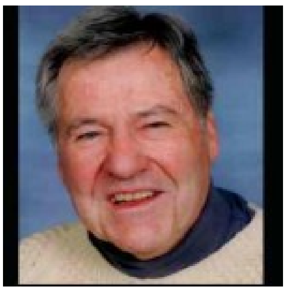
Letter: Politics and TRPA

To the community,

Who will slay the TRPA? Will it be Nevada or California that kills the beast? The soap opera has public officials in both states playing musical chairs. Some who wanted the TRPA dead now wish it to live because the big bad bear California is threatening to create a California agency for its part of Lake Tahoe if Nevada pulls out of the TRPA.

South Lake Tahoe's City Council is an example. Mayor Tom Davis who has opposed the TRPA now wants it to live. Mayor Davis has said that a California agency would not be in the best interest of local government. But that's the tough nut to crack. What's in the best interest? How do we define those words when South Tahoe is a battleground where factions fight for their interests to prevail? Those who want the loop road are sure that they know what is best. Those who promoted the convention center knew what was best. So on and on goes the local soap opera. Where it stops, who knows? Who will get what, when will they get it, and how will they get it?



Bill Crawford

In the scheme of things political, each man and woman has the vote so that they can vote for what they see as their best interest.

Political parties are factions that compete to govern. And each party knows what is best. But it's a messy business.

People and parties are divided on big issues. Taxes, war, peace, etc. People in government who claim to have a vision are too cocksure that they are right. I am thinking of Iraq. Too often they are dangerous visionaries. And too often they are elected to the City Council where they leave a record of failure.

Bill Crawford, South Lake Tahoe

Letter: Austin’s House thankful for support

To the community,

Employees from three local Starbucks stores recently made their mark in our community by doing the annual spring yard cleanup at Austin’s House. Friendly partners from Starbucks stores located in Minden, Gardnerville, and North Carson Crossing participated in this community service event for the fifth straight year.

Starbucks has been a great supporter of Austin’s House, with donations and volunteer work. Starbucks employees also served the refreshments and helped with set up and tear down for the “Goldilocks on Trial” play to benefit Austin’s House.

There was also another landscape improvement. An autumn purple white ash tree was donated anonymously to shade the front of Austin’s House. David Ruf, owner of Greenhouse Garden Center, donated the labor and equipment for planting the tree.

Austin’s House is the only emergency children’s shelter in rural Northern Nevada. Austin’s House provides services and care for up to 10 children from infants to age 18. The children are placed at Austin’s House after being removed from their homes due to abuse or neglect. Austin’s House provides the basic living necessities including proper nutrition, hygiene, rest, nurturing, recreation, companionship, life skills training and education. The facility depends on continued generous support from the community to keep the doors open.

Conrad Buedel, Austin House

Editorial: Don’t let Clean Water Act money evaporate

Publisher’s note: ***This editorial is from the April 23, 2013, Redding Record Searchlight.***

How hard is it to spend government money? Harder than you’d think.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency sent a lashing letter to the California Department of Public Health last Friday declaring that the state agency is violating the Clean Water Act. Its major sin? Not spending federal money that should be going toward improving substandard water systems.

The state had $455 million in clean-water money just sitting in the bank as of last October, according to the EPA. That cash, as part of the state’s revolving loan fund, should be financing upgrades at waterworks. As users then repaid the money through their monthly bills, the money could in turn help other communities in need.

It’s not that the state is wasting the money – frittering it away on systems that don’t work or multi-layered bureaucratic reviews or conferences with $14 catered muffins. Instead, the EPA said, the state has frequently committed the money to large water projects that are not “shovel-ready.” That leaves large sums essentially frozen for years while local water agencies do their work.

In the meantime, though, the money could be put to good use. Jared Blumenfeld, the EPA’s regional chief, told The Associated Press that the state could instead finance water upgrades for small communities with pressing needs.

Many California farm communities struggle with contaminated groundwater, likely from agricultural runoff, but the rural north state is also thick with rickety old water systems that have trouble meeting 21st-century standards and are overdue for improvements. Small towns rarely have the means locally to pay for this kind of work, so it stings to leave unspent federal money on the table.

Some state lawmakers, frustrated at the inability to muster action on vital water cleanups, were already pushing for change in the program. We’d hope the north state’s representatives would join them. The administrative details are of little interest to anyone but water insiders, but the bottom-line need to spend water-quality money effectively – and, in this case, simply to spend it at all – ought to be self-evident.

As a reminder, though, the EPA’s letter also highlights the coming wave of needed investments. The agency’s most recent study says California will need an astonishing $39 billion worth of water-quality improvements by 2026 – a thousand bucks per resident of the state. The disputed money here is a proverbial drop in the bucket, but it’s a start.

You know, unless it just sits in the bank.

Letter: SNC thankful for support

To the community,

I want to thank everyone in the entire Sierra Nevada College extended community for their incredible participation during last week’s 24-hour period of Nevada’s Big Give. The official tally on the Big Give website shows that $61,296 was raised in support of SNC.

Your phenomenal efforts made SNC No. 1 statewide for the cumulative dollars raised among the 397 participating nonprofits stretching from Reno to Las Vegas to Elko. Over 80 individuals contributed during this fund drive. We actually raised $62,896 when we include several additional contributions made outside of the Big Give website.

The energy level and enthusiasm on Thursday was absolutely outstanding. We had donations from every sector: alumni, faculty, staff, parents, graduating seniors, members of our Board of Trustees, and of course, a number of individuals here in the community. Most significantly, contributions ranged from $10 to $20,000 – a testament to the importance of gifts of every size. ver half of the gifts received were at the level of $10-$25 and that made all the difference in terms of our overall level of participation. It gives credence our belief that every gift, of every size, makes a difference.

Our efforts were kicked off on Thursday morning with a $20,000 challenge contribution from SNC board member Bridge Stuart. Thanks to all of you, we were able to meet Bridge’s incredibly generous offer. Our board Vice Chair Atam Lalchandani added to the challenge amount, and I joined Ben and Margaret Solomon in constructing a special challenge aimed at our alumni, graduating seniors, parents, faculty, and staff.

We think and talk a lot about the philanthropy of the next generation, so I am extremely pleased to let you know that SNC Alumni and graduating seniors made a very strong showing with a combined total of 32 gifts – approximately a third of the total number of contributions. Graduating seniors logged in as a part of a special Senior Class "$19.69" effort – challenging them to give an amount recognizing the year of the college's founding for the opportunity to see me dance the hula at the luau two days prior to graduation.

Again, I can't thank you enough for your support of the college. Your contributions will help us to continue to strengthen SNC and make it great. We have come a long way: achieving unprecedented financial stability for the college; increasing academic excellence and academic rigor; and enhancing opportunities for our students to engage in the kind of active learning – inside and outside of the classroom – that ensures that they will graduate with the higher order critical thinking skills and the leadership and teamwork abilities that are required for success in our rapidly changing world.

Thank you for all that you did to make it such a spectacular day.

Sincerely,

Lynn G. Gillette, Sierra Nevada College president

Editorial: Community college transparency welcome

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the April 14, 2013 Contra Costa Times.***

When it comes to California's 112 community colleges, is the glass half-full or half-empty?

After careful study of the state's Student Success Scorecard for the community colleges, we are inclined to opt for the former.

We willingly admit that we have long seen California's community colleges as an undervalued jewel in the education system.

There was a good deal of hyperventilating from some quarters about the news that the overall completion rate for those who had entered community college in 2006 was clearly lower than the class that had entered in 2002. While we agree that is disappointing, it was expected and we caution against putting too much stock in this single finding, especially without some context.

The score card compared how well community college students reached their goals of transferring to a four-year school or earning a certificate or an associate degree within six years. We see that drop between the 2002 and 2006 groups as the "glass-is-half-empty" finding in the study.

Overall, the 2006 cohort recorded 49.2 percent of its students had earned a certificate, an associate degree or transferred to a four-year school within six years. The 2002 cohort had registered a 52.3 percent rate.

But one must consider that the 2006 group entered community college just before the extreme crash of the nation’s economy. It is critical to remember that these students saw monumental changes in community

colleges, higher education and the overall job market during the measured period.

As jobs became more scarce, four-year college costs continued to soar. Meanwhile, financial aid became more scarce and suddenly community colleges were deluged with students.

At the same time, community colleges had to absorb $1.5 billion in budget cuts, which dramatically altered the classes and opportunities offered at those colleges.

On top of all that, the four-year schools faced their own financial challenges partly by accepting fewer transfer students.

Given this conspiracy of events, it is a wonder that the completion rate dropped only 3 percent.

Which leads us to the half-full part of the equation. The study seems to indicate that the community college system is doing a good job reaching and improving the unprepared students, which is a critical mandate. These students who were not ready for college-level work when they arrived are making it through their first year and enrolling in a third straight semester at greater rates than students who needed no remedial courses.

And while the completion rate of both black and Latino students is under 40 percent, it is on the rise. Latino students are demonstrating persistence rates of about 66 percent, which is roughly equal to their white counterparts.

This is an important measure because about 36 percent of all community college students in the state are Latino.

But, by far, the most encouraging aspect is the score card itself. In an education system often mired in mystery, the score card is a legitimate attempt at accountability. We applaud its use and hope that administrators and students can learn much from its findings.

Opinion: Plastic bags need to go away

By Marce Gutiérrez and Nathan Weaver

Imagine that you're a sea turtle swimming off the coast of California. You see something that, to your eyes, looks like a jellyfish – a welcome sight, given your hunger. As you open your mouth, you realize, too late, that what you thought was dinner is, in fact, the remnants of a plastic bag. The plastic settles in your stomach, never to digest, telling your body that you're full. Soon, you'll starve and die.

The Legislature is considering two proposals to ban single-use plastic bags throughout California. Introduced by Sen. Alex Padilla, D-Los Angeles, and Assemblyman Marc Levine, D-San Rafael, in their respective chambers, the ban would be a major step forward in protecting our ocean. As a coastal state and nationwide leader, California can help protect sea turtles and other ocean wildlife.

All Californians have a deep connection to the beach and the ocean, including our Latino community. It's the perfect place to host a family get-together, a pickup ball game or to enjoy fishing. For some of us, the ocean plays an important part of our family's history: The same waves are crashing in our ancestral places of origin and the Golden State we call home. It is natural, then, that we all play a part in keeping the ocean healthy and vibrant. Reusable shopping bags, surprisingly enough, also recall long-standing traditions — long before single-use plastic bag bans were introduced, our grandmothers would unfailingly use their woven bags to shop in the “mercado.”

The U.N. Environmental Programme reports that each square mile of ocean contains more than 46,000 pieces of plastic litter, varying in size from tiny flakes to bags to enormous fishing nets. It will take hundreds of years for this plastic to break down, longer if we keep adding more. In some parts of the Pacific Ocean, the mass of floating plastic already outweighs plankton 6 to 1. All of this plastic harms at least 267 species of ocean animals, and plastic bags are especially dangerous.

California could help protect the Pacific by eliminating single-use plastic bags. Assume that our state’s 38 million residents each use seven plastic bags a week. That’s almost 13.8 billion bags each year. Some will roam our streets like urban tumbleweeds, many will take up scarce landfill space and only a few will be recycled. But too many plastic bags will enter the ocean through storm drains, creeks and rivers.

Banning plastic bags would be a huge victory for animals throughout the Pacific, like the leatherback sea turtle. These turtles consume hundreds of jellyfish each day and can easily mistake plastic bags for their favorite food. In fact, more than one-third of adult turtles may have ingested plastic, according to a recent analysis of dissection reports. Because sea turtles cannot vomit, any plastic they can’t pass will remain in their stomachs permanently. Once a turtle eats too many bags, it will have no room left for food and will die of starvation.

Researchers in Queensland, Australia, found that bags and other soft plastics caused nearly a third of all sea turtle deaths in the area studied. Leatherback turtle populations have declined by 95 percent in the last two decades, due to a combination of factors, and it is critical that we remove threats to these vulnerable animals.

Many other species would benefit from a plastic bag ban. Seabirds like the majestic Laysan albatross frequently ingest floating plastic, mistaking it for food. Other birds are trapped or entangled in bags and, once trapped, often drown or suffocate. Adult seabirds can inadvertently scoop up plastic pieces, including bag scraps, and feed them to their chicks. When the plastic lodges in the chick's stomach, it leaves too little room for food and can starve the chick.

Even the largest animals in the ocean are potentially vulnerable to plastic bags: Scientists have found plastic in the stomachs of several dead whales in recent years. Most of the largest species of whales are filter feeders that swim through the ocean with their mouths open and capture floating plankton. This feeding strategy puts the whale at risk to suck up any piece of plastic garbage small enough to fit in its whale-sized mouth. Toothed whales are also vulnerable. Scientists have discovered plastic bags in the stomachs of dead sperm whales, which feed primarily on squid and fish.

Banning single-use plastic bags is an easy, common-sense way to protect marine animals. That's why more than 70 California cities and counties have already said "no" to single-use plastic bags. Every plastic bag ban helps keep the Pacific Ocean cleaner.

Nothing that we use for a few minutes should pollute the ocean for hundreds of years. It's time to do the right thing by banning single-use plastic bags in California.

Marce Gutiérrez directs Azul, an organization working to empower Latinos as coastal and ocean stewards. Nathan Weaver is the oceans advocate for Environment California, a citizen-based environmental advocacy organization. This column first *appeared in the Sacramento Bee.*

Opinion: Revamped fire fee worse than current one

By George Runner

Better late than never, California lawmakers seem to be waking up to the reality that the illegal “Fire Prevention Fee” they enacted nearly two years ago is a complete fiasco. Even so, they are refusing to repeal it. Instead they are scheming up ways to replace the tax with yet another tax that’s even bigger than the first.

Where else but Sacramento would someone think the answer to a bad tax is to replace it with one even worse?

Assemblyman Wes Chesbro, who represents many rural taxpayers on California’s North Coast, is leading the charge to reinvent and expand the fire fee. His proposal (AB468) would replace the fire fee with a 4.8 percent “surcharge” on all insured homeowners and businesses in the state of California, regardless of location.

George Runner

A similar concept was proposed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger in 2009 but was rejected by the Legislature.

These payments, averaging $48 per policy and totaling an estimated $480 million per year, would find their way to a “Disaster Management, Preparedness, and Assistance Fund.” The fund would benefit bureaucracies, like CalFire, that are involved in the state’s disaster preparedness efforts.

If you want to discourage an activity, you tax it. Mr. Chesbro’s proposal would make it more costly for Californians to maintain insurance coverage on their property, punishing them for being responsible. Our laws should encourage good behavior, not discourage it.

Call it what you will, this new “surcharge” is really just the fire fee all over again – this time on steroids. It aims to repackage, rebrand and expand a tax that to date has been a colossal failure. Although the new tax will lessen annual payments for current fire fee payers, it will dramatically expand the number of overtaxed Californians who are forced to pay even higher taxes.

The original fire tax was supposed to bring in $84 million in revenue from more than 825,000 rural California taxpayers. Due in part to billing errors and bad addresses, the state has spent millions and only collected about $75 million.

This new tax would cost California property owners six times more money than the original. About 10 million people would be impacted—twelve times as many as right now.

The Legislature passed the original fire fee by a simple majority vote rather than the required two-thirds vote for new taxes. That’s why the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association, with my full support, has filed a class action lawsuit against the state of California.

As currently drafted, Chesbro’s legislation would also only require a simple majority vote, rather than the two-thirds vote clearly required by Proposition 26. It’s hard to imagine the Legislature would replace an illegal tax with an illegal tax, but stranger things have happened in Sacramento.

It remains to be seen what Gov. Jerry Brown will do if it passes the Legislature. Some also speculate the Governor will propose sweeping changes to the fire fee when he unveils his May budget.

Despite significant media coverage, to date the governor has mostly tried to brush off growing concerns about the fire fee and CalFire. In January, the agency was forced to admit the existence of a secret $3.66 million slush fund. In February, the agency was faulted by the Legislature’s attorneys for illegally diverting fire fee funds to pay for wildfire investigations. The governor dismissed these revelations as “boring.”

Since the original fire fee passed, Californians have voted twice to send billions of additional tax dollars to Sacramento. Some now believe the state’s budget is balanced and could even see surpluses in the next few years.

Public safety is the first priority of government. The heroic men and women who fight wildfires and respond to emergencies and natural disasters deserve our full support.

But that doesn’t mean they need new taxes. Public safety should be first, not last, in line for existing public dollars. If the state’s emergency readiness lacks adequate funding, we need to do a better job prioritizing the billions of dollars the state is currently spending.

With this in mind, the Legislature would do best to repeal California’s illegal fire tax and stop thinking about replacing it with a tax that’s six times worse.

George Runner represents more than 9 million Californians as a taxpayer advocate and elected member of the State Board of

Equalization.

Letter: Adventure Mountain slides into volunteerism

To the community,

Normally Adventure Mountain Lake Tahoe is providing loads of fun at their sledding and tubing winter recreation area. However, on April 22 their energy was directed toward seeing that the needy members of the South Shore community were being served a hot and healthy meal.

Through Bread & Broth’s adopt A Day of Nourishment program, Adventure Mountain Lake Tahoe sponsored and volunteered at the Monday evening dinner.

Linda Mueller, Jim Mueller, Chris Korves, Gin Mooney and Wes Snyder

Adventure Mountain LT owners Jim and Linda Mueller brought their two sons, Luke and Max, employees Chris Korves and Wes Snyder and friend Gin Mooney to help the B&B volunteers with the dinner setup, serving and cleanup. While preparing the giveaway bags, Linda expressed her thanks to the community for their support of Adventure Mountain LT, stating that “sponsoring an Adopt A Day was a way of giving back to the community”.

The sponsor crew enthusiastically worked with the B&B volunteers and enjoyed their first time hosting an AAD. Wes Snyder, Adventure Mountain LT manager, wrote of his experience, “This is a wonderful group of people that provides a great service for the community. We had a great time helping and look to participating again in the future.”

Bread & Broth is very grateful to the generous Adventure Mountain LT owners and crew for their support of time and money to support B&B’s goal of feeding the hungry. B&B’s business sponsors are fine examples of how their community involvement strengthens the community.

Interested in finding out more about Bread & Broth, contact me at (530) 542.2876 or carolsgerard@aol.com.

Carol Gerard, Bread & Broth

Letter: Colleagues don’t condone Nutting’s actions

To the community,

As chairman of the Board of Supervisors for the county of El Dorado I feel compelled to react to recent statements made by District II Supervisor Ray Nutting during an April 18, 2013, interview airing on KOVR Channel 13.

On camera District II Supervisor Nutting admitted to taking over $70,000 of public monies to cut and clear wood from his personal lands. Furthermore, Mr. Nutting said he saw no wrong with his actions and plans to continue to seek and use future public money for his personal use.

Until KOVR's news segment, the Board of Supervisors was unaware of this activity and unaware of an open criminal investigation by District Attorney Vern Pierson.

On behalf of the Board of Supervisors it is imperative for the public to know we do not condone any conversion of public money to personal use, period. I will be asking for a special board investigation into Mr. Nutting's activities.

Finally, the public is to be assured the Board of Supervisors and our county staff will work cooperatively with the district attorney. Should events unfold calling for our board to take unusual or appropriate steps to preserve the integrity of our board, county employees and citizens of the county of El Dorado, we shall do so in a swift and immediate fashion.

Ron Briggs, chairman El Dorado County Board of Supervisors

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Here is another news report on the case.

Opinion: Legislation could shutter Barton's skilled nursing

By Mary Bittner

In recent months, Barton Memorial Hospital's Skilled Nursing Facility has been challenged with keeping patients, staff and the facility in its entirety safe from the effects of California Assembly Bill 97. If passed, this bill would create devastating cuts to reimbursement for Medi-Cal services provided by distinct part skilled nursing facilities (DP/SNFs) throughout the state, including South Lake Tahoe's only long-term care facility located at Barton Memorial.

This bill requires a two-thirds vote in the Assembly and Senate before it goes to Gov. Jerry Brown for action. It will first be heard in the Assembly Health Committee on April 30.

Mary Bittner

Since Assembly Bill 900 is considered an "urgency" bill, it would take effect immediately if Brown signs it into law by July 1. Barton Health is hopeful the state Assembly and Senate seriously consider this bill. In reality, to sustain continued operations of our high-quality long-term-care services AB900 must pass on Tuesday.

AB900 would stop the proposed budget cuts to Medi-Cal reimbursement (that are called for in AB97) for medical services provided by hospital-based skilled-nursing facilities. Barton Memorial's Skilled Nursing Facility is of-that-type and predominately has a population of Medi-Cal patients. At present, our licensed 48-bed skilled-nursing and short-stay rehabilitation facility often runs at full capacity. It provides care for aging adults, offering private and semi-private rooms, 24-hour care, activities, and programs that maintain and/or improve independence. In 2012, our Skilled Nursing Facility was awarded five-stars from Medicare, which is only given to the top 10 percent of nursing homes in the nation.

Cuts in reimbursement would force Barton Memorial to reduce capacity or close services completely as the acute-care reimbursement simultaneously declines with health care reform. 2011's AB97 reduced Medi-Cal reimbursement rates for DP/SNF to rates applicable in the 2008-09 rate year, less 10 percent, effective June 1, 2011, resulting in an effective rate decrease for most facilities of 25 percent. Cuts of this magnitude will have a devastating impact on the access of Medi-Cal beneficiaries to medically necessary skilled-nursing services.

If AB900 does not pass, our skilled nursing facility may not only face cut-backs or closure, but will have to pay to the state of California (retroactive to June 2011) the amount of reduced reimbursement. Barton has been setting aside money for this very issue, however, losing those funds will impact our overall operations, drive up cost for the provision of acute-care and possibly jeopardize the future viability of Barton as the sole community health care provider for our community.

Part of the most vulnerable population Barton serves is the elderly and those with severe chronic disease. According to Barton's 2012 Community Health Needs Assessment Report, 13.7 percent of the community in Barton Health's primary service area are 65 years and older. Of this population, 76.9 percent are Medicare supplement insurance dependent (compared to the U.S. benchmark of 75.5 percent), which does not provide coverage for long-term care needs.

Surrounding facilities on the West Slope have in recent years decreased their long-term care bed capacity and California residents do not qualify for Nevada Medicaid.

Barriers to long term-care access would impact family members of elderly patients, forcing elderly residents to be removed from their loved ones and housed in facilities miles away from home. The distance disparity is complicated by geography (surrounded by four mountain passes), weather/road condition variability, and transportation challenges within the local community. Per the 2012 Barton Community Health Needs Assessment, 9.8 percent of primary service area adults lack transportation compared to 7.7 percent nationally.

If long term-care services were forced to close, unemployment rates would rise, (current local unemployment is at 16.7 percent) adding to the ongoing threat of departure of local residents on the South Shore. This would negatively impact the fiscal landscape of our local economy, which already suffers from a $5.2 million deficit. Reduction of services could impose further erosion of our rural community resources, imposing a trickle-down effect to local businesses relying on tourism.

Barton Health is dedicated to educating our community on the effects of health care reform and its impact on Lake Tahoe residents and our surrounding areas. As the safety-net provider of health care for the South Lake Tahoe community, we rely on our local residents to make their voice heard on these concerns and issues. It is imperative that our state legislative representatives become educated about the importance of AB900 and understand how vital the Barton Skilled Nursing Facility is to our community. We plan to keep you informed of the progress of AB900 and other changes related to health care reform.

We encourage you to contact our local legislators and urge them to vote for AB900: Sen. Ted Gaines, email senator.gaines@senate.ca.gov and Assemblyman Frank Bigelow, email.

Mary Bittner is vice president of Nursing and Ancillary Services for Barton Health.