

Fire Districts Reject Tax Bailout

The Placer County Fire Chiefs Association at their January 11 meeting voted not to support the League of County Taxpayers proposal of a one-eighth-percent sales tax to help fund fire districts in the county. The league has been meeting and working with fire groups and county officials for the past two years in a concerted effort to find funding for distressed fire districts, especially those serving rural residents.

Fire Association President Ken Wagner, chief of the Roseville Fire Department, stated in a letter to the league that the proposal "does not reflect the total needs of the fire agencies" and "Cities within Placer County... cannot currently support the measure... with (their) philosophy that tax revenue generated in the city should stay in the city."

While the Placer County Fire Chiefs Association voted not to support the league's bailout tax, two fire districts enthusiastically supported the proposal. Placer Hills Fire Chief Ian Gow indicated that the tax would bring much needed funding to support the district's readiness for emergencies.

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"We Took No Reportable Action"

The Ralph M. Brown Act is one of the bastions of the fortification that protects the people of California from the petty despotism of mini-minded public officials that are elected to county boards of supervisors, city councils, and district boards. The purpose of the Brown Act is to effect public access to meetings and the decision-making process of local governments. The provisions of the Brown Act ensure that local governments are efficient where elected officials require confidential candor, debate, and information gathering.

The act provides for closed sessions to accommodate narrowly defined exceptions to open proceedings. The only legally sanctioned exceptions are matters concerning personnel hearings,

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Placer's "Bridge To Nowhere"

When Congress was considering the Federal Budget last November, the National Highway Bill gained attention as legislators, one after another, attached pork-barrel projects to the NHB like joyful children adding ornaments to a Christmas tree. One of the most outrageous examples was a \$320 million bridge at Ketchikan, Alaska, to cross from the town to an off-shore island of 50 inhabitants. Pundits termed it the "Bridge to Nowhere."

Alaska Senator Ted Stevens claimed that the bridge was a very necessary

need for Ketchikan residents as it also would improve access to an airport located on the island. Pork dealers always seem able to claim justifiable "need" for their pork projects. More of this later.

Placer's own "Bridge to Nowhere" is called "revenue sharing." This device was suggested to the Placer County Board of Supervisors some dozen years ago by then County Executive, Don Lunsford. This was an easy sell, as each supervisor could select and approve county-funded projects, usually

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Another Placer County Bureaucracy

As Placer County taxpayers stand by helplessly, their elected officials initiated the process of creating a new bureaucracy on January 10. The five members of the Placer County Board of Supervisors and the five directors of the Placer County Water Agency (PCWA) agreed to form the Middle Fork Project Finance Authority, established to manage the Middle Fork American River Project after the project's license expires in 2013 (see Middle Fork Project this page).

The expected profits of the project are estimated to range from \$15 to \$25 million per year or even \$20 to \$90 million per year, depending on the motivation of the estimator. The opportunity to control spending has the county supervisors and PCWA directors salivating. Based on the track record of Placer County officials to use loose dollars to go into slush funds to pay for pet projects, county residents are not likely to see the money be spent for improved water, reduced water rates or any other infrastructure improvements.

The initial cost to the taxpayers/ratepayers will be for relicensing the Middle Fork Project, estimated to be about \$35 million for engineering and

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Middle Fork American River Project

The Middle Fork American River Project is a water and power project that includes seven dams, four reservoirs, and five hydroelectric power plants. It was created after voters approved a \$140 million bond issue to build the project in 1961. The 50-year license to operate was the project issued by the Federal Energy Regulatory Agency in 1963. The Placer County Water Agency (PCWA) operates the project.

However, after PCWA became an independent agency in 1975 with a separately elected board of directors, supposedly independent of the Placer county Board of Supervisors. Somehow the county supervisors retained the mandate to approve contracts for the expenditures of revenue for energy and the sale of energy.

—Dan Sokol



"Outsourcing" Homework

A new application of outsourcing work has entered the school classroom. Some high school and college students, when pressed for time with social and other activities, have begun to "outsource" some of their homework projects for school. One student, as the fall semester neared the end, went online to bail himself out from under a tight time spot. The internet was a lifeline.

"This is homework I did not have time to study for," he said on a website devoted to outsourcing computer projects. "I need you guys to help me."

Attached was a take-home final exam from a computer class that the student would pay someone else to "cover" for him. This bit of innovative commerce took place on rentacoder.com a website that has an extensive database. While U.S. companies have gone online to outsource their programming to India, China, etc. why not set up an outsourcing network here in the United States?

rentacoder.com, started by Sam Ippolito, has installed that sort of a database. Search for "homework" in its database and you get 1000 hits. Impressive, but only a small fraction of computer students are available for outsourcing hire. Such site help is available at costs of less than \$100 and can be completed within a few hours.

Outsourcing of programming homework is only a fraction of a much bigger problem of classroom cheating. Online term papers can be bought on such subjects as causes of the Civil War, in ten or more pages, and other assorted term paper subjects.

School deans are somewhat concerned over this practice as the student using outsourcing is not developing original or individual thinking and composing. The one really being cheated is the student.

In this wireless age where kids can access the internet's wide range of information from their cell phones and PDAs, some schools are rethinking this activity not as cheating but as group brainstorming in which students will learn to access information and work out problems in group actions.

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