



Analysis: Recent California newspaper editorials

Published: Wednesday, 3 Aug 2011 | 4:33 PM ET

The Associated Press

Aug. 1

The (Riverside) Press-Enterprise: "UC stealth"

The University of California should be no less accountable for its use of tax money than any other public institution. Fiscal obscurity has to end. The university needs to provide taxpayers a far clearer, more transparent explanation of UC budgeting.

The state auditor last week found that the UC budget process lacked sufficient detail for the public to evaluate the university's financial decisions. Funding for the system's 10 campuses varied widely, without any clear explanation for those disparities. The audit also reported that between 2005-06 and 2009-10, more than \$1 billion a year went for "miscellaneous services." But what that vague budget category included was unclear.

UC should understand the danger this lack of specifics presents. A cash-strapped state with persistently massive budget deficits needs to justify every dollar of spending. So how are taxpayers supposed to judge their investment in higher education if the university will not provide the data required to show the public that UC spends money wisely? And obscuring basic fiscal processes is a strange way to court public support for a university beset by budget cuts and rising tuition rates.

The variance in UC general fund allocations among campuses illustrates the point. UC San Francisco, for example, received \$55,186 per student in 2009-10, while UC Santa Barbara got \$12,309 per student. UC Riverside landed \$14,319 per student that year.

There are legitimate reasons for such differences. Some education, such as the health sciences coursework at UC San Francisco, costs more to provide. Some campuses also have programs that others do not. And some of the disparities stem from funding decisions the university made decades ago, and never revisited.

But the lack of detail about how such factors actually affect campus allocations lets public speculation run unchecked. The auditor noted that the four campuses with the highest proportion of minorities, including UCR, had the lowest per-pupil funding. The audit said there was no reason to believe ethnic makeup affected the budget allocation -- but noted that the public might draw that conclusion because UC did not provide the specifics to show otherwise.

UC officials said they are revising the budget process to give the public a better understanding of where the money goes and why. Yet at the same time, university finance experts defended the lack of detail by saying that the UC budget process was so complex that the public might misinterpret it.

Such arrogance only raises public suspicions. Surely, the UC budget is no more complicated than the state or federal government budgets, which provide reams of specific information about spending and allocations. There is no reason a public university cannot do as much.

Higher education is vital for California's future prosperity. But that fact does not excuse UC from its duty to be accountable to taxpayers. Public scrutiny of UC finances may not always be comfortable, but it is essential.

July 31

Los Angeles Daily News: "Budget bust — The price of neglecting pension reform can be seen in cuts to our schools, to the elderly, even to day laborers"

Day laborers crowding the entrance to Home Depot. Seniors dumped out of day care programs. Students shut out of public higher education because of cost. This is what ignoring pension reform looks like.

Until now, the effects of many of the budget cuts by state, county and city governments have been visible only around the edges of society. The average person could ignore them. They hit home at someone else's house.

But now the effects are showing up in everyday life.

They are the theme that links a handful of news stories this month.

The closures of day-labor centers that had been funded by Los Angeles-area cities took away such services as health services, English lessons and protection from exploitive employers. It also sent manual laborers back to Home Depot stores and other unofficial gathering spots to look for work, often to the annoyance of shoppers.

The discontinuation of state funding for California's 300 adult day health care centers, including dozens in the San Fernando Valley, raised fears that ailing and isolated senior citizens would be denied medical attention and the company of other people. The responsibility for helping them will fall to other cash-strapped agencies and to seniors' families.

Cuts in state funding for public education prompted tuition increases of 12 percent for the California State University system and 9.6 percent for the University of California system just weeks before the start of the 2011-12 academic year. That's a terrible blow for many students and families, for whom money may be scarce anyway these days.

Unfortunately, we'd better get used to such tangible symptoms of government budget crunches.

It is easy but only slightly correct for elected officials to put all of this down to the economic downturn. Leaders themselves deserve blame for signing off on unsustainable benefits for public employees and delaying hard choices.

The day was bound to come when the growing pension obligations would balloon — much like the mortgages that force thousands to walk away from their homes.

City leaders talk about huge revenue gaps. The trouble is not the incoming money, which has stayed roughly the same or grown. The trouble is the cost of servicing the debt and obligations incurred by generations of politicians who traded employee benefits for support and re-election.

Recently, Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa and the City Council scored a small victory on this count by extracting concessions on health-benefits payments from the city's police force. Of course, to achieve that, the city had to give the police pay raises of 7 percent over three years, handing off a budget headache to another mayor and council.

As one of the largest drains on public funds in the state, pensions and other retirement benefits are siphoning off billions of dollars right off the top of any budget. The downturn in the market only increased the liability. It didn't create the problem.

Politicians know that most of the electorate finds the issue of pension reform to be vague, esoteric and inaccessible. They know they can take the easy way now because they will no longer be in office — at least, not their current office — when the chickens come home to roost.

Voters have let politicians get away with this, and now, all around us, we see the results of this failure embodied by laborers going back to the Home Depot, seniors being displaced, students leaving college. Chickens roosting.

Aug. 2

Pasadena Star-News: "Advancing solar power"

Gov. Jerry Brown has a well-earned reputation for promoting environmentalism. It was under his administration in the 1970s that California took the lead in reducing auto emissions and greatly improved energy efficiency. That is a major reason why Californians today use substantially less energy per capita than the national average.

Brown's latest foray into improving the environment is his ambitious goal of tripling the amount of electricity that California receives from renewable energy, primarily through solar power.

He is seeking 20,000 new megawatts of renewable electricity by 2020. That is enough to power 20 cities the size of San Francisco. About 8,000 megawatts of this energy would come from large solar power plants — like the 392-megawatt BrightSource project in the Inyavah area of San Bernardino County — and 12,000 megawatts from a multitude of smaller, local solar arrays and other renewable sources to deliver electricity to businesses and homes.

The governor declared that the future of energy is not Texas oil, but California sun. He may well be right, but there is considerable uncertainty about the prospects of his latest California dream ever coming true.

The big question is whether it is economically feasible to produce renewable energy from non-fossil-fuel sources such as solar, wind, biomass and hydropower.

Today, solar energy costs considerably more than electricity produced by natural gas and other fossil fuels. But solar energy costs have been coming down gradually, while the cost of petroleum has been rising and is likely to continue to go up.

Also, solar energy is available only when the sun shines, and electricity cannot be stored except in electric-car batteries.

Sun power can be a major source of energy during peak hours of use during the summer, when air conditioning consumes a massive portion of the state's electricity production. As electric and plug-in hybrid cars become more popular, additional electricity production will be required and could be provided by solar energy during the day.

If solar power and other renewable energy sources can take over a large percentage of electricity production during peak hours in a cost-effective manner, California would be well served with a clean, locally produced source of energy.

It's the cost-effective part of the equation that is the greatest challenge to Brown's vision.

There is encouraging news from Germany, which gets 17percent of its electricity from renewable sources and has set a goal of 39percent by 2020. Germany installed 7,400 megawatts of solar power last year, more than a third of what Brown seeks over the next decade in California.

California should aggressively pursue solar power and other renewable sources of energy for the future. But it must do so in a way that is compatible with current economic realities. If solar power is seen as an economic impediment instead of a promising source of clean energy, Brown's vision is not likely to become a reality.

Aug. 2

San Jose Mercury News: "Revive California business? We know what we need to do"

The big surprise in California's new economic development plan unveiled July 29 by Lt. Gov. Gavin Newsom was — um, nothing.

No surprises. Not a one. It's all strategies we knew were needed, most of them laid out earlier this year in a Silicon Valley Leadership Group white paper on the California economy. But codifying them in a plan is the first step toward ending Sacramento's inexplicably laissez-faire attitude toward creating jobs and attracting business — or even trying to keep the companies we've got. States and cities struggling to do that in recent years have had nowhere to turn at the state level for help.

Newsom's next step, also proposed by the leadership group, is to create a state office to develop and coordinate strategies in distinctly different regional economies. Most important, California needs a jobs czar to focus 100 percent on this sole purpose. The elements of the plan, such as paring back or simplifying some regulation, will mean little if there isn't a champion to spread the word and to drive further changes as circumstances shift.

We don't want to be Texas. California has different strengths. But we can learn from successes in other states, and Newsom appears to have done the homework.

The lieutenant governor announced the plan in Silicon Valley, a nod to local industry's help, and is taking it on as a personal quest. This is a case in which political ambition will be helpful. Another nice report sitting on a shelf won't help Newsom win the governorship or some other higher office. But measurably changing California's now-embarrassing reputation as a job killer into that of a job creator — now that would be a rock-solid platform.

Aug. 3

The Sacramento Bee: "Assembly needs to come clean on its records"

It's a basic tenet of the law that those who write the law shape the law for their benefit.

California legislators are quick to promise open government, so long as that promise does not extend to themselves. That has become obvious again, as Speaker John A. Pérez finds himself enmeshed in a fight in which his foe seeks what should be readily available records.

Pérez and the Assembly leadership are punishing fellow Democratic Assemblyman Anthony Portantino of La Cañada Flintridge by threatening to lay off his entire staff for a month starting in October.

Portantino has clashed with Perez several times, most recently by refusing to vote for the budget.

Rules Committee Chairwoman Nancy Skinner, a Berkeley Democrat and Perez loyalist, flatly says the leadership is not taking the action against Portantino's staff as retribution for his budget vote. Rather, Skinner claims, Portantino overspent his office budget.

Skinner's claim defies belief. The Assembly must approve Portantino's hires and budget. Additionally, Portantino has spent less this year than last year, largely because he lost staff after Pérez stripped him of a committee chairmanship after earlier fights.

Portantino insists he is frugal. To buttress his claim, Portantino filed a request under the Legislative Open Records Act for detailed budget information about all 80 Assembly members and the Assembly's budget. The Bee and one of Portantino's hometown papers, the San Gabriel Valley Tribune, also requested Assembly spending information.

As The Bee's Jim Sanders wrote Monday, the Assembly is refusing to release current year spending records.

The Assembly has determined that information about how Assembly members spend taxpayers' money in the current year is not public information, but rather is the equivalent of "preliminary drafts, notes or legislative memoranda."

That is a stunning, though perhaps predictable, answer by individuals who write the laws. There is no more fundamental public information than how government spends money it extracts from taxpayers' wallets.

It's understandable why lawmakers might not want this information to become public. Details about how a legislator has spent or overspent his or her budget would be the stuff of political hit pieces. But embarrassment should not justify withholding what otherwise ought to be public information.

The sum at issue is not trivial. The Assembly consumes \$140 million a year, more than enough for example to restore funds for adult day health care, the program that provides a place for infirm elderly to spend their days to help them avoid going to nursing homes.

Many individual legislators are sincere in their desire to help this state. But the cannibalistic fight among Perez, Skinner and Portantino is the latest lamentable example of how the Assembly has become a diminished institution.

The veracity of the claims by Pérez, Skinner and Portantino ought to be easy to determine. The Assembly should produce the records of how members spend taxpayer money. Failure to release the records will only accelerate the further deterioration of the lower house.

Aug. 2

(Santa Rosa) Press Democrat: "Term limits have produced few changes"

In the two decades since California voters enacted term limits, 241 state legislators have run up against the limit and left office.

Did they return home to resume the careers they suspended and live with the consequences of the laws they enacted?

In a word, no.

According to a new study, state legislators are just as likely to land in a different office as they were before term limits went into effect. Moreover, today's legislators are far more likely to arrive in Sacramento having already held some other elective office.

Consider the class of 2008: 60 percent of the termed-out Assembly members and 40 percent of the termed-out senators either got elected to another office or appointed to a position on the public payroll.

Among legislators who left office between 1980 and 1990, the last decade before term limits, the career path was about the same: 60 percent of Assembly members and 30 percent of senators moved to a new office or a public-sector job.

As for their replacements, about 70 percent graduate from city councils and other local offices, compared to 28 percent of the freshman class of 1990.

The findings, included in a report published in late July by the nonpartisan Center for Governmental Studies, aren't particularly surprising to people who closely follow California government and politics.

Few people have jobs that allow them to pull up stakes for two years, much less six or eight years, to serve in the state Legislature. Fewer still have the personal resources or political networks

needed for an effective campaign in state Senate districts that now have more than 900,000 residents.

Simply stated, term limits hasn't created the "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington" culture of citizen legislators that voters were sold in 1990. Yet it must be acknowledged that term limits were begotten by the same public dissatisfaction that produced California's new open primary system as well as the independent commission that's mapping new district lines for legislative and congressional districts.

It may or may not be a byproduct of term limits, but the Legislature is considerably more diverse than it was in 1990, and more members have graduate degrees. However, the loss tenure in office has given rise to even greater influence for the permanent fixtures of the Sacramento scene — lawyers and lobbyists, many of them termed-out legislators who passed through the revolving door to trade on their contacts and experience in state government.

With term limits, legislators arrive knowing they need to start thinking about their next job, and making enemies isn't a great strategy.

Effective or not, term limits aren't likely to go away anytime soon. Voters have twice rejected measures to relax them, though both measures were ill-disguised attempts to let incumbents stay in office longer.

Another measure is headed to the ballot. This one would allow legislators to spend their entire tenure in the Assembly or the Senate. It would ease some of the political demands, allowing legislators to focus on their jobs without offering any bonus time for incumbents.

That would be a small improvement, and it may be as much as we can achieve until legislators earn more respect.