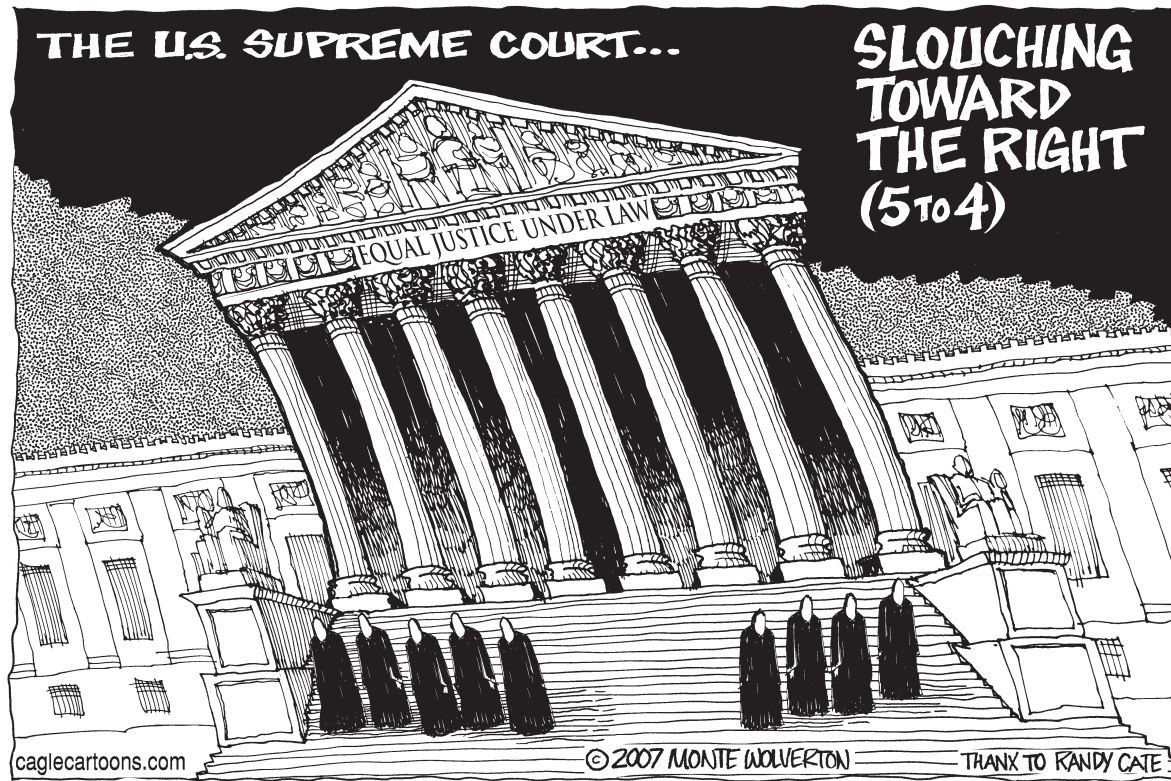


BY THE NUMBERS

- **5:** The deposit, in cents, for most bottles and cans, up a penny as of July 1.
- **17,000:** The number of new slot machines OK'd by the Legislature for four Southern California tribal casinos.
- **\$4,400:** The pay raise accepted by House members — an automatic 2.5 percent.
- **9,000:** The number of tubes of toothpaste made in China that contain a poison found in the U.S.
- **\$135 million:** The price of the most expensive American home for sale: Hala Ranch, a 95-acre estate in Aspen, Colo., was built in 1991 for the family of Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan.
- **3.21:** The number of inches of rain that fell in Los Angeles between July 1, 2006, and June 30 — the lowest amount ever recorded.



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LETTERS

Fireworks in forest are irresponsible

EDITOR,

This is addressed to anyone who either set off fireworks or who let their children do it on the Fourth of July: What are you morons thinking?

As Albert Einstein said, "The difference between genius and stupidity is that there's an end to genius."

How could anyone be so unconscientious as to put their neighbors and the rest of the valley in jeopardy just for the temporary thrill of lighting off a few rockets?

Did you folks somehow miss the recent pictures on the news and in the papers of folks standing by their burned-out homes in the Tahoe area just because some idiot let a campfire get away? Or, how could anyone forget the firestorm devastation in the Oakland hills a while back?

In the 40 years I've been in the valley, I can't remember it being this dry this early in the season. A spark from safe-and-sane fireworks is just as deadly in these conditions as regular fireworks.

I'm a big proponent of individuals' rights and think folks should be able to do what they want, as long as it doesn't cost anyone else any money, time or grief and, when it comes to neighbors, you don't have to hear it, see it or smell it. But no one's individual rights are greater than the safety of our community.

I know you can't legislate intelligence, because I still see people throwing lit cigarette butts out of their car windows.

I know the authorities are swamped when it comes to responding to these calls, but if we don't get a grip on this problem, we'll be seeing ourselves on CNN.

I propose that we start a valleywide effort next year to eliminate this problem. We need to develop a zero-tolerance attitude toward this with heavy fines and jail time. We need to get neighborhoods involved and volunteers to help monitor, document, report and prosecute anyone who is unclear on the concept of using fireworks in a forested valley in extreme conditions when it's 100 degrees outside.

We need to work with our absolutely incredible volunteer fire departments and sheriff's office to educate and inform. We need signs on Highway 9. We need leaflets passed out, and we need to make sure everyone is aware of this so there will be no excuses.

I'm willing to put some time into this — if anyone else is, give me at call at 336-2198.

— **Tex Anderson**, Ben Lomond

COMMENTARY

Late state budget a symptom of a dysfunctional process

California has now gone nearly two weeks past the July 1 start of the fiscal year without a new budget in place. As chair of the Assembly Budget Committee, I'm frustrated with the lack of an on-time budget. You should be, too.

Our state is fortunate to have an open, professional and successful budget process each year from January until mid-June. Just before the June 30 deadline is when the dysfunction kicks in, which is exactly what's happened this year.

Following the governor's January budget proposal, legislative committees meet in public more than 100 times — reviewing hundreds, if not thousands, of budget items one by one — to craft a budget.

This year, that process produced a budget with a reserve of more than \$2 billion—matching the governor's — while protecting programs the governor had targeted for cuts, such as the cost-of-living increase for people on Social Security.

The budget also repays \$2.5 billion in debt bonds, enables implementation of last year's landmark global-warming legislation, preserves funding for California's neediest children, continues the Williamson Act to protect agricultural land, provides anti-gang funding and reforms the juvenile justice system, fully funds our Proposition 98 public education commitment and reverses cuts to public transportation.

Even though this budget is similar to the governor's in terms of dollars, the problem is not the substance, but the process. California is one of three states to require a two-thirds legislative budget approval, along with Arkansas and Rhode Island.

As a result, a minority of legislators can choose to not participate in the months-long budget process and then hold up budget approval with demands that have not been made or vetted in public. That's what's happening now.

Some legislators want cuts to public transit, education and other state services. But those requests have not been raised as specific proposals in any of the about 100 budget hearings — nor have they appeared in any newspaper.

Eventually, a budget will be negotiated, approved and signed — likely within the next couple of weeks. I'm hopeful it will be similar to the one we crafted through the public budget process. That's the good possibility.

The bad possibility is the minority could believe it has nothing to lose by holding the budget up for proposals not made in public — even though the cost is high in wasted time, strained relationships and lack of public confidence in the process and the state's elected officials.

Part of the problem is the tense relationship between the governor and legislators of his own party, which creates an interesting dynamic. Democrats and the Republican governor need legislative Republicans to finish the budget.

Republicans are angry with the governor for his far-reaching health

care reform proposals. They know that if they make him lose face in the budget process, he might not have the clout to make a health care deal that they don't want.

And this is the result of the process that does not allow majority rule in the budget process. Maybe the two-thirds budget approval works in Arkansas, but it's not working in California. It allows legislators to ignore a public discussion of California's spending blueprint and hold out for things that have not seen daylight during the budget process. The system rewards this kind of bad behavior.

Over the long term, that budget routine is a roadblock to the serious progress toward budget reform needed to close the ongoing deficit, stabilize revenues and repay debt — and plan for the health care needs of aging baby boomers while the state population increases by 10 million people over the next 25 years.

Last year, California led the nation on global-warming legislation and made progress on a host of other issues. Many of them — including the global-warming bill — would not have become law if a two-thirds vote was required, even though they were supported by a strong majority of Californians.

It's time to have a state government that matches the vision of its people. We are capable of taking the national lead again — on health care especially. We can do that with a simple majority. Let's hope we have a good budget in place by the time that happens.

■ **John Laird**, D-Santa Cruz, represents the 27th Assembly District.



**Assemblyman
John Laird**
27th District