

Marcos Breton: Ho-hum, taxpayers ripped off again

mbreton@sacbee.com

Published Wednesday, Jul. 28, 2010

The most insidious kind of corruption is the mundane lapse of judgment often behind the everyday fleecing of taxpayers in California.

It starts with a tired justification repeated around Sacramento like a mantra – that public officials making obscene compensation packages actually deserve it because they could make more money in the private sector.

Oh, and they work very hard, too!

The lie permeates Sacramento and beyond. In the last week, we learned that Robert Rizzo, the city administrative officer in Bell, was making \$787,637 a year. And Scott Plotkin, a drab executive director of the Sacramento-based California School Boards Association, was paid \$540,395 in 2008.

Honestly. It's criminal if these two cases are not criminal. It's perverse that Rizzo and Plotkin will probably become wealthy pensioners in the end.

It's insane that in the case of the CSBA, the responsible party – a 31-member board of directors – has circled the wagons. They are "investigating" Plotkin's windfall, which is hilarious since they had to have approved his pro-athlete salary in the first place.

Hello, Mr. Fox, let me show you to the henhouse.

Capitol Dome insiders hope the controversies will blow over, but like it or not, Bell and CSBA may have a broader impact.

The requirement of a two-thirds vote to pass a state budget enables the Republican minority in the Legislature to grind state business to a halt each year. But what would happen if Democrats could pass the budget on a simple majority vote if the public approves Proposition 25 in November?

Bell and CSBA are living advertisements for keeping the two-thirds majority vote in place, gridlock or no.

Whom can we trust with the money?

The fears raised by Bell and CSBA speak to broken human judgment, which is much harder to regulate and guard against than a broken political system.

The people in Bell and at CSBA were not iconic political party bosses who seduced us while lining their pockets.

They are ordinary bureaucrats who gamed the system in the cold light of day.

In the case of CSBA, board members – including Priscilla Cox of the Elk Grove Unified School District and Susan Heredia of the Natomas Unified School District – had to know, or at least should have known, they were paying Plotkin an obscene amount of money at the same time they were suing the state for more money for schools.

Bell City Council members exempted themselves from salary limits by passing a ballot initiative with fewer than 400 votes in favor, less than 1 percent of the city's population.

When it all came tumbling down, city leaders took a public whipping – and some resigned – but they left with their pockets full.

Hey, they earned it, right?

© Copyright The Sacramento Bee. All rights reserved.

Call The Bee's Marcos Breton, (916) 321-1096.