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[Back to Home](#) > [Weekly sections](#) > [Perspective](#) > Tuesday, May 03, 2005

Editorials

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EDITORIAL

Reform public employee pension plans

Excessive public employee pension deals will bankrupt government in California unless the people elected to represent the public gather the courage to deal with the issue rationally. That is a simple truth.

None of this should come as a surprise for anyone who has been paying attention. The city of San Diego has been driven to the brink of bankruptcy by such sweetheart pension deals.

That city has a nearly \$2 billion – that's with a B – liability, including the unfunded costs of providing free health coverage to city retirees. The city's Pension Reform Committee estimates that the retirement system there will gobble up an amount equal to 25 percent of the general fund. That is staggering and it means that cuts must be made in services to pay for it.

Even more staggering is that the system there allows city workers to retire at 140 percent or more of what they earned annually while they were on the city payroll.

But we needn't look so far south to find egregious examples. A glance at the West Contra Costa Unified School District's health benefit makes the point that these budget-sucking deals are everywhere.

That 33,000-student district is being crippled by a lifetime benefit that is going to cost nearly \$1 billion. The district offers lifetime health coverage for teachers, plus coverage for their spouses and their children, who are covered until they are 23 years old in some cases. To qualify for this extraordinary benefit, one need only work for the district for five years.

It is a stunning liability, but neither it nor the San Diego case are uncommon.

We fully recognize the difficulty in dealing with such issues. These sweetheart deals already have been cut – however incompetently – and it is next to impossible to take them away now.

But at some point, the madness must stop. It needs to be now. Government negotiators at all levels – whether it be school boards, counties, cities or the state – simply must understand that their loyalty is to the taxpayers and not the public-employee unions.

These negotiators, who are supposed to be looking out for the public good and not the public-employee good, must stand firm in the notion that future deals cannot be nearly so generous.



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- Entertainment
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 - Perspective
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New employees coming into any public system must either pay some of the cost or not reap such lavish benefits. If government throughout this state is to avoid the financial Armageddon that looms, public-employee unions must engage in a good-faith reality check and elected officials must develop backbone.

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