said.

In his memo to workers, Loveall said it was "obvious" that the last three days of negotiations "was nothing more than a sinister and shameful delay tactic designed to allow managers more time to lie to, threaten and intimidate our members. Clearly their goal was to persuade you to abandon your union."

Raley's says the strike is its first in its 77-year history. The company had set a midnight Saturday deadline for reaching a deal. The talks went on another two hours, and then broke off. Raley's then unilaterally implemented many of the terms of its "last and final" contract offer. The basic wage rate stays the same, but there will be a 2-year pay freeze and the elimination of bonus pay for working Sundays. Holiday bonus pay is scaled back.

The strike doesn't immediately affect Bel Air stores, whose workers haven't yet taken a strike-authorization vote. Union officials said such a vote will occur soon.

While the strike has the support of allied unions, such as Teamsters Local 150, Raley's should be able to keep operating. Spokesman John Segale said the drivers are expected to deliver goods to the vicinity of the stores, and then store managers will retrieve items from the trucks and bring them inside.

But getting shoppers inside will be another matter. One early morning customer drove by the front of the store, realized a strike had begun, and drove off. "I support ya," she told the pickets.

Bob Reynolds, a former Safeway executive who's now a

supermarket industry consultant in Moraga, said workers and the company will both get hurt by the strike. "Raley's is going to be hit very hard," he said.

Even with the stores open, some departments will probably just limp along, and even many of the most loyal Raley's customers will go elsewhere. "You never want to show your most loyal shoppers where the alternatives are," he said.

Yet in West Sacramento, store director Wendell Helton said his staff was working on getting the store completely operational.

Segale, the company spokesman, said, "We are continuing to provide a level of service and maintain product on the shelves."

As of today, anyway, some customers were willing to cross the picket line.

Joel Barton of Elk Grove, who bought 12-packs of soda at the Land Park Raley's store, said he had no reluctance to shop there. "Not a bit – Raley's is a good company," he said.

"I told (the strikers) on the way in they ought to be picketing Wal-Mart," he said.

Raley's and other traditional grocers have been losing market share to nonunion stores like Wal-Mart, which pay their workers roughly half as much as the union chains.

Raley's top pay for union workers is \$21 an hour plus benefits, although most workers aren't at the top of the pay scale.

The UFCW did agree to concessions at struggling Save Mart Supermarkets of Modesto in September. Raley's says its final contract offer was more generous to workers than what Save Mart employees accepted – a statement flatly denied by the union.

Number of registered voters in California hits record

By Patrick McGreevy and Evan Halper, Los Angeles Times

SACRAMENTO — The number of Californians who can now vote has surged to record levels — passing 18 million for the first time — a leap that could affect the outcome of contests across the ballot next week.

More than 1.4 million new voters have signed up, nearly 50 percent of them online under a new law that kicked in six weeks ago allowing electronic registration. They tend to be younger and more left-leaning than the state's general voting population, according to Political Data Inc., a bipartisan firm that analyzed county reports.

That gives Democrats, who already dominate state politics, a big boost; they outnumber Republicans among the new voters by more than 2 to 1. The highest number of registered voters until now was 17.3 million, in February 2009.

The newly enfranchised could loom large in Gov. Jerry Brown's push for tax increases, which is teetering in the polls. Brown has been pitching Proposition 30 to college students lately in a blitz of campaign appearances and social media outreach efforts expected to last until election day.

Independent voters, whose numbers also have risen, are considered key to Brown's effort. A third of those who

recently registered did so without a party preference or with a minor party.

The fresh registrants also could tip the balance in congressional races where Democrats hope to make gains in their uphill battle to retake control of the House; in more than a dozen House districts, Democratic registration rose slightly. And the new voters could help Democrats seeking to secure the state Senate and Assembly supermajorities required to raise taxes.

Online registration is the California Legislature's answer to "voter identification" laws being promoted elsewhere with requirements that residents produce driver's licenses or other identification before being allowed to vote. Civil-rights activists say such rules are intended to intimidate citizens and drive down election participation by the poor.

"While other states created illegitimate ways to suppress the vote, we found ways to increase the voter rolls," said state Sen. Leland Yee, D-San Francisco, who wrote the online voter registration law. He called the program "a tremendous boost to young people and first-time voters."

Gov. Jerry Brown signed the law last year over the objections of some GOP lawmakers, who expressed concern that electronic registration would invite fraud.

According to Political Data, a sizable share of the surge happened late. About 15 percent of the online registrants filled in their forms on the Internet on Oct. 22 – the deadline for next week's election – amid various groups' get-out-the-vote drives that day on Facebook and Twitter.

The numbers will rise further as some counties finish their tallies this week, said Paul Mitchell, vice president of Political Data. He predicted the final number will be about 18.4 million registered California voters when the secretary of state releases official statistics Friday.

Mitchell said online registration “created an avenue for a lot of people to register who would not have gone to the DMV and picked up a form or had someone harass them to register at Target.”

Other factors, such as a growing pool of voting-age Californians and the registration increase that typically accompanies a presidential election, were also at work, said Kim Alexander, who heads the nonpartisan California Voter Foundation. Her group promoted the new law.

She said the online effort brought in “typically underrepresented” young residents.

In some areas, registration increased by as much as 10%. That shifts the dynamic in at least two state legislative races.

In the 40th Assembly District in San Bernardino County, Democrats have reversed a GOP registration edge. Republican incumbent Mike Morrell of Rancho Cucamonga is fighting Democrat Russ Warner, also of Rancho Cucamonga, for the newly drawn seat.

And Democrats regained an advantage they had previously lost in a hotly contested race for the 31st state Senate District, in Riverside County. Republican Assemblyman Jeff Miller of Corona is running there against Democrat Richard Roth of Riverside.

Meanwhile, GOP officials had anticipated the Democratic uptick and were working to blunt its effect by scrambling to register more Republicans. They say some new GOP voters are not reflected in the Political Data report.

“We will figure out whether it makes a material difference on election day,” said Bob Huff (R-Diamond Bar), minority leader in the state Senate.

Republicans expressed doubt that the online system had

effectively rooted out people not eligible to vote.

“There are not enough safeguards to prove that someone’s online identity matches their true identity,” said Assembly Republican leader Connie Conway of Tulare.

Where Republicans see safeguards, Democrats see barriers. Brown this year signed a law, also over GOP opposition, that a few years from now will allow Californians to register to vote on election day.

Scientist: Sutter Mill meteorite a significant event

By Kathryn Reed

INCLINE VILLAGE – While it may seem like meteorites fall out of the sky all the time, what with two descending on Northern California this year, the reality is these occurrences are rare.

Looking like an ordinary rock, a sample of what dropped at Sutter’s Mill on April 22 was passed around Thursday night to a crowd of more than 50 at Sierra Nevada College. No one was able to touch it because it was in an enclosed case.



A piece of the meteorite, next to a pen for size perspective, that was found in the Sutter Mill area in April. Photo/LTN

And no one has every touched it with bare hands because it would essentially contaminate this extraterrestrial organism.

While the rock that was on exhibit was not large, the meteorite was the size of a minivan before it broke up over the Sierra. That Sunday morning a loud boom was heard throughout Lake Tahoe, with first reports that it could have been part of the Lyrid meteor showers.

Quing-Zhu Yin, a geology professor at UC Davis, spoke Nov. 1 about the importance of this particular particle. But his talk was scheduled before the Oct. 17 meteorite landing in Novato, so he had two astronomy events to talk about.

He said the two occurrences were very different. The one in the Bay Area came in at a very low speed and had larger pieces than the Sutter Mill meteorite. The Novato one had one piece weighing 100 grams.

NASA video cameras were able to track the trajectory of each rock landing on Earth so scientists then knew where to look

for the pieces.

Yin described the Sutter Mill meteorite as “special” because it is the most centric of meteorites known to humans, with its origin likely to be Jupiter.

It was one of the rarest types of meteorites to fall to Earth – a carbonaceous chondrite, the earliest solid material to form in this solar system more than $4\frac{1}{2}$ billion years ago, before the planets, including the Earth, formed.

This meteor had the highest entry speed ever recorded of a meteor, according to Yin, at 29 kilometers per second. This compares to a bullet that travels at 0.07 kilometers per second.

Yin said the Sutter Mill event is the most significant collection of space rocks since the 1960s when Apollo 11 astronauts brought back lunar rocks and meteorites fell in Mexico and Australia. He said scientists are still learning from those events.

What those particles taught scientists include:

- The age of the solar system
- Condensation consequences of chemical elements and minerals
- Discovery of presolar grains
- Supernova triggers
- Discovery of left-handed amino acids and right-handed sugars.

What this latest outer space matter will teach scientists remains to be seen.

NV Energy profits increase

By Eli Segall, Las Vegas Sun

NV Energy had a strong jump in third-quarter profits as it spent less on fuel and power but had a bump in sales.

The Las Vegas-based electric company said Friday it earned \$223.2 million of net income, or 94 cents per share, for the three months ending Sept. 30. That compares to \$173.5 million of profit, or 73 cents per share, in the same period last year.

The company lowered its operating expenses by 7 percent last quarter to \$615 million. It spent \$171 million on fuel for power generation, down from \$217 million a year ago, and paid \$206 million for purchased power, compared to \$223 million last year.

NV Energy also had 9.5 million megawatt-hours of electric sales last quarter, up 3 percent from a year earlier, though its volume of gas sales slipped by 1.5 percent.

Altogether, operating revenue rose to \$1.026 billion from \$1.018 billion.

NV Energy serves 2.4 million Nevada residents, or about 90 percent of the state's population.

Tahoe properties contribute to Caesars Entertainment quarterly loss

By Steve Green, Las Vegas Sun

Caesars Entertainment Corp. of Las Vegas said it lost a hefty \$505.5 million in the third quarter, a loss wider than the \$164 million lost the same period last year. Much of the casino operator's loss was on paper. Its expenses in the quarter included one-time charges totaling \$419 million to write down the value of certain assets as required by accounting rules.

These write-downs, on paper, included \$247 million related to goodwill and \$127 million for trademarks. If a company determines assets like these will produce less income in the future than previously believed, their value has to be written down and the amount written down is an operating expense.

The results were also affected by increased interest expenses and certain tax provisions.

With net revenue increasing 0.4 percent to \$2.198 billion, the loss per share amounted to \$4.03 vs. the \$1.31 per share lost in the year-ago quarter.

Despite the large loss, Caesars indicated operating results improved companywide as EBITDA at the property level grew 3 percent to \$512.2 million. EBITDA, a common financial metric for gaming companies, means earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation and amortization.

The company's Las Vegas resorts, including Caesars Palace, Planet Hollywood and the Flamingo, produced net revenue of \$735.1 million, up 0.3 percent.

Caesars said that in Las Vegas, casino revenue increased but food and beverage revenue fell. Visitation levels in Las Vegas were flat, falling 0.4 percent, but spending per trip was up 7.8 percent, thanks to strength in the international high-end segment.

Caesars said hotel revenue in Las Vegas was “relatively flat” compared with 2011. The local Caesars hotels, as a group, saw an overall decrease in average daily room rates from \$89 in 2011 to \$87 in 2012.

At the company’s Harrah’s properties in Laughlin, Lake Tahoe and Reno and at Harveys Lake Tahoe, net revenue was off 4.8 percent to \$134.1 million.

In Atlantic City, which has been hit hard by new competition in the East, Caesars said its properties saw net revenue decline 4.1 percent to \$477.3 million.

CEO Gary Loveman said the company’s Atlantic City properties did not suffer extensive damage during Hurricane Sandy and should be reopening in the coming days.

While analysts have been concerned about Caesars’ ability to service its \$19.96 billion in debt, Loveman said in a statement that the company made significant progress in the quarter “on a strategy designed to position our company for future growth.”

This included refinancing debt, extending debt maturities and the planned sale of the Harrah’s St. Louis casino for \$610 million.

The company plans to plow money into various expansions and renovations, including the Nobu Hotel at Caesars Palace, rebranding the Imperial Palace as the Quad, the \$550 million Project Linq, renovating and repositioning Bill’s Gamblin’ Hall & Saloon for \$185 million and adding a \$140 million convention center in Atlantic City.

At the same time, it's been expanding or looking to expand in online gaming and in physical places like Ohio, Maryland and Massachusetts.

"Thanks primarily to growth in our interactive operations and a continued emphasis on expense reductions, we achieved about the same net revenues and adjusted EBITDA as in the third quarter of 2011, despite more competitive markets and the challenges posed by the continuing weakness of the U.S. economy," Loveman said.

Anti-Sass campaign rooted in loop road

By Kathryn Reed

Rare is the time when a campaign is visibly launched against a candidate. Welcome to South Lake Tahoe.

Signs began cropping up this week against Austin Sass who is running for the South Lake Tahoe City Council.

The man behind the signs is Mike McKeen, an ardent voice in the anti-loop road campaign. He has formally and legally created the committee called Opposition to Loop Road – 2012. This allows the group to post the political signs.

McKeen owns the Powder House property near Stateline that would be taken out under some loop road proposals. The signs are in this area as well on timeshare properties owned by big backers of Councilman Bruce Grego, who is up for re-election.

McKeen did not respond to an email inquiry from *Lake Tahoe News*.

However, he has posted comments on *LTN*. On Oct. 18 he wrote the following unedited comment, "Only funded Bruce Grego AFTER his vote and clarity with the loop road.. Do NOT need members with with strong financial backing from Nevada interests Park Cattle Co., South Shore Vision (former Gaming Alliance, etc.. We already have Claire and Angela, Sass would make the majority. Council members need to represent South Lake Tahoe residents first – we pay the taxes! Our community is not named "Tahoe South"."

This is what Sass wrote about the loop road in his candidate Q&A for *Lake Tahoe News*: "If someone came to you and said they wanted to buy your house or business and had no money or financing prospects, how much time would you spend with them? For most of us, the answer would be none. That's how I currently think about the loop road. There is no money and there are no funding sources to build now. We can all dream, but it's time to focus on what's real.

"There is no doubt that the TTD (Tahoe Transportation District) threw a bomb into our community without thinking about how people's emotions would flare up and how they would answer everyone's questions. Plain and simple, they messed up. On the other hand, there are a small number of people in our community who are politicizing the issue for their own political and future financial gain. They are just as much at fault in polarizing our community as the TTD was. We also need to remember that this project has been part of the plans in our community for many years and the city knew it was in the works.

"I am open to any ideas that would revitalize any part of the South Shore. I hope investment comes soon because that should improve the economy, the environment, and our transportation, which is key to achieving connectivity."

In regards to McKeen's signs, Sass told *Lake Tahoe News*, "It's a free country. He can put whatever he wants on a sign within

the guidelines of his committee. I will thank him for the free advertising later."