



Thomas D. Elias: No favoritism in budget plan

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Special interests have seemingly been crying from every rooftop in California from the moment Gov. Jerry Brown issued his first proposed state budget days after taking the oath of office.

They've all had the same message in response to the bitter medicine Brown dispensed: "We are special, we provide such a valuable service that our budgets and our staff simply can't be cut without doing irreparable damage."

The bleating came as no surprise to Brown or his top advisers. At one pre-inaugural budget meeting, Brown warned all present to "fasten your seat belts." His top advisor and campaign manager, Steve Glazer, predicted that Brown's honeymoon would end the day the proposed budget appeared and that "people will be screaming on every street corner."

They are. For among major spending areas in the state budget, this plan spares only elementary and high school education. Schools shouldn't be cut, Brown said, because they've suffered so many reductions in the past three years.

Some samples of the first complaints voiced:

- Eliminating local redevelopment agencies, said the executive director of the California Redevelopment Association, John Shirey, "... is more smoke and mirrors that will ... cause widespread economic pain in communities throughout California ... It makes no sense to kill this economic engine."
- "This budget is a death warrant for California AIDS patients," said Michael Weinstein, president of the AIDS Healthcare Foundation. "(It) seems like it is intended to push vulnerable Californians with very little income off life-saving treatment ... it could also jeopardize the greater public health in California."
- "These proposals will result in more than 120,000 children ... losing access to health coverage," said Peter Manzo, head of the United Ways of California. "Children will not get the preventive care they need to be healthy ... taxpayers will carry a heavier burden as uninsured children receive more costly health care in emergency rooms."
- "Cutting the Adult Day Care Health program is completely nonsensical," said Lydia Missaelides, executive director of the California Association for Adult Day Services. "Given that half the funding for ADHC comes from the federal government, this will cost the state more than it will save."

Similar gripes came from the heads of the state's public

Universities, construction workers unions and many more. Almost all these interests and their backers supported Brown last fall, but he's plainly not playing favorites.

The truth is that virtually all the cut programs have value. But money to give them the funding they've had in recent years is not in hand or in prospect, and there will be even less if Republicans and tax protestors manage to block the special election Brown seeks to call in order to ask the public to OK extensions on about \$8.5 billion per year in temporary taxes due to expire July 1.

Reality is that if the governor and the Legislature heed any of the interest groups now complaining, they'll simply have to take money from some other valued program to make up for it, which would amount to a shell game.

Brown knew before he even ran for office that he'd get most of the blame for this budget, when it's plainly not his fault. All he's done is set priorities for distributing a much-reduced pot of state money. If legislators don't like those priorities, they'll make changes.

In fact, there are plenty of other places to distribute blame. The last two former governors borrowed and used gimmickry for the last nine years to push their immediate budget problems into the future, and that future has arrived. On his first day in office, ex-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger cut the vehicle license tax by more than \$4 billion per year to please the car dealers who helped finance his election, costing the state \$28 billion so far — enough money to avoid any of the cuts now proposed.

Voters approved myriad bond issues for everything from hospitals to veterans benefits to parkland and, yes, budget balancing. It was a lot like individuals who see something they like at the mall and whip out a credit card without remembering they'll have to pay it off sometime. Now the interest on that debt costs more than \$5 billion a year

Which leaves Californians in a terrible dilemma, especially if they are among the several million affected by unemployment or home foreclosures: They'll either have to accept even more severe cuts than those proposed or go along with a painful tax extension. Bitter medicine indeed, but Brown appears to have few choices other than to confront voters with the hard facts and their unpleasant consequences.

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