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Editorial: Crocodile tears

Public suffers, but county workers get theirs

Bee Editorial Staff

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"It's so sad," Sacramento Supervisor Illa Collin moaned last week. "We had to tell people: 'Gee, we're sorry, but there's no money.' "

Faced with a historic state and local government budget deficit, Collin and her fellow supervisors then proceeded to cut \$13 million in support to private agencies in the county that feed poor seniors, run after-school programs for kids, counsel pregnant teenagers, help the unemployed to find work and more.

And more cuts to county services are coming, supervisors say. To close the county's \$100 million budget deficit, the Sheriff's Department may have to cut 178 positions, including



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many street deputies;
the Probation Department will stop monitoring 16,000 adult criminals on probation; 500 seniors a day may be denied meal services; 38,000 patients may be turned away from health clinics; 40 percent of homeless beds may be eliminated.

Sad, indeed. And yet in the midst of all the hand-wringing, supervisors quietly approved pension increases last week of between 25 percent and 50 percent for themselves and other county workers that will cost the county general fund an additional \$34 million a year. Pension debt will be refinanced and stretched out so the hit won't be that bad right away -- just \$24 million this year. That's more than enough to restore all the social programs the county cut last week.

Supervisors also voted to give former county workers who are already retired a 1 percent to 6 percent cost-of-living increase. This gift to county retirees will cost another \$900,000 this year.

A visibly distressed Supervisor Muriel Johnson, who along with Roger Niello voted against that tiny sliver of the big pension giveaway, asked fellow board members, "When do we accept the fact there is no money?"

Taxpayers must ask the same question. The new benefits approved are more generous than anything most private-sector workers receive. County employees can now receive full pensions at age 55 1/2. For workers who began their career at age 20, that's about 70 percent of pay. Sheriff's deputies who began their career at age 25 can retire at 50 with 75 percent of pay. If they wait until they are 58, they will take home 100 percent of pay.

So what gives? How can the county justify laddling out increases to its workers while preparing draconian cuts in public services?

Here's the explanation: Some of these pension benefit hikes approved last week were negotiated two years ago when things were bad, but not as bad as they are now. They were necessary, the county line goes, to make Sacramento competitive with the state, which had already given its workers the richer benefits. And way back then, when all these pension hikes were set in motion, the official line was that it wouldn't really cost anything. The big run-up in the stock market would cover the cost of enhanced pensions.

Sacramento County is not unique. Prodded by state lawmakers and powerful public employee unions, counties, cities and special districts across California have approved lavish pensions that they are now struggling to pay for.

That's good news for the people who are getting the pensions. It's bad news for taxpayers, since it means that the cost of basic government services will soar at the same time the services themselves are slashed.

It is, as Collin says, sad -- and maddening too.

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