Opinion: California bashers are missing the real story

By Peter Schrag, Sacramento Bee

New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie was only the latest to pile on California this week. The state, he told California GOP delegation at the party's national convention, had given itself to "the masters of huge spending and huge government." In electing Jerry Brown, it made "a bad choice with an old retread."

A couple of weeks ago, Mitt Romney compared us to Italy, Greece and Spain. Sarah Palin, calling California "a cautionary tale" in a Facebook posting, warned that "Obama's vision for America will make the rest of the country look like California, minus the beautiful scenery and warm weather."

The Golden State, she said, "once boasted the entrepreneurial innovation of Silicon Valley – the American creative engine," with the strong implication that it was no more.

And last week, state Sen. Mimi Walters of Irvine issued a handout headed "California Is Not Quite as Bad as Greece." Her bill of particulars included "Taxes, Taxes, Taxes," "3rd Highest Unemployment Rate in the Nation" and "Lowest Credit Rating in the Nation." Translated in this election season: It's all the Democrats' fault.

Do any of them really know the place they're talking about?

None of them seemed to know that the 365,000 jobs California gained in the 12 months ending in July meant that the state had grown jobs twice as fast as the nation – 2.6 percent vs. 1.3 percent. Professional, scientific, technical and

information services added 60,000 jobs.

The Bay Area – meaning Silicon Valley, in case Palin doesn't know – led the state in job gains. In the past year, the San Francisco metro area added nearly 41,000 jobs; the San Jose area gained more than 30,000; the East Bay gained nearly 20,000. Southern California and Sacramento also picked up jobs.

In the second quarter of 2012, more venture capital was invested in California-based companies than in the other 49 states combined. The state economy, said Steve Levy of the Center for the Continuing Study of the California Economy, "has its mojo back."

Read the whole story

Opinion: Time to fight the rural fire tax

By George Runner

A fire tax bill is coming soon to a mailbox near you. It's not fair; it's not constitutional, but thanks to Gov. Jerry Brown and the Legislature, the bills are coming all the same.

On Aug. 13, California began mailing the first of more than 825,000 Fire Prevention Fee bills to Californians who own property with a habitable structure in a State Responsibility Area- those 31 million acres where CalFire has primary responsibility for fire prevention and suppression.

It doesn't matter whether you've invested time, sweat and money to meet the state's ever-evolving fire standards. It

doesn’t matter whether you experience any benefit from CalFire’s prevention activities. It doesn’t even matter whether you already pay for local fire service – though if you do, you’ll get a $35 discount.

Like it or not, if you live in an SRA, the state is going to start billing you $150 each year. And if you don’t pay within 30 days, you’ll face steep penalties and interest.

The bills are going out in alphabetical order by county between August and early December. That means residents of Alameda, Alpine, Amador and Butte counties will receive their bills in August. Residents of Tuolumne, Ventura, Yolo and Yuba counties most likely won’t see theirs for several months.

The first round of bills is expected to raise $84 million to help pay for the state’s operations last fiscal year. The next round of bills is just around the corner – they’ll be mailed beginning March 2013.

Forget the photos of firefighters fighting fires. This new tax won’t pay for firefighters or put out a single fire. Nor will it do anything to expand the state’s fire prevention efforts. The dollars collected will simply fund existing CalFire programs.

Supporters of the fire tax argue that folks who live in fire-prone areas should pay for increased state fire prevention costs.

Imagine if we funded other state programs similarly. The Legislature would then require property owners in high-crime neighborhoods to pay a “crime prevention tax” to fund the state’s prisons and public safety programs.

After all, these high-crime neighborhoods produce more criminals.

Somehow I doubt urban politicians will extend the same logic

to other state programs – especially not if it means higher taxes for the urban areas they represent.

When it comes to the fire tax, there's no relationship between a taxpayer's burden and the benefits he or she will receive.

Even so, the governor and Legislature are still trying to pretend this new tax is a fee. That's because the Legislature doesn't have constitutional authority to raise taxes without a two-thirds vote. By pretending the fire tax is a fee, the Democrat majority approved it on a simple majority vote.

I intend to join the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association in suing to halt this illegal money grab. But before a lawsuit can move forward, at least one property owner must 1) receive a bill, 2) file a written appeal and 3) have his or her appeal denied.

To help inform California taxpayers, I've established a website (calfirefee.com) providing detailed information about the new fire tax. Visit this site to find out if you live in an SRA and might soon receive a fire tax bill. You can also find further details regarding the process, timeline and grounds for filing an appeal.

California needs a balanced budget, but we should not balance it on the backs of already overtaxed Californians. As an elected taxpayer advocate, it is my duty and privilege to work each and every day to protect taxpayers from unfair and excessive taxation – including this new illegal fire tax.

George Runner is a member of the state Board of Equalization. His district, which stretches from San Bernardino County to the Oregon border, is home to more than 9 million Californians.

Opinion: STAR a worthy group looking for volunteers

To the community,

At the recent Lake Tahoe Air Fest the Sheriff's Team of Active Retirees (STAR) assisted handicapped attendees park their cars, making sure they were aboard a shuttle bound for the action on the tarmac. This is one of several activities the STAR volunteers do throughout the year.

The group is presently looking for enthusiastic men and women aged 50 and over to help in their year-round activities in the Lake Tahoe Basin. The group meets monthly with a sheriff's deputy and are updated on the needs of the county's law enforcement agency. Routinely, STAR volunteers patrol Tahoe area neighborhoods, trail heads and beaches, check on live-alones, and do vacation home checks for traveling locals.

Other activities throughout the year include participation in Every 15 Minutes (drunk driving education for high school juniors-seniors), The Drug Store Project (drug and alcohol deterrent for middle school students), Treat Street (Halloween activities for young people and parents), and provide extra support during emergencies.

After a background check and an interview by a deputy, candidates for membership attend a two-week STAR training academy taught by sheriff's office staff, wear a STAR uniform and become members of a dedicated and fun group of community service volunteers. To apply, visit the sheriff's office at 1360 Johnson Blvd. in South Lake Tahoe or call (530) 573.3000. The academy will be scheduled this fall.

Joan Young, STAR volunteer

Opinion: Youth benefit from Soroptimist donation

To the community,

Live Violence Free, formerly the South Lake Tahoe Women's Center, would like to extend a thank you to Soroptimist International of South Lake Tahoe for enabling us to conduct the inaugural Girls Empowerment Retreat.

Thanks to a grant from the Soroptimist group we were able to plan and execute two sessions of this overnight camp, packed with fun and empowering workshops for transition age girls. The workshops included self-defense, leadership, self-care, crafting, and a session with the Humane Society.

By the end of day twos, the girls were begging us to let them stay another night, and for us, that was a true measure of our success.

Thank you Soroptimist International of South Lake Tahoe for your generosity and dedication to this community; we couldn't have done it without you.

Scarlet Caldwell, outreach educator for Live Violence Free

Opinion: Wall Street abuses cannot continue

By Phil Angelides

Money laundering. Price fixing. Bid rigging. Securities fraud. Talking about the mob? No, unfortunately. Wall Street.

These days, the business sections of newspapers read like rap sheets. GE Capital, JPMorgan Chase, UBS, Wells Fargo and Bank of America tied to a bid-rigging scheme to bilk cities and towns out of interest earnings. ING Direct, HSBC and Standard Chartered Bank facing charges of money laundering. Barclays caught manipulating a key interest rate, costing savers and investors dearly, with a raft of other big banks also under investigation. Not to speak of the unprecedented wrongdoing that precipitated the financial crisis of 2008.

Evidence gathered by the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission clearly demonstrated that the financial crisis was avoidable and due, in no small part, to recklessness and ethical breaches on Wall Street. Yet, it’s clear that the unrepentant and the unreformed are still all too present within our banking system.

A June survey of 500 senior financial services executives in the United States and Britain turned up stunning results. Some 24 percent said that they believed that financial services professionals may need to engage in illegal or unethical conduct to succeed, 26 percent said that they had observed or had firsthand knowledge of wrongdoing in the workplace, and 16 percent said they would engage in insider trading if they could get away with it.

That too much of Wall Street remains unchanged is not surprising. Simply stated, the banks and their leaders have paid no real economic, legal or political price for their

wrongdoing and thus have not felt compelled to change.

Phil Angelides, former state treasurer of California, was the chairman of the Financial Crisis Inquiry Commission, which conducted the nation's official inquiry into the financial crisis.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Complexity obscures California school money

By Dan Walters, Sacramento Bee

When Gov. Jerry Brown labeled the state budget a "pretzel palace of incredible complexity," he almost certainly had in mind the budget's largest, most complicated piece – financing schools.

Proposition 98, a measure that barely won voter approval in 1988, supposedly dictates what schools and their 6 million students are to receive from state and local taxes, but it's so dense that only a few analysts profess to understand it, and they rarely agree.

Rather than take politics out of school finance, therefore, Proposition 98 invites political manipulation.

Typically, after much gnashing of teeth, the governor and the Legislature agree on a number each year and then interpret Proposition 98 to justify it.

Over the last half-decade, a recession-wracked budget could not be stretched to cover what Proposition 98 required, so shortfalls were placed on what insiders call “the credit card.” The state booked the money as a debt, now more than $13 billion.

School Services of California, which advises school districts, recently generated a chart showing the gap between what schools should be receiving in unrestricted state and local funds under Proposition 98 – roughly three-fourths of their total revenues – and what they are actually receiving.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Skate the Lake raises money for cancer research

To the community,

B4BC’s Eight Annual Skate the Lake Presented by Tahoe Longboards took place Aug. 18 in North Lake Tahoe and was a great success. Over 85 participants pushed for prevention and collectively, more than $10,000 in net funds were raised.

Participants included Tahoe residents from near and friends from afar to encourage people to come together and show one way of living a healthy and active lifestyle. Some who joined in the fun were pushing in honor of loved ones who have battled breast cancer, and others participated because they believe in B4BC’s mission of spreading the importance of early detection + active living as the best means of prevention.

B4BC was proud to extend its support to the local survivor community through a $2,500 donation to the Gene Upshaw Memorial Tahoe Forest Cancer Center in Truckee.

A special thank you to all who fundraised including top fundraisers (1. Randy Scheidt – Valley Springs 2. Arnie DePietro – Valley Springs and 3. Araseli Lopez – Sunnyvale, as well as the following sponsors for their support: presenting sponsor Tahoe Longboards, GoPro, Sun Bum, Mamasake, New Belgium, Hartline Construction, Hurley, Paul Mitchell, Woodward Tahoe, Tahoe Dave's and The Alley.

To kick off Breast Cancer Prevention month, B4BC's second yearly longboard-a-thon, Skate the Coast, will take place in Southern California on Sept. 29 and will consist of an 18-mile course that will run from the Santa Monica Pier to the Redondo Beach Pier.

Boarding for Breast Cancer

Opinion: Apologizing to Live at Lakeview promoters

To the community,

I want to make a correction or retraction for comments I made during a slightly heated debate thread about the Lakeview Commons summer concert series.

I mistakenly made these comments because I was under the

assumption that the city was financing this event and because of that I thought we should have more local bands. I was wrong.

As it turns out OnCourse Events finances these events themselves as well as with sponsors. In my opinion, that means they can hire anybody they want to play their events.

If the bands aren't to my liking … well so what … clearly by the success of the event, they are to many peoples liking.

I realize now that many of the kinks that the series is having are getting worked out in the first year. This week an ordinance was passed by the city that there is to be no smoking of any kind in any South Lake Tahoe parks. And even though there was a little wafting through, it was nothing like it was.

Also, Rob made numerous announcements about rules and common sense etiquette throughout the night. Not much more can be done on that front.

I'd like to thank CarolAnne from OnCourse Events for taking the time to set me straight. I should have done my homework a little better.

Here's to continued success on your venture.

Lisa Quick, South Lake Tahoe

Opinion: SnowGlobe should be

silenced

To the community,

Seems the devil's at it once more. SnowGlobe is again a-go. It's hard to fathom who is in control in bringing back this nuisance to town.

My logic instructor, Dr. Patch, thought you can't have a universe of discourse without first defining the terms. So, what is a nuisance? Webster's New College Dictionary (1995) defines nuisance as "vexatious, a bother that interferes with legal rights by causing damage." When reviewing SnowGlobe's first production in town, Webster's definition of a nuisance fits SnowGlobe's performance. It was vexation, an annoyance, an irritation. For some folks it created physical discomfort. Noise so loud that there was no escaping the boom, boom pounding. It was an invasion of privacy disturbing citizens' right to be left alone in their homes.



Bill Crawford

And, of course, the promoters breached the agreement by ignoring the time when the noise was to end. But alas the nuisance will return to cause walls to shake and to induce headaches. Give the devil his due.

Bill Crawford, South Lake Tahoe

PS: The City Council's 3-2 vote at the Aug. 21 meeting on postponing the Aug. 28 public hearing on the loop road was out

of order because the loop road was not on the agenda. I have spoken to the city attorney about the breach of the rules by the council. He was surprised to hear it.

Opinion: Neighborhood meeting about crime well attended

To the community,

The Aug. 22 neighborhood crime meeting went well, with about 50 people attending.

South Lake Tahoe police were informative and supportive. It seems that police logs are at the front desk and could be added to a website if we had one.

I would like to continue a neighbor watch discussion. Maybe another meeting next month is in order. Any feedback is welcome either online or Acornlawn@yahoo.com or (530) 544.7795.

Mike Lee, South Lake Tahoe