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## California Focus: Prop. 92 a bad deal for taxpayers

### Measure boosts spending on community colleges while limiting fee increases

By **TERESA CASAZZA**

If proponents of Proposition 92, primarily the union representing community college instructors, have their way, come February, hundreds of millions of dollars, if not billions, in new spending will be locked into California's constitution. Unfortunately, the sponsors of Prop. 92 completely neglected to include a way to pay for their costly new scheme, and taxpayers could end up footing the bill.

Prop. 92 claims to help community colleges by increasing spending and lowering fees, but this proposal just doesn't add up. The state Legislative Analyst says Prop. 92 will increase spending by nearly a \$1 billion

the first three years. This, as California is already facing an \$10 billion deficit in 2008.

Prop. 92 creates a funding formula for the 109-campus state community college system that automatically boosts spending when the state's population of young adults increases. Actual community college enrollment does not have to increase in order for the schools to get more money.

The extra Prop. 92 money will have to come from somewhere, and politicians will be left to decide where to find it. They could raise the sales tax, put new taxes on other items, or even increase our income taxes to raise the money this measure would require. Or, they could be forced to cut other critical programs, like social services, public safety or even education funding, including K-12, the Cal State University or University of California systems.

Prop. 92 also expands the community college board of governors to include more representatives from inside the system and gives them "full power to employ and set compensation" for executive officers with all of their new money. Nothing in this measure requires any accountability, audits or disclosure of how the funds are spent. And Prop. 92 contains no independent oversight to deal with issues like misuse of funds. As problems with Prop. 92 arise, it would be virtually impossible to address them as the

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measure requires a fourth-fifths vote of the Legislature to make statutory changes to this constitutional amendment.

Oddly, when it comes to helping community college students with paying for school, Prop. 92 really falls short. The measure says it will lower student fees by \$5 per unit, to \$15, meaning a full-time student would pay \$450 per academic year instead of the current \$600. But student fees make up less than 10 percent of the overall cost of attending community college, with books, supplies, transportation, and health and child care making up the other 90 percent.

And Prop. 92 does nothing to help low-income students with costs because such qualifying students already have their fees waived. In fact, according to the state Legislative Analyst, about one fourth (or around 625,000) of community college students, about 625,000 people, pay no educational fees at all. And a March 2007 study prepared for the Hewlett Foundation by the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education found that 52 percent of full-time California community college students have their fees waived. Prop. 92 does nothing to address the bulk of student costs.

California's community college fees are already the lowest in the nation, at \$20 per unit. In Arizona, Texas, Illinois, Florida,

and New York, fees range from \$65 to \$116 per unit for in-state resident students. By lowering the fees in California to \$15 per unit and making it nearly impossible to raise them in the future, Prop. 92 will drain \$70 million in revenue from our community colleges annually. It doesn't make sense to roll back the lowest college fees in the country and ask California taxpayers to pay more.

We strongly support California community colleges and the opportunities they provide to both young adults and older workers seeking new skills, but Prop. 92's attempt at ballot box budgeting just does not add up. Spending will be increased by hundreds of millions per year, with no way specified to pay for it. Funds will have to come from taxpayers or be pulled from other critical programs. Bureaucracy will be increased, with no independent oversight, audits or accountability. And the bulk of student costs are not addressed in Prop. 92 at all.

Prop. 92 will cause more problems than it claims to solve and should be soundly rejected at the ballot box on Feb. 5.

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