



FOLLOW THE MONEY

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Introduction

California is overtaxed, its state and local governments are constantly looking for new ways to raise taxes, and productive citizens and businesses are leaving at ever accelerating rates.

This state of affairs is not new and perhaps over the years it's gotten worse gradually enough that it was possible to ignore like the proverbial frog in the pot. However, now the deterioration of California has begun to accelerate so rapidly that even those who support the status quo have been forced to acknowledge that something is indeed wrong.

Following a report by the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC), detailing an exodus of our state's highest earners and largest taxpayers, longtime *Los Angeles Times* political columnist George Skelton stated:

Until now, we've been in denial, telling ourselves that college-educated, upper-income people weren't leaving. Our progressive tax base and

growing economy were secure. The departees were lower- to middle-income people who weren't the heavy taxpayers or big job producers.

Everyone seemed to buy into that, although many could cite anecdotal evidence to the contrary.

I plead guilty.¹

Today, California's claimed \$97.5 billion surplus has turned into a \$22 billion deficit — a massive number but still less than the \$30+ billion California's Employment Development Department (EDD) distributed to scammers during the pandemic.

The rate at which companies are leaving California has doubled and companies large and small are fleeing to more business-friendly locales like Texas and Florida. Speaking of Texas, while Sacramento now must deal with the budget shortfall caused by excessive spending and exacerbated by the loss of all the companies chased away, Texas is currently reporting a nearly \$33 billion surplus.^{2,3}

Given this state of affairs, wouldn't now be an appropriate time to examine the ways that our state wastes taxpayer money or commits acts of fraud or abuse against the citizens our representatives are elected to serve?

Follow the Money discusses numerous instances of California's leaders failing to properly manage the people's hard-earned money and failing to conduct themselves with integrity.

While political factions seem to get more polarized every day, surely we can all agree our elected leaders should take the responsibility of managing our hard-earned taxpayer dollars seriously.

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Bureaucracy & Corruption

Governor Newsom solicited nearly \$227 million from private companies

1/14/22

Gavin Newsom has requested hundreds of millions of dollars in donations for “legislative, governmental or charitable” purposes from individuals and entities, including corporations that have business before the state, according to a report by the Fair Political Practices Commission, or FPPC. The report relates to donations during 2020, when nearly \$227 million was given at the behest of the governor to support his priorities during the pandemic. The top contributors were Facebook and Blue Shield, which gave \$27 million and \$20 million respectively. These donation requests, officially known as “behested payments,” are legal but also raise legitimate questions about whether they create conflicts of interest when these same companies are the subject of legislation or consideration for state contracts. While the 2020 total was unusually high, behested payments are common at all times in California government and bear watching. Using behested payments,

Newsom raised \$12.1 million in 2019, \$15 million in 2021, and \$34.5 million in 2022.^{4,5}

LA DA's failure to do his job leads to mass thefts of packages from trains

1/15/22



After a surge in robberies targeting its trains, Union Pacific railroad sent a letter to Los Angeles District Attorney George Gascón citing his order to stop prosecuting certain thefts as being responsible for thefts of numerous UPS, Amazon, and FedEx packages. Images of the area around the tracks littered with boxes from the stolen goods went viral around the world.⁶

Bay Area county pays woman \$2.45 million to write book she allegedly plagiarized from Wikipedia

5/5/22

Santa Clara County paid over \$2 million for an employee to write a 580-page manuscript on the history of the county, but large portions of this manuscript have been reported to have been plagiarized from Wikipedia, from various newspapers, and from the county itself. This already expensive project was made even more expensive by a two-year delay that caused the project's timeline to be extended. Meanwhile, the Mercury News reported even if the book is published it is unclear where it will be available besides the county office and archives.⁷

Junkets ...

7/14/22

As is unfortunately nothing new, California politicians jetted around the world on junkets that were paid for by various special interests. Iceland, Ireland, and Israel were among the destinations legislators enjoyed at no cost to



themselves. Such trips give lobbyists and special interest representatives access to politicians that is not available to regular citizen taxpayers, thus giving them an unfair advantage when their business is discussed in official proceedings.^{8,9}

EDD fraud estimated at \$32.6 billion and still rising

10/6/22

While regular Californians struggled to access relief during the pandemic, scammers and even inmates on death row were found to have been able to receive unemployment funds from the state. The extent of the fraud has continued to grow as more information is uncovered, and an investigation by Sacramento-based KCRA-3 has now put the total at over \$30 billion.¹⁰

California launches \$25 million “guaranteed income” pilot program

9/15/22

“Guaranteed income” is a controversial concept where individuals receive free money with no strings attached. The concept has been promoted by various nonprofits and adopted on a local basis in several California cities, but now the state will provide \$25 million to expand this program statewide. Pregnant women and foster youth will be among nearly 2,000 Californians who will receive \$600 to \$1,200 monthly checks for up to 18 months.

Although earlier programs were funded with donations from foundations, this is the first program funded by taxpayer dollars. As this is a pilot program, Sacramento’s goal is to implement such a program on a much grander scale. Taxpayers should be wary.^{11,12}

Legislators champion environmental laws — that they ignore themselves

12/7/22

While legislators representing California’s supermajority party continually pat themselves on the back for “saving the environment,” a recent court ruling found their Capitol reconstruction project to be in violation of the state’s CEQA law, the “California Environmental Quality Act.” The plan in question, which is the subject of four lawsuits, would spend over \$1 billion in taxpayer dollars to knock down the portion of the State Capitol where legislators’ offices are located and rebuild it. Under the plan, the size of this portion of the building would nearly double, from 325,000 to 525,000 square feet. Specifically, the state was found to have failed to consider alternative options and to properly solicit and consider input from the public.¹³

Education

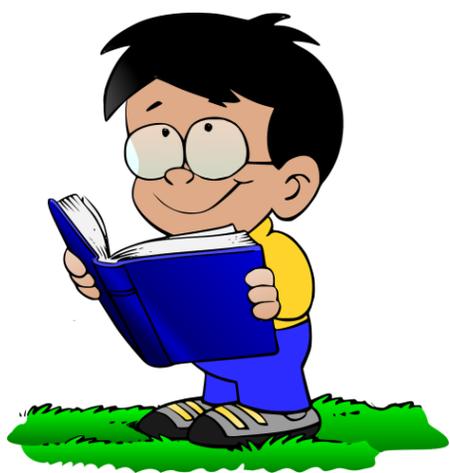
San Mateo Community College administrator admits using district resources for political purposes

1/6/22

A San Mateo Community College Vice Chancellor admitted to using district resources for political purposes in a plea agreement that saw authorities drop embezzlement and perjury charges against him. The administrator had been charged with a total of 15 felonies. A district representative stated the administrator was placed on leave.¹⁴

77 percent of school districts refuse to disclose employee pay

2/4/22



A law passed in 2014 was intended to require all public agencies to disclose employee pay, but most school districts currently use a loophole inadvertently created by another law to opt out of this requirement. Following the revelation that a school district administrator was able to use a series of unusual perks to amass a \$700,000 salary in 2020 and 2021, a bipartisan group of legislators introduced a bill to require disclosure once and for all. The bill, SB 924, died in the Assembly.^{15,16}

Community colleges fail to report data on fake enrollments

5/22/22

Following reports in 2021 that 65,000 bots, which are potentially connected to online scammers, had attempted to enroll at California community colleges and receive financial aid, the Chancellor demanded colleges report data on the situation as part of an investigation. However, the deadline for reporting this data passed with nearly 40 percent of colleges failing to respond and 15 percent failing to even fill out preliminary surveys. All nine community colleges in Los Angeles County were among those failing to report.^{17,18}

Much of \$33 billion in COVID money given to California schools unaccounted for

6/9/22

A CalMatters investigation into how COVID money given to California schools was spent was unable to get answers from many school districts including Oakland, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. Oakland, which refused to provide records in response to the request, was previously found by state officials to have misspent \$1 million in COVID funds.¹⁹

San Gabriel Valley school district official and consulting firm CEO charged with \$1.4 million embezzlement scheme

8/23/22

A former superintendent of Bassett Unified School District, in L.A. County's San Gabriel Valley, and a consulting firm CEO were charged with a scheme to divert a portion of a \$30 million school construction bond for their own gain. An

investigation by the District Attorney's office alleged that \$1 million of invoices had been approved for work that was never actually done as part of the scheme.²⁰

Energy and the Environment

\$200 million likely lost to recycling fraud

1/10/22

A Consumer Watchdog investigation into recycling fraud found the state loses \$200 million a year to scammers bringing in trash from out of state and mixing extra materials with cans and bottles to increase its weight. The advocacy group also noted that CalRecycle, the agency responsible for overseeing this program has conducted 62,259 audits, investigations, and inspections over the past decade, of which the agency has recovered \$1,611 per action — likely less than the cost to taxpayers of each investigation itself.²¹

State can't keep the lights on and predicts it will probably get worse

5/6/22

Although the state is already experiencing rolling blackouts and skyrocketing costs due to policymakers' drive to transition entirely to "green power," state energy officials are forecasting that these problems will get worse in the years ahead. By 2025, officials from three state agencies and the governor's office warned, California will have an energy capacity shortfall of 1,800 MW, and consumers will furthermore be hit with electricity rate increases from four to nine percent annually between now and 2025.²²

Sacramento offers \$9,500 payouts to electric car buyers

6/22/22

Sacramento's taxpayer-funded "Clean Cars 4 All" program is offering low-income residents almost \$10,000 to pay toward buying an electric car. Given the high cost of buying everything else, including electricity, a high-priced electric car is probably not high up on the list of things most low-income residents want.²³

Ban on the sale of gas-powered cars plus \$20,000 fines

8/25/22

The California Air Resources Board voted to require all new vehicles sold in California to be electric by 2035. The agency furthermore mandated that by 2026, one-third of all vehicles sold must be electric (only 16 percent of vehicles sold in California in the first three months of 2022 were electric). Failure to meet this target could cost automakers fines of \$20,000 per vehicle sold short of that goal.

This regulatory mandate ignores the question of whether one-third of auto buyers actually want an electric car with its inherent limitations related to costs and range. The mandate furthermore ignores the issue of whether the state's power grid, which is already struggling to reliably supply power, can handle the additional demand that would be caused by these new vehicles. Tesla CEO Elon Musk has stated electricity production would need to double to accommodate an all-electric vehicle fleet.²⁴

California bans gas heaters and furnaces by 2030

10/23/22



When a Federal agency official said a ban on gas stoves was “on the table,” outrage ensued and the White House was quick to distance itself, stating that it would not support a ban. However, last year the California Air Resources Board moved ahead with a similar plan to ban gas water heaters and furnaces by 2030. The state is offering subsidies of up to \$4,885 to get homeowners to switch to electric heat pump

water heaters, although of course these subsidies are not free money but are ultimately paid for by taxpayers.^{25,26,27}

Housing and Homelessness

\$700,000+ homes for select Los Angeles homeless

2/24/22

An audit of a \$1.2 billion bond program that promised voters 10,000 units of new housing for Los Angeles’ homeless population found that only 1,200 homes had been built since the spending was approved in 2016, while the number of homeless residents in the city rose from an estimated 28,000 to about 41,000. Of the homes built, 14 percent came at a cost of over \$700,000 each and one project under development was estimated at \$837,000 per unit.^{28,29}

LA homeless agency fails at counting

10/26/22



Los Angeles officials called for an “evaluation” of the accuracy of the annual count of the homeless population conducted by the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority after the results of its point-in-time count were disputed by City Council members, Rand Corp. surveyors and residents.

For example, the report stated that the number of homeless people in the northwest quarter of Venice living in tents, cars, or RVs had dropped from 509 to 0, while the situation on the ground still clearly showed many such homeless individuals present in exactly these conditions.

The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority (LAHSA) is responsible for managing more than \$800 million in annual spending of federal, state, county and city taxpayer dollars.^{30,31,32}

San Francisco homeless nonprofit embroiled in scandal - again

11/17/22

A nonprofit that controls nearly \$28 million in public funds intended to provide housing for the homeless was accused by San Francisco officials of improperly collecting rent and allowing housing to be illegally sold to residents. The current charges against the United Council of Human Services come after a 2017 report by city auditors found financial mismanagement by the same group. The politically connected CEO of the nonprofit dismissed the charges as being motivated solely by

her race and gender. Perhaps a good question to start with is why did this nonprofit continue to receive taxpayer dollars after the issues found in the 2017 audit?^{33,34}

LA wants to spend \$100 million putting homeless in motels

12/20/22

An initiative by L.A. mayor Karen Bass to spend \$100 million getting the city's 40,000 plus homeless residents off the street by moving them into motels faced strenuous opposition from motel owners, who expressed concerns that the city would not commit to reimbursing them for damage caused to rooms by homeless residents. The motel owners cited the costs and problems they experienced with an earlier, similar effort, Project Roomkey. If the city agrees to reimbursement for damages, taxpayers could be on the hook for even more than the proposed \$100 million.³⁵

Infrastructure

Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) projects \$1.2 billion deficit

2/10/22

Prior to the pandemic causing increasing numbers of Bay Area residents to begin working from home, BART's ridership was already declining. Ridership has not rebounded to its pre-pandemic levels and officials are projecting a \$1.2 billion deficit by fiscal year 2032. Now policymakers are considering a \$100 billion tax increase to support BART and other regional transit systems in spite of declining ridership. Voters would have to approve the tax increase, which could be on the ballot in 2024.³⁶

“High speed rail” cost estimates continue to rise

2/15/22



While voters narrowly approved a plan to construct high speed rail in California, the plan they approved stated the total cost would be \$45 billion, with state taxpayers on the hook for \$10 billion of this cost and the rest to come from private and Federal funds. Private investors unsurprisingly have not

provided funds to the ongoing boondoggle of a project and the California High Speed Rail Authority itself has revised its cost estimate up to \$100 billion. Many observers predict the total cost could ultimately rise to twice that. Estimates for the San Jose to San Francisco segment alone have more than tripled to an estimated \$5.3 billion. It's also worth noting that multiple revisions have resulted in a plan that is no longer truly “high speed” but now includes numerous slower portions.³⁷

LA public transit gets even more unsafe

9/17/22

Surging crime is a problem throughout Los Angeles and crime on local trains and buses is not new. However, as crime has risen throughout the city so also has it gotten worse on public transit. Ridership on the L.A. Metro system is down overall from pre-pandemic levels but women especially have declined to return to riding buses and trains due to safety concerns. Homelessness, on the rise throughout Los Angeles, likewise has impacted transit with homeless individuals using trains, stations and their parking lots to take shelter.

In addition to safety concerns, declining ridership may also be caused by design and planning of transit stations. Transit designers point out that while in other locations around the world transit stops often include retail and food service vendors, L.A.'s transit stops do not, thus making riders feel isolated.^{38,39}

Conclusions

Albert Einstein famously said the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.

Although it includes numerous examples where our government has failed, *Follow the Money* is not a report that is intended simply to criticize or find fault. The purpose is to expose these examples of waste, fraud, and abuse so that we can have a conversation about how we can do better.

Surely, Californians from all political vantage points can agree that we want our leaders to spend our money effectively in ways that make our state a better place to live, and not squander taxpayer dollars. It's up to all of us to hold government accountable for how it spends our money.

Once, California was a place people from all over America wanted to move to. Now we are in the throes of the greatest west-east migration in American history as Californians flee. Can California be saved? Unequivocally, despite the challenges before us, the answer is yes, but it depends on citizens getting involved, demanding accountability, and talking to their friends and neighbors.

One way you can start is by sharing our *Follow the Money* report with friends or posting a link to it on social media. The first step to solving a problem is acknowledging that it exists.

About the Author

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