Opinion: State's future depends on adapting to climate

By Dan Cayan

Maybe it is the fact that in 1862 massive floods from 45 straight days of rain transformed the Central Valley into an inland sea that drove the California Legislature to relocate to San Francisco.

Or maybe it's because sunny beaches, cool Sierra slopes and expansive deserts can be seen and felt, all within a half-day's drive. Santa Ana winds and San Francisco fog figure prominently in our culture. For many reasons, Californians have a heightened sense of their special relationship to climate, an appreciation for how it changes from year to year, and a high awareness of the extremes that come with it.

On the national level, however, climate change science has been a challenging message to convey in the political arena. Politicians respond to immediate, often emotional, issues and are especially tuned to the timetables of legislative terms and news cycles.

Climate change is in many ways the opposite – a plodding sequence of events, dominoes falling one at a time only every 10 years or 100. Warnings of temperature rises that may amount to only a few degrees in 50 years do not inspire angst. The climate trend that is set in motion today might be recognized as serious only by a voter two generations hence.

But Californians have shown that they understand how important it is to understand climate and invest in research. Even through years of unsigned budgets, shutdowns and IOUs, we have still managed, wisely, to take the long view on one thing that really matters.

Dan Cayan is a researcher at Scripps Institution of Oceanography, UC San Diego and the U.S. Geological Survey.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Time for the city to stop clowning around

To the community,

In September of 2000, Measure S passed and for 11 years it has been a mess. The latest episode is the city's contract with a private party to operate the ice rink.

Both parties to the contract signed the documents without knowing the IRS rules that govern such relationships. Thus, the private party can't make a profit because of the goof up.

Bill Crawford

But when we recall the screw-ups on the Lakeview Commons contract, the Measure S snafu is not a surprise. It is business as usual.

So now the city is attempting to tap dance around the IRS rules by turning the non-taxable bonds into taxable bonds at an unknown cost to the city. The architect for the fiasco is City Manager Tony O'Rourke, the knight in rusty armor, who preaches partnerships between the private and pubic agencies. Thus, the city rushed to close the deal on the ice rink while operating in the dark.

As an aside, at the Measure S JPA meeting on Dec. 5, a member of the board, Mayor Hal Cole, was 35 minutes late. It seems he doesn't' know the time of day. Nothing new there.

So where are we when we view the management of the public's business in the city of South Lake Tahoe. I think the answer is provided by Frank Sinatra's "Bring in the Clowns" which goes like this: "Bring in the clowns. Don't worry, they're already here."

Bill Crawford, South Lake Tahoe

Opinion: A big thank you to thoughtful roofers

To the community,

A big shout out of thanks to Roof Masters.

I am a lucky lady to still have my husband after his fall from our roof last week. Aside from a head injury, the next step was to have surgery on his fractured wrist. We arrived home from the hospital to a completed roof project done by Scott of Roof Masters.

“Da Boys” know each other through hockey and Scott is very familiar with Paul’s stubborn streak. Thank you for taking the worry of Paul heading up a ladder again in a cast to finish the job.

You are amazing.

Lisa Huard, South Lake Tahoe

Opinion: Craziness governs school financing in California

By Dan Walters, Sacramento Bee

The state budget’s 800-pound gorilla is the task of educating 6 million elementary and high school students.

It consumes between 35 and 40 percent of the general fund. The money is allocated by a bizarre combination of power politics and a constitutional provision so complex that only a few in and around the Capitol even profess to understand it — and rarely agree.

Since the budget usually can’t meet its full constitutional obligation each year, even when the economy is healthy, politicians and education lobbyists hammer out some number. They include a proviso that any unpaid amount will go on what they call “the credit card” to be repaid at some point in the future.

To complicate matters even more, one of the factors determining the obligation is how much money hundreds of districts are receiving in local property taxes, which are also affected by the economy. A huge chunk of the money is allocated for specific purposes called “categorical aids.”

Finally, the school aid numbers budget are subject to change at any moment if the state’s revenue estimates are off the mark – which they usually are.

It’s completely irrational, and effectively forces local school officials to operate on a month-to-month basis – even though they are also tied into labor contracts, especially with teachers, that assume longer-term financial stability.

The current situation is a classic example, and even more convoluted than usual. The 2011-12 state budget adopted in June assumed that the state would receive an extra $4 billion in revenues. But it also provided that should those dollars not appear, there would be up to $2.5 billion in automatic spending cuts, three-quarters of it school aid.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Closing USPS’ Reno center will create more postal issues

Publisher’s note: ***This editorial is from the Dec. 2, 2011, Reno Gazette-Journal.***

Forty years ago, Federal Express (now FedEx) discovered that there was money to be made by promising shippers that a parcel sent today could be in its recipient's hands tomorrow … anywhere in the country.

In those same 40 years, the U.S. mail has gotten slower, not faster, even as the cost of stamps has steadily increased. For Northern Nevadans, it will get even slower if a proposal to close the Reno sorting center is accepted by U.S. Postal Service officials.

The Postal Service's answer to its serious financial problems seems to be making service worse rather than better.

The result will be to chase away even more customers — to email, bill-paying services and to FedEx or UPS — until there's no one left to prop up a dying service.

Before the USPS closes the Reno center and sends all local mail to Sacramento for sorting, including mail that has to be sent right back to Nevada, Congress should insist that the quasi-governmental agency complete a top-to-bottom rethinking of its mission and how it can meet it many years into the future. Right now, it is clearly heading in the wrong direction.

The Postal Service's problems are very real. It is losing money by the bucket load, and the model first put into place by Benjamin Franklin more than two centuries ago clearly doesn't work anymore.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Everyone deserves a

little holiday cheer

It’s that time of year of holiday parties. They range from subdued affairs to extravagant undertakings.

Some people have commented on *Lake Tahoe News* publicly and to *Lake Tahoe News* privately about parties South Lake Tahoe is having.

So, we looked into it.

Yes, those employees, too, get to celebrate the season. Just like a lot of other public employees do – here and across the country.

Several departments are having a holiday “lunch” – which the director of that department is paying for. When it comes to the police department, that party is being paid for ($35/person) by each employee. It is after “normal” hours – more of a dinner party.

City staff has done this before. This is not entirely new.

The city manager is coordinating a lunch for Dec. 15 – just like last year – during the regular lunch hour for employees to attend. In the 2011-12 budget the lunch is covered up to $700. Estimates are this year’s lunch will cost $500.

At this lunch employee service awards are given. These are awarded at quarterly lunches instead at City Council meetings.

Pass judgment as much as you like. You are the one looking in the mirror.

At *Lake Tahoe News* we like to think people deserve a thank you – at least once a year. No matter who they work for.

With that said, thank you to everyone out there – employed or looking for work or volunteering – as long as you are doing what you can to make this town, this basin, this world just a little better – or have done so perhaps when you were more capable – Thank You.

– Lake Tahoe News staff

Opinion: TMDL really means Total Madness Delivered by Lahontan

By Claire Fortier

Four simple letters, TMDL, spell significant consequences for the city of South Lake Tahoe, and the entire Lake Tahoe Basin. What started with the best of science and intentions has morphed into a disjointed and costly regulatory process that could to tie-up local financial resources for years, if not decades.

Worse, we don’t even know if these new standards, which are an expensive administrative game-changer for local jurisdictions, will work on a small scale, much less for the entire region. The first real results are at least 15 years away.

Claire Fortier

The regulations, however, may start as early as this week, now that Lahontan Water Board has imposed them.

Further, we don't know what non-compliance means. It may well result in staggering mandatory penalties that could bankrupt the city.

When first conceived, the challenge to increase lake clarity to 100 feet in 65 years was a noble cause. According to scientists, greater clarity in the middle of the lake could be achieved by reducing fine sediment runoff into the lake. Much of the problem lay in the 10 percent of the Lake Tahoe watershed that had already been disturbed or built upon.

What that meant to most of us who live at Lake Tahoe was that by fixing what was aging and crumbling – our roads and dated infrastructure and architecture – we could improve the Tahoe economy and environment at the same time. That was a win-win for us.

The science was reassuring. The deliverable – a cleaner, clearer lake – was measurable. The economic possibilities were invigorating. With the new TMDL (Total Maximum Daily Load) standards, investors wouldn't face the costly and time-consuming regulatory process that stalls so many good projects at the lake.

But the TMDL model was flawed. First, scientists never factored in the water quality of the near shore, the place most people see and feel Lake Tahoe. Second, it was assumed that all water (rainfall, snow) eventually landed in the lake, which is simply not true. Much of the precipitation in the Lake Tahoe Basin is absorbed into the ground, which contributes miniscule amounts of fine sediment to the lake. Finally, the definition of TMDL, even the measurement of clarity, varied from one state to another.

While the clarity challenge, which trigger Lake Tahoe's unique TMDL, has the backing of two states and the EPA, the reality of TMDL has markedly different interpretations and implications.

First, there is federal interpretation. TMDL is not unique to Lake Tahoe. It is a mandatory measurement of any impaired water body. What's unique to Lake Tahoe is exactly what the EPA claims on its website: The underpinnings of "final restoration plan are among the most advanced ever applied to a TMDL in the nearly 40-year history of the Clean Water Act. The Lake Tahoe TMDL has blazed new ground .…"

The problem is that Lake Tahoe's water clarity goal is an aesthetic measure, judged entirely on how far down a dinner plate can be seen at mid-lake, and not a pollutant discharge problem, which is the standard for most EPA TMDL.

Then there is the U.S. Forest Service's TMDL interpretation. As owner of more than 80 percent of the land in the Tahoe basin, the Forest Service may embrace the TMDL goals, but is not be held to the same standards or requirements.

Nevada, in the meantime, has its own answer on the clarity challenge. It is a shared public-private responsibility dependent in large part on private development and investment.

Finally, there is the California interpretation, or more to the point, the Lahontan Water Board's staff interpretation of TMDL. That interpretation places the regulatory and financial burden on local government. Local jurisdictions must figure out how to meet b Lahontan's TMDL and stormwater objectives, and must do so while populating, monitoring and reporting on the very model that determines that TMDL effectiveness.

Precisely how these standards are met is up to the individual localities. Lahontan has no long-term management plan. What Lahontan offers is an array of options in its “tool box.” But some of the tools (like costly, state-of-the-art street sweepers) have never been proven in Tahoe.

Nor has Lahontan given the jurisdictions any clue as to the consequences of not meeting the TMDL. Theoretically, it could cost the city a minimum of $3,000 a day if it fails to meet the model numbers.

Worse, Lahontan has no overall plan to incorporate TMDL into other aspects of the Lake Tahoe regulatory or funding process. TMDL was supposed to establish a standard, and in theory, reduce the regulatory nightmare that is Tahoe. But what is required for California won’t be imposed in Nevada and the standards for the TRPA may not dovetail with Lahontan’s requirements.

While the Tahoe TMDL model faces some significant challenges, it may well be the new pathway toward Lake Tahoe restoration. But it needs some significant tweaking and some real collaboration between regulatory agencies around the lake, local government and the EPA. Lahontan’s plan simply isn’t ready for prime time.

But even if Tahoe TMDL reached a successful, collaborative conclusion, the real question is who is going to pay for it?

And that’s one no one can answer at this point.

Claire Fortier is on the South Lake Tahoe City Council and is that elected body’s representative to the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

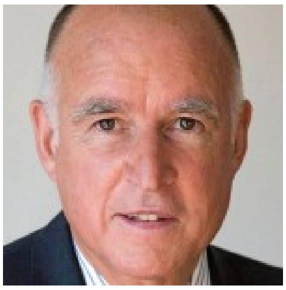
Opinion: Voters should decide California’s future

Publisher’s note: ***This is an open letter to the people of California from Gov. Jerry Brown.***

To the people,

When I became governor again — 28 years after my last term ended in 1983 — California was facing a $26.6 billion budget deficit. It was the result of years of failing to match spending with tax revenues as budget gimmicks instead of honest budgeting became the norm.

In January, I proposed a budget that combined deep cuts with a temporary extension of some existing taxes. It was a balanced approach that would have finally closed our budget gap.



Jerry Brown

I asked the Legislature to enact this plan and to allow you, the people of California, to vote on it. I believed that you had the right to weigh in on this important choice: should we decently fund our schools or lower our taxes? I don’t know how you would have voted, but we will never know. The Republicans refused to provide the four votes needed to put this measure on the ballot.

Forced to act alone, Democrats went ahead and enacted massive cuts and the first honest, on-time budget in a decade. But without the tax extensions, it was simply not possible to eliminate the state's structural deficit.

The good news is that our financial condition is much better than a year ago. We cut the ongoing budget deficit by more than half, reduced the state's workforce by about 5,500 positions and cut unnecessary expenses like cell phones and state cars. We actually cut state expenses by over $10 billion. Spending is now at levels not seen since the seventies. Our state's credit rating has moved from "negative" to "stable," laying the foundation for job creation and a stronger economic recovery.

Unfortunately, the deep cuts we made came at a huge cost. Schools have been hurt and state funding for our universities has been reduced by 25 percent. Support for the elderly and the disabled has fallen to where it was in 1983. Our courts suffered debilitating reductions.

The stark truth is that without new tax revenues, we will have no other choice but to make deeper and more damaging cuts to schools, universities, public safety and our courts.

That is why I am filing this week an initiative with the Attorney General's Office that would generate nearly $7 billion in dedicated funding to protect education and public safety. I am going directly to the voters because I don't want to get bogged down in partisan gridlock as happened this year. The stakes are too high.

My proposal is straightforward and fair. It proposes a temporary tax increase on the wealthy, a modest and temporary increase in the sales tax, and guarantees that the new revenues be spent only on education.

Here are the details:

Millionaires and high-income earners will pay up to 2 percent higher income taxes for five years. No family making less than $500,000 a year will see their income taxes rise. In fact, fewer than 2 percent of California taxpayers will be affected by this increase.

There will be a temporary half cent increase in the sales tax. Even with this temporary increase, sales taxes will still be lower than what they were less than six months ago.

This initiative dedicates funding only to education and public safety—not on other programs that we simply cannot afford.

This initiative will not solve all of our fiscal problems. But it will stop further cuts to education and public safety.

I ask you to join with me to get our state back on track.

Jerry Brown, governor of California

Opinion: Suggestions for how to fix South Lake Tahoe

By Steve Kubby

South Lake Tahoe should be one of the greatest destinations in the world. Aside from the stunning beauty of the lake, we are blessed with amazing writers, athletes and artists in this community. Meanwhile, Heavenly Mountain Resort is quickly becoming one of the best ski resorts in the world and their claim to the best tree skiing on planet Earth is no exaggeration.

Unfortunately, our fair city looks less like a world class destination and more like a ghost town these days. Even the bank can't afford decent landscaping. Hard times have hit South Lake Tahoe and much of it, like the huge 12-acre crater near Stateline, can be traced to the sins of local government and redevelopment.

Steve Kubby

The city of South Lake Tahoe was incorporated in 1965 by combining the previously unincorporated communities of Al Tahoe, Bijou, Bijou Park, Stateline, Tahoe Valley, and Tallac Village. The stated purpose for creating the city was to provide its own snow removal, road repairs and policing, since it was felt that El Dorado County was not providing adequate services. Within a year, the city council had already abandoned their original mission and granted $40,000 to their supporters on the local tourist bureau.

Since then, the city council has all but abandoned the roads and focused the bulk of its time and money on redevelopment schemes that assume the need for a centrally planned economy and a regulatory environment that is one of the worst in the country. Just this year, the city council will spend $1.8 million on redevelopment, while spending a pathetic $100,000 on road repair. Since beginning redevelopment 15 years ago, the city has stopped nearly all funding for road repairs, accumulating over $100 million in damage to the existing city roadways, according to its own estimates.

Fixing South Lake Tahoe isn't that complicate, if we can just go back to those original three priorities of snow removal, road repairs and policing.

But first, the voters need to make some decisions:

– Do you really want to live in a city where traffic and parking enforcement has been stepped up in order to pay the salaries of the enforcers?

– Do you want snow removal done by outsiders who have submitted the lowest bids and will replace our local dedicated and experienced crews?

– Is it fair that everyone who rents has to pay the TOT and $200 million in bonded debt, money that was used to benefit Marriott and Vail?

– Do you want a city council that believes in police powers to seize property and incur massive debts without a general vote?

If your answer to these questions is no, then here is what we must do to end this failure in local government:

– Forget about redevelopment and focus on basic services.

– Hire an outside accounting firm to perform a forensic audit of the city's finances.

– Stop aggravating tourist with aggressive enforcement of traffic and parking ordinances.

– Stop squandering money on studies, consultants and tourist promotions.

– Stop retiring city officials at 100 percent of their salary.

– Stop hiring new city officials with astronomically high salaries and benefits.

– Stop electing city council members who don't believe in free markets, personal freedom or private property.

Of course, there are those who will tell you that everything is under control and not to listen to those who have sounded the alarm. They will tell you to ignore the findings of the El Dorado Grand Jury of wrongdoing and malfeasance by the city council. Instead, they will steadfastly claim that redevelopment has been a great success and that the free market can't be trusted to provide affordable housing and controlled growth. However, why is it that no other city in the Basin has undertaken redevelopment?

Certainly, the North Shore looks a whole lot better than the South Shore, so those who advocate for redevelopment have a lot of explaining to do.

In the meantime, an honest appraisal of the financial crisis facing the city has yet to be made by city officials. Until that happens and the city admits it is broke, nothing is going to get fixed. Like an alcoholic who is in denial, the city council needs to admit to past failures, its current debt and the enormous unfunded liabilities it has incurred. Only when we have faced the true magnitude of the unfunded road and retirement liabilities, will we be ready to slash all the fat and get back to basic services.

Steve Kubby is a resident of South Lake Tahoe.

Opinion: Unable to understand logic of STPUD's water rates

By Steve Jacobs

I am extremely upset and frustrated with South Tahoe Public Utility District. As a consumer and full-time resident of this community, I believe many of us are being victimized by STPUD's current water policy. I believe their current water rates are unfair, inequitable and should be illegal.

If you do not yet have a water meter: If you do not yet have a water meter, you will continue to be billed at the "flat-rate" of approximately $200-plus per quarter (for both water and sewer). As soon as STPUD gets more funding, they will eventually install a water meter at your house. Once you have a water meter, you will then be charged based on your water usage.

If you already have a water meter: If you currently have a water meter (or when STPUD eventually installs one for you), you will be charged for every drop of water you consume. I am a full-time resident and I recently received my latest quarterly bill (water and sewer) for almost $500.This is up from the flat rate of $200-plus. There are only two people in my household, and we have landscaping but no lawn areas. (Note: For more details about my water situation see below). So I am now being charged 2½ times the amount of a flat-rate customer.

But it is not just me. One of my neighbors lives alone and received a bill for almost $800 (she has a lawn). Her neighbor who has a family of four and lawn area received a bill for over $900.

The problems: People without water meters will continue to pay the flat rate while many of us with meters will pay substantially more. This is not equitable and the district openly admits that their current rate system is unfair. STPUD says that California law requires the district to charge metered customers for their water based on volume consumed. And while this is true, there is no state law that establishes the actual rate that STPUD has elected to charge us. The problem is STPUD has set the water rates way too high.

To determine how much to charge for water, STPUD hired a consultant. And, of course, STPUD needs a certain amount to support their operations. However, both the consultant (as stated in the consultant report) and STPUD (in my conversations with customer service and according to Dennis Cocking, STPUD public information officer) admit that the current water rate disparity is unfair and inequitable when applied to their customer base. This inequity is especially amplified in our community where we have such a high percentage of second homes. In order to keep the rates "revenue neutral," STPUD has to set water rates substantially higher for those of us who live here full time and use a "normal" amount of water. Second homeowners (with properties that sit mostly vacant) use little water and will pay far less. The result is those who already struggle financially to live here full time will now subsidize those who can afford to have a vacation home at the lake.

Also, in my view, people with a reasonable amount of landscaping and who water responsibly should not be penalized. Our water comes directly out of the ground, and if you water your lawn or your plants you recycle most of that water back into the environment. It would be different if we were in a drought situation. But we are not in a drought, and from my understanding we probably never will be, as there is plenty of water here in the Tahoe basin. While it is everyone's responsibility to use water conservatively, I do not think it is right that STPUD wants us to live like we are in a continual drought.

Possible solutions: While I question the cost-benefit of the multimillion dollar water meter installation program, ultimately I believe it is a good thing to have meters in order to encourage people to use water wisely. However, the laws and policies relative to water usage need to be established and applied fairly and impartially. STPUD'S current water rate policy clearly does not meet this test.

Here are some possible solutions:

1. It is my understanding that some current STPUD board members are in favor of raising rates even higher. Prior to establishing user rates, I believe STPUD needs to take a hard look at every aspect of their operation to ensure they are doing everything possible to minimize waste and maximize operational efficiency. Over the past years, most companies in America have cut back staff and have streamlined operations. I do not see that STPUD has ever made any effort to do this. They are a monopoly; they are supposed to be working for us (the public) and not just protecting their own interests. STPUD needs to evaluate staff compensation packages, staff levels, and implement infrastructure cost controls.

2. I believe STPUD should immediately increase the fixed portion of the water bill (the meter charge) and substantially decrease the consumption rate (to near zero) until such time that all of their customers have water meters. This would comply with state law, and would alleviate much of the inequity and class disparity for residents and second-home owners. In the distant future, when everyone has water meters, an equitable volumetric rate among the entire customer base could be considered.

3. I believe STPUD should immediately establish a tiered usage, seasonally adjusted base rate so people can afford to water their landscaping in the summer. (Tiered rates are commonly used by many utility companies.) People should not be penalized for having a reasonable amount of landscaping that is watered intelligently and conservatively. Plants are good for our environment, and the water used to keep plants healthy is mostly returned back into the ground from where it originated. Also, water used for irrigation is relatively cheap to provide since it does not need to be sewage processed or pumped over the hill to Nevada.

4. I believe that STPUD should delay volume-based billing for

a period of one year for each of their customers after that customer has a water meter installed. My understanding is that this is permitted by state law. Excerpt follows… "(B) Notwithstanding subparagraph (A), in order to provide customers with experience in volume-based water service charges, an urban water supplier that is subject to this subdivision may delay, for one annual seasonal cycle of water use, the use of meter-based charges for service connections that are being converted from non-volume-based billing to volume-based billing." For this one-year period, STPUD bills should indicate to their customers the actual dollar amount for the metered rate versus the non-metered rate. This would allow customers the opportunity to learn and prepare for the differences between the two billing systems.

My water situation (for comparison): In my case, I have a water meter at our house. So, STPUD charges for water based on their current metered rate, and as a result my latest quarterly bill (for sewer and water) has jumped from $150 to almost $500. There are only two people in my household and we use water very conservatively. We have low-usage water fixtures and appliances (1.6 gpf toilets, low-flow showers, sink aerators, high-efficiency dishwasher, etc.), and we have a landscaped yard with native plants (no lawn areas) that is on a low-flow drip irrigation system that is on a timer.

STPUD says that, with current water rates, over the course of an entire year the total amount that a metered customer pays will equal the amount paid by a flat-rate customer. This is simply not going to be true for anyone with landscaping that needs to be watered in summer.

Please let me know your thought: I have tried to put the facts and my beliefs together on this issue. If I am in error on anything, I apologize and please let me know. I am interested in hearing readers' input on these ideas.

I encourage everyone to call the district (530.544.6474) and let them know your ideas; or better yet, attend a STPUD board meeting and express you thoughts.

Thank you.

Steve Jacobs is a resident of South Lake Tahoe.