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Opinion



CURRENT TOP NEWS REPORTS
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Daniel Weintraub: The city that doesn't know how to handle the homeless

Gavin Newsom is a rare breed: a politician who admits he was wrong.

Dan Walters: 'None of the above' might be a winner over Feckless and Clueless

California voters -- some of them, anyway -- will decide three months hence whether Democratic Gov. Gray Davis wins another term or is replaced by Republican Bill Simon. Most voters probably wish that they had a broader array of choices.

Letters to the editor: Mideast needs compromise

I'm saddened by the vitriolic tone of writers and speakers on the Israel-Palestine issue.

Editorial: Food stamp foolishness

No one disputes the fact that California has done a lousy job of administering the federal food stamp program. The error rate -- the rate at which the state either overpaid or underpaid food stamp recipients -- was 17.7 percent last year.

Editorial: Bigger than Oracle

The Davis administration negotiates a \$95 million no-bid contract for software with Oracle Corp. for a product that state auditors conclude state agencies don't need and won't use. After the contract is negotiated, the company delivers a \$25,000 contribution to Gov. Gray Davis' re-election

Editorial: Bigger than Oracle

Want real scandal? Try prison guard contract

Bee Editorial Staff

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The Davis administration negotiates a \$95 million no-bid contract for software with Oracle Corp. for a product that state auditors conclude state agencies don't need and won't use. After the contract is negotiated, the company delivers a \$25,000 contribution to Gov. Gray Davis' re-election campaign.

The Davis administration negotiates a labor agreement with the prison guards union that state auditors conclude will increase guard salaries 37 percent over five years, boost already soaring overtime and sick leave pay, and cost taxpayers an additional \$518 million annually by the last year of the contract. Two months after the governor signs the contract, the California Correctional Peace Officers Association, the guards' union, delivers a \$251,000 contribution to Davis' re-election campaign.

One scandal, Oracle, spawned weeks of public hearings in the Legislature and led to the forced resignation and outright dismissals of top state officials. Very few legislators have raised concerns about the costly prison guard contract, a deal they helped cut. The Assembly approved the contract on a 79 to 0 vote and the Senate 28 to 1. Only Sen. Tom McClintock, R-Simi Valley, opposed it.

A single figure puts the lopsided approval vote in perspective. The guards union

contributed \$2.3 million to candidates for the state Legislature during the 1999-2000 election cycle, more than any other single contributor in the state.

The same governor and lawmakers who want to raise taxes or cut vital programs approved lavish pay increases and perks for the guards just a few months ago. For example:

Under the terms of the contract, physical fitness incentive pay has been increased from \$65 to \$130 per pay period. Correctional officers will no longer have to pass an agility test -- sit-ups, running and jumping -- to prove they are fit. Instead, they only need a note from their doctor. The department estimates the number of officers who qualify for extra pay under the new rules will jump from 58 percent to 90 percent.

Under the old contract, prison wardens could require guards with unusually high levels of leave to submit medical excuses when they claimed to be ill. That requirement was dropped in the new contract. Since the contract went into effect at the beginning of the year, sick leave has soared from 8,165 hours per month in January to 46,544 hours in April.

Beginning in 2006, correctional officers, under the new contract, will be able to collect full retirement benefits (as much as 90 percent of pay) at age 50 instead of 55. The auditor says that could produce a spike in retirements, increasing already alarming officer vacancy rates and overtime costs. In the first six months of the contract, the department spent \$110 million in overtime, \$36 million more than was planned for the entire year.

The Davis administration contends the auditor's \$518 million cost estimate of the prison guard contract is excessive. It pegs the additional cost of the new provisions in the contract at closer to \$300 million a year, but the auditor says the administration's figures fail to account for the last and most expensive year of the agreement.

Davis staffers have refused to make public the fiscal analyses and other key documents used to negotiate the terms of the guards' contract. Attorneys for the governor say under state labor law the documents are confidential. To reveal them would hamper the state in future labor negotiations.

As bad as the Oracle deal was, at least the documents were made public. And unlike the guards' contract, in the end, the Oracle deal was cancelled.

That put an end to the Oracle scandal. There's no end in sight to this one.

campaign.

Editorial: How? When? And why?

Months after President Bush began threatening to bring about "regime change" in Iraq, the Senate has joined the debate by holding two days of public hearings. Predictably, expert views were mixed about whether and how to remove Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. At the end, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Joseph Biden promised more hearings in September. Good.

Editorial: Wall St.'s animal farm

The stock market is on the run, stampeding from one metaphorical incarnation to another.

Editorial: Himalayan hype

Ever since China's maximum leader, Deng Xiao-Peng, declared a generation ago that "to get rich is glorious," authorities in Beijing have sought to follow the late leader's dictum and, in the process, prove that a market economy and Communist political orthodoxy can peacefully coexist. But their newest effort may pose a real challenge.

Letters to the editor

Re "Gray Davis a reluctant governor; would Bill Simon be any better?", July 23: Columnist Dan Walters maintains that early action by Gov. Gray Davis could have minimized the electricity and state budget crises.

Editorial: Businessman Simon

Is Gov. Gray Davis lucky or what? That refrain echoed across the state yesterday morning as Californians opened their papers to headlines that a Los Angeles jury had found Republican gubernatorial candidate Bill Simon's firm liable for \$78 million in compensatory and punitive damages for defrauding a business partner.

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