

Opinion: Placer County supervisors believe in transparency

By Robert M. Weygandt

The public and media keep close tabs on how local governments spend taxpayer dollars these days.

Placer County welcomes the scrutiny, and is happy to provide answers.

I want to take this opportunity to update residents on the county budget for 2011-12. The Board of Supervisors believes strongly in a transparent budget process, and encourages all residents to stay informed about county government – whether they live in cities or unincorporated areas.

Many residents are unaware the county offers a broad range of services to all county residents. The county, for example, checks gasoline pumps, supermarket scales and price scanners to make sure they are accurate and inspects restaurants throughout the county to make sure food is safe.

The county helps veterans get the benefits they deserve, runs local elections, prosecutes suspected criminals, helps parents collect child support payments, issues marriage licenses, helps protect the public from communicable diseases and offers alcohol and drug abuse treatment programs.

It provides public health clinics, child welfare services, mental health assistance and many other safety-net services.

Placer County has worked hard the last few years to preserve core services and maintain its fiscal stability despite the economic slowdown and state budget crisis.

On June 7, the board adopted a balanced proposed 2011-12 budget so the county would have a spending plan in place when the new fiscal year began July 1. In September, the board will adopt a final budget with more precise estimates of available local and state funding.

The proposed budget is for \$720 million, down 4.9 percent from 2010-11. It is 16.8 percent lower than the \$865 million budget adopted in 2008-09, the last fiscal year before county revenue began dropping because of the economic slowdown and state budget crisis.

Revenue losses over the last few years have been accompanied by rising demand for many county services because of the economic slowdown and population growth.

Growth has slowed lately, but Placer County's population jumped 40.3 percent from 2000 to 2010.

The rapid growth of south Placer's cities has exacerbated Placer County's budget challenges. Up to 90 percent of the county's general-purpose revenue is spent on countywide services that benefit residents in both cities and unincorporated areas, but the county's costs for providing services in cities exceed the general-purpose revenue it receives from city residents by about 30 percent.

That imbalance is becoming more and more critical because about 60 percent of the county's general-purpose revenue comes from property taxes, and property-tax revenue is down considerably.

For 2011-12, property tax revenue is down 3 percent from the fiscal year that just ended. Since 2008, revenue from that source has dropped approximately 13 percent.

Placer County's budget outlook still could change dramatically based on implementation of the recently approved state budget. Specifically, the state is shifting significant new

responsibilities for public safety and health and human services to the county with insufficient resources to carry out such responsibilities. Similar challenges exist for the county's redevelopment agency, which faces funding reductions of approximately \$3.8 million due to the state budget.

I am proud of the county's success responding to the slowdown and state budget crisis, and pledge we will continue working hard to keep Placer County on a sound fiscal footing and preserve core services to the public.

Robert M. Weygandt is chairman of the Placer County Board of Supervisors.

Opinion: Meaningful debate on military spending is MIA

By Daniel Wirls

As the president and Congress grind their way to a budgetary compromise that will do far more to further alienate the American public than solve our fiscal crisis, one thing – military spending – is all but overlooked. For all the strife over taxes and entitlements, the president and majorities in both parties agree on the following: Military spending is essentially off the table, even though it is far and away the most distorted part of the national budget, the most egregious mismatch between the country's rational needs and the commitment of national resources.

Let's remind ourselves of a few basic facts. Since 2001, the nation has spent more than \$1.2 trillion on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. During the same period, military spending has

increased more than 80 percent. That 80-plus percent increase is separate from, in addition to, the \$1.2 trillion for the wars. U.S. military spending is higher than at any point since World War II, without counting the hundreds of billions for the wars. The United States spends close to half the world's total in military spending and our closest allies bring the total to more than 70 percent. At about \$80 billion, the Pentagon's budget for research and development, alone, exceeds the entire military budget of any nation except China.

Moreover, the fastest growing entitlement program is not Medicaid, Medicare or Social Security – it's veterans' benefits, a separate category of spending, independent of the Pentagon budget or war spending. Over the last decade, the Veterans Affairs budget increased from \$47 billion to \$124.7 billion per year, or 162 percent (compared to Medicare's 109 percent, Medicaid's 119 percent, and Social Security's 61 percent).

Daniel Wirls is a professor of politics at UC Santa Cruz.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Parents are the best teachers

By Emily Kirkpatrick

Study after study shows that children suffer from the summer slide when school is not in session. But the answer doesn't have to be – and shouldn't be – contained only within the walls of a school. And, given the severe budget cuts that Bay Area schools are facing, it can't be.

The onus is on parents to keep kids' minds actively engaged – and it doesn't just mean another summer reading program. Children spend five times as much time outside school as they do in the classroom, most heavily concentrated in the summer, so parents are the best ones to prevent summer learning loss.

A study just released by the Rand Corp. found that students experience the most benefits when summer programs include individualized instruction, parental involvement and small class sizes. An earlier study by Harris Cooper, a professor of psychological sciences now with Duke University, estimated that summer loss for all students equals about one month of school. Low-income students experience even higher levels of loss.

The common solution in both studies is parents. Cooper suggests parents work with children during the summer months by engaging in small, individualized programs.

Emily Kirkpatrick is vice president of the National Center for Family Literacy.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Tahoe's young professionals thankful

To the community,

Tahoe Regional Young Professionals would like to thank all who joined the group July 27 at Pope Beach for their mixer/barbeque. More than 30 people attended the warm sunset filled evening – the second of many mixers for the young

professionals.

TRYP would like to send a special “thank you” to Overland Meat for donating their delicious burgers and hot dogs. Great salads, sides and desserts were brought by individuals and TRYP.

The next events scheduled are Beach Clean-up days, Aug. 17 and Aug 20. Stay tuned for details.

TRYP’s mission is connecting Tahoe’s next generation to help the community and strives to get younger professionals involved in the community and give back while creating an environment for networking.

For more information email tahoetryp@gmail.com or find them on Facebook: www.facebook.com/TahoeTRYP.

Jenn Boyd, TRYP

Opinion: ‘It’s the spending, stupid’

By Tom McClintock

Imagine a family that earns \$50,000 a year but is spending more than \$88,000 with a credit card balance of \$330,000. The discussions around the kitchen table are likely to be a little tense.

Proportionally, that’s where Washington’s finances are today, and that’s why the national discussion is a little tense, too.

Even these figures belie the magnitude of the fiscal crisis.

Shutting down the entire federal government and firing every federal employee is no longer enough to balance the budget. Mandatory spending – mainly entitlements – consumes more than the government takes in.



Tom McClintock

Fortunately, revenues vastly exceed debt payments, so threats of an actual default are so much flimflam. The president has both the legal authority and constitutional obligation to prioritize payments to prevent a default. The problem is that a lot of other bills would go unpaid, causing a downgrade to the nation's triple-A credit, forcing up interest costs, wiping out all of the savings now on the table and jacking up everything from mortgage interest costs to family credit card rates.

But avoiding a downgrade will take more than just raising the debt limit. Without a credible plan to place the Treasury back on the path to fiscal solvency – which Standard and Poors defines as reducing the deficit by \$4 trillion over the next decade – the nation's credit will be downgraded no matter what happens with the debt limit.

So what to do?

The president wants to raise taxes on “corporate jets” and “millionaires and billionaires.” But the awful truth is that there aren't enough corporate jets or millionaires and billionaires to make more than a dent in these numbers.

That's why the president has actually proposed raising taxes

on those earning \$200,000 per year (\$250,000 for couples). These are families who are already paying more than half of all income taxes, many of whom are struggling to keep up with upside-down mortgages while putting kids through college without financial aid. Worse, over 80 percent of small businesses' net income would be subject to the president's "millionaires and billionaires" tax at a time when we're depending on them to produce two-thirds of the new jobs that people desperately need.

The folly of the left's tax nostrums is to assume that high taxes are the path to prosperity and an antidote to deficits. They are neither.

As Adam Smith warned, raising taxes in a recession makes as much sense as a shopkeeper raising prices in a sales slump. New revenues are needed, but the healthy way is to remove the burdens that government has placed on the economy and produce those revenues through economic growth. Prosperity is the only true source of revenue.

Nor are taxes an antidote to deficits. In fact, they're close cousins: a deficit is simply a future tax. Both are driven by spending. It's no coincidence that while annual spending increased by \$1.2 trillion in the last five years, the annual deficit increased by \$1.4 trillion. It's the spending, stupid.

So how do we reduce spending when promised entitlements are pushing the nation to bankruptcy? A family grappling with a problem as big as the federal government's would rapidly come to several conclusions.

First, it's going to need a work-out plan, starting with a family budget. In March, the House passed the first federal budget since 2009. It would ultimately balance the budget and pay off the debt. The Senate tore it up.

Second, that family's going to have to review its spending and pull out everything that it can do without. The House has

begun that process but has a long way to go. The Senate frets over losing the “Cowboy Poetry Festival.”

Finally, it’s going to have to renegotiate any promises it has made but just can’t keep. And that’s the biggest budget challenge, because an entire generation of Americans has made retirement plans based on those promises.

For example, an average couple earning \$89,000 and retiring in 2011 will have paid \$110,000 into Medicare and will consume \$350,000. Is anyone really surprised the system is collapsing?

Paul Ryan has done the nation a great service by offering an alternative that stops provider flight and guarantees seniors the choice of the health care plan that best meets their own needs, underwritten by a solvent Medicare system in a manner that provides higher support to those who are sicker, poorer and older.

Facing grim financial reality after decades of profligacy is a difficult, time-consuming and thoroughly unpleasant process. But there’s an infinitely worse alternative.

Just ask the Greeks.

Tom McClintock represents the 4th Congressional District, which encompasses Lake Tahoe on the California side.

Opinion: The ‘lunacy’ of standardized tests for kids

By Nancy Creech

Have you ever given young children a standardized test?

Kindergartners are 4 to 5 years old and this is what happens: Some of them cry. Some get stomach aches. Many of them, all of a sudden when instructions are being explained, have to go to the bathroom or get a tissue. Some draw all over the paper. They talk. They shout out answers, as they have been taught to care for one another and help one another.

Race to the Top put us on the data bandwagon and Education Secretary Arne Duncan has now called for more “formative assessments.” Even though Michigan did not win Race to the Top money, we are nevertheless answering the call for data for data, data, and more data, for children in kindergarten.

I am spending so much time recording “formative” assessments that I don’t have time to evaluate the meaningful assessments and plan for instruction, much less time to actually teach!

I now have to give a total of more than 27,000 check marks or grades for my class of 25 students per year. This is not counting the stars, stickers or smiley faces I put on their work each day.

Nancy Creech is a kindergarten teacher in Michigan.

Read the whole story

Opinion: From ‘No and Slow’ to ‘Fast to Last’

By Garry Bowen

Interesting that TRPA hired themselves a part-time COO with a PhD in psychology and management consultant as his shingle. Hopefully, he has some organizational development skills

somewhere in the mix, as “streamlining” the various internal methods will take a lot of organizational skill, especially if part time.

A reasonable assumption could be made that this is a good move for [Executive Director] Joanne [Marchetta] to deal with the “externals”, as she put it, as the contemporary function of a CEO (which rightfully she is) is to look to the future, strategizing where the entity is going in the distant future, leaving the daily delegations to others.



Interesting timing, though, as “streamlining the administrative process for residential permitting” comes at a time when they are diminishing the residential in favor of the development process of planning. It would appear that this is also at a time when they are several years behind in completing Pathway 2007 (P7 is now late P12). This diminishes the potential convergence of the TRPA emphasis on the near shore urban TMDL pollution issues of blighted areas with one fast-growing national green building trend: EB (in LEED EB is existing buildings) as an ongoing source for improving air, energy, and water quality simultaneously.

Encouraging either larger-scale commercial or more individual residential development will be better served through the establishment of building standards more immediately in concert with the overall goals of lake clarity, which is itself in tune with what the citizenry says they want: a greener community.

So, it’s OK to reorganize from a “No & Slow” emphasis to one of “Fast to Last” by establishing sustainable standards high enough to obviate the TRPA premise of eliminating unnecessary legal dilemmas. That premise was stated by Mr. [John] Singlaub at the outset of their “new” era, as the costs to TRPA in terms of staff time and/or legal costs were too high in

squandering funds that could be used for other things.

In order to offer Mr. [Ed] Gurowitz some insight, I have my own story to tell: a number of months ago I was engaged by one of the areas prominent architect/engineers, who was asked by staff within the agency what green building programs they should be looking at, presumably to include in the Regional Plan we have not yet seen. It was decided that I would be an asset in helping them figure it out, being much more familiar with what's out there.

My colleague called TRPA as a next step and was never called back; knowing this as not unusual, I went ahead and contacted the CEO of the best global green building entity that I currently know of, and he graciously agreed to make a presentation here when needed – and then left the following day to make a series of presentations in Mexico City to several building consortiums. Well, unfortunately, too many of us know the outcome already – I never got a call back, so they never got the presentation so graciously offered, and it might have helped them, and Tahoe.

Presumably, this is at least part of the problem that Mt. Gurowitz was taken on for – and I wish him luck.

The renowned Hunter Lovins of Rocky Mountain Institute, author of the 13-million copy book, "Natural Capitalism," and her own prodigious sustainability career, was recently quoted as saying, "Even if you're a profit-maximizing capitalist who believes climate change is a hoax, you'll do exactly what you'd do if you were scared to death about climate change, because we know how to solve it at a profit."

She concluded, "You don't have to believe in the problem to believe in the solution. There are opportunities to make more money while solving the problem."

In short, the citizens are right to want a green community, and there is now no reason not to have one – any new direction

should be guided by the idea that they will be “leaving money on the table” not to pay attention to the very prodigious advantages to “going green”. Even the CEO of Turner Construction, which built the basin’s only LEED platinum building routinely uses the figure 0.8 (less than 1 percent) as the “premium” paid for going green, after \$20 billion of green-built projects.

This would be streamlining at its finest, while satisfying all parties with a win-win for the treasure we know as Lake Tahoe, while satisfying my own craving for “policies equal to the scenery”.

And rebuild Tahoe’s image as a benefit – to all.

Garry Bowen has a 50-year connection to the South Shore, with an immediate past devoted to global sustainability, on most of its current fronts: green building, energy and water efficiencies, and public health. He may be reached at tahoefuture@gmail.com or (775) 690.6900.

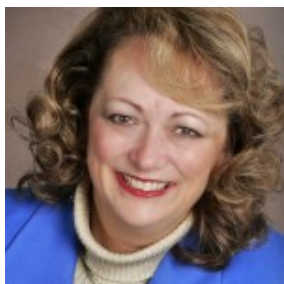
Opinion: School board work – a challenging job

By Vicki Barber

A friend said to me recently, “I didn’t know being on a school board would be so difficult. I thought I would just try to help out. This is work.”

I imagine most people have similar thoughts. It’s a school board. How hard can that be? These days, with the kinds of decisions facing board members, I would suggest that it is

extremely hard! My friend was concerned about the necessity of lay-offs in her district. California's declining budget is forcing the board she's on to look at a change in structure. Unfortunately, the need for this change in structure will most likely lead to severe changes in staffing and, potentially, in student achievement.



Vicki Barber

Yes, she can make a decision to balance the budget, but she also knows what that will mean to programs and services. After she votes for something that must be done, she will go home to the same neighborhood that also houses the families her vote will affect. Yet, if she chooses not to vote for the layoff, she will have to decide what else can be cut in order to balance the budget.

We have historically looked at the decisions school boards make as falling into one of three categories – busing, budgets, and buildings. How do we get students to and from school? How do we adequately staff our schools? Do we build a new science wing or tear down the old gym? Even in good times, those challenges were the cause of much debate and planning. Now the questions are more intense. Do we even run a bus service? If we approve a budget, will we actually get the funds to meet it? What programs can we cut or modify? What cuts are least likely to negatively impact the students? Yes, we know the building is old, but closing it this year is not an option, so what, if any, improvements to it can we make?

Those are only a few of the questions board members are

facing. And, they are not just facing them at one meeting, but at every meeting they attend. They are not just facing the questions at board meetings. They are being asked by neighbors, staff members, and administrators, "What are we going to do?"

This is truly uncharted territory. Those of us who have been in education for a few years are familiar with the ups and downs of school budgets. We learn to prepare for the cycles. This circumstance, however, is unprecedented. We have never before seen shortfalls this severe. Board members and educators alike are trying to find good solutions for the current situation.

Our dedicated school board members deserve a great deal of credit for the amount of effort they are putting into their work. Not all of the decisions are popular. Few of the decisions are easy. But board members in every school district in El Dorado County are doing the hard work of determining how to navigate this difficult time. As my friend said, "This is work." Yes it is, and thank you for being willing to do that work.

Vicki Barber is superintendent of El Dorado County Office of Education.

Opinion: Using common sense in the woods

By John Heil

The national forests in California offer a variety of recreational opportunities and beauty. With the wonders of

adventure, however, come certain hazards.



The most effective way to prevent mishaps is to adequately prepare for the trip. Knowledge of the area, weather, terrain, limitations of your body, plus a little common sense can help to ensure a safe and enjoyable trip. For example, be aware of hiking conditions.

If you plan to enjoy the rivers and streams, make sure you are aware of the depth and speed of the water.

Take care of yourself and your pets and be alert to changing conditions, wildlife habitat and any potential hazards.

Here are some further tips to assist you in having a safe and pleasurable visit to one of California's 18 national forests.

- * Travel with a companion. You don't want to be by yourself in case of an emergency. Tell someone where and when you are going, when you expect to return, and how many individuals are in your party.

- * Be in good physical condition. Set a comfortable pace as you hike. A group trip should be designed for the weakest member of the group.

- * Stay hydrated. You, your children and your pets.

- * Think about your footing while traveling near cliffs. Trees and bushes can't always be trusted to hold you. Ensure you are on solid ground.

- * Stay on developed trails or dry, solid rock areas with good footing. Wear appropriate clothing and footwear for the trail conditions and season.

- * Check your equipment. Keep your equipment in good working order. Inspect it before your trip. Do not wait until you are at the trailhead.

* Be weather wise. Keep an eye on current and predicted weather conditions – for example, how hot it will be for the day. Know the signs for approaching storms or changing weather conditions. Avoid bare ridge tops, exposed places, lone trees, streams, and rocks during lightning storms. Find shelter in a densely forested area at a lower elevation. Even in the summer, exposure to wind and rain can result in hypothermia.

* Learn basic first aid so you will know how to identify and treat injuries and illnesses. Carry a first aid kit with you. Learn how to identify the symptoms of heat exhaustion, heat stroke, hypothermia, and dehydration, and know how to treat them.

* Make camp before dark. Traveling after darkness has resulted in many accidents from falls, so travel only during daylight. Set up camp well away from the edge of cliffs, and learn the terrain during daylight. If you have to leave camp after dark, stay in areas you have seen in daylight, go with a friend, and always use a good flashlight.

* Be alert for slippery areas and take your time to avoid tripping. Low-hanging branches and variable terrain makes running unsafe, and leaves can hide slippery areas underneath.

* Alcohol does not mix with cliffs or water play activities! If you drink, stay away from cliffs and from skilled water activities. Judgment, agility, and balance are all reduced by alcohol consumption.

* Think before you drink. No matter how clean or pure stream water looks, it's likely to contain water-borne parasites and microorganisms that can cause discomfort and sometimes serious illness. Pack your water in, or purify through chemical treatment.

* Wildfires: Despite heavy precipitation in some parts of the state and late snowfall across the Sierra, forest visitors should not let their guard down for wildfires. As summer

temperatures continue to dry out vegetation, the fire danger is increasing. Whether you're car-camping or backpacking with a portable stove, know the local fire restrictions in the area in which you're visiting.

* Campfires: In areas where open campfires are allowed, always make sure yours is completely extinguished before leaving. Drown your fire with water and stir it until it's cold to the touch. Abandoned campfires are illegal and consistently rank as the number one cause of human-caused fires in California and the nation.

John Heil works for the U.S. Forest Service regional office in Vallejo.

Opinion: LTCC Demonstration Garden takes learning outdoors

By Melonie Guttry

In 1984, a single individual envisioned the Lake Tahoe Demonstration Garden, which is now a flourishing 7-acre garden showcasing attractive native and adapted plants, while using conservation techniques to address water quality concerns. The Lake Tahoe Demonstration Garden is located on the Lake Tahoe Community College property behind the G-Wing Garden Buildings near the Child Development Center.

This site was originally very disturbed by human activity, having served as a borrow pit for the construction of roads and later as a recreation area for off-road vehicles. Its bare

compacted soils supported little vegetation and directly contributed sediment into Lake Tahoe via Trout Creek.

Construction began in the spring 1990 with a grand opening in 1991. Now it is a thriving, functional landscape where the community and visitors can enjoy and learn about Tahoe's unique environment.



Melonie Guttry

The garden continues to expand and make improvements through generous donations and agency partner collaboration. The garden's community partnership is designed to protect and preserve the Lake Tahoe Basin by showcasing landscapes to:

- Promote the use of water efficient native and adapted plants and gardening practices;
- Display native and adapted plants in an attractive natural setting;
- Demonstrate best management practices and other backyard conservation practices
- Provide a public venue for inspiration and education.

The Tahoe Resource Conservation District in partnership with the UC Cooperative Extension Master Gardeners started the Green Thumb Gardening series in South Lake Tahoe in June 2010 at the Lake Tahoe Demonstration Garden. This educational series was developed to promote conservation landscaping techniques and inform homeowners and gardening enthusiasts that gardening in Lake Tahoe is fun, beautiful and beneficial to

our treasured natural environment. There is something for everyone in this year's line-up of informative classes. You are encouraged to bring your questions and to share your experience and knowledge. All presentations are outdoors in the beautiful garden setting and lively discussion between attendees and the presenters enrich the experience.

Running through the end of August, Green Thumb presentations will be at the UC Davis Field Station on Tuesdays and at the Lake Tahoe Demonstration Garden on Wednesdays from 5:30-6:45pm. This summer's topics will cover native vegetation, veggie gardening, native bees, sprinkler system check-ups, invasive weeds and much more. The Tahoe RCD will be participating every Tuesday and Wednesday evening. California Tahoe basin residents can stop by to sign you up for free technical assistance services, such as BMP, conservation landscaping and invasive weed evaluations. You will also have the opportunity to learn more about the Master Gardener Program and how you can become involved.

Green Thumb gardening at the Lake Tahoe Demonstration Garden is just one of many reasons to visit and enjoy the garden. If you haven't experienced the newest addition, the Ledbetter Terrace, you will be in for a treat. Wedding and event bookings are currently being scheduled at this unique outdoor Tahoe venue. To learn more or book your next event, go online. If you'd like to learn about sustainable landscaping practices on your own schedule, visit the many informative garden demonstrations and ask the Tahoe RCD demonstration garden specialist to share their knowledge. The garden can always use a helping hand. If you are interested in volunteering for organized work events at the Demonstration Garden, please contact Jennifer Cressy at Tahoe RCD. You will be sure to leave not only with a sense of community and accomplishment, but you will also learn a thing or two about sustainable landscaping practices.

For a full schedule and topic descriptions go to our calendar

online.

Melonie Guttry is executive director of the LTCC Foundation.