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**HEADLINE:** County workers' raises at expense of other services

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**BODY:**

I want to report a public mugging. You and I are witnesses to a theft in plain view. Peter is being robbed to pay Paul. The victims being stuck up this time are Fresno County taxpayers.

A proposed new contract for about 4,500 Fresno County government workers will give them a 12.25% raise over the next four years. That is more than a 3% annual wage growth guarantee that is well above the rate of inflation and will cost Fresno County almost \$2 million the first year alone.

Additionally, the agreement sets in concrete a fat retirement plan that guarantees county workers retirement at age 55 and a pension of 2.5% of their highest annual salary times the number of years worked. If you apply the math to the \$107,000 annual starting salary of the county official who negotiated this deal -- Ralph Jimenez, director of personnel services -- Mr. Jimenez would draw an annual pension after 30 years of more than \$80,000.

No wonder Mr. Jimenez joined Tom Abshere, the lead union negotiator for Local 535, in telling The Bee last week how pleased they both were with the new agreement. Talk about the fox guarding the henhouse.

'Fiscal malpractice'

Out of control payroll, benefit and pension costs are crippling all levels of government these days, and they are unchecked -- and often aided and abetted -- by the elected officials taxpayers must trust to guard the public purse. Fresno County is now in the midst of committing the same kind of fiscal malpractice that got the Fresno Unified School District into so much trouble.

Lest you think I exaggerate, allow me to make the case that whenever government pay, benefits and pensions grow faster than the tax base required to cover the cost, something has got to give. Usually it is fundamental services -- like public safety -- that quietly get shortchanged.

If you live in Fresno County outside the police boundaries of local cities and need a sheriff's deputy, you know what I mean. Response times in these outlying areas can be dangerously long. The thin green line is currently inadequate. New deputies cost new money. It looks to me like the costs of this new contract leave nothing in the public till for new hires.

Worse than not having enough deputies on duty is a 911 call system at the Sheriff's Department that is so old and untrustworthy that it breaks down and goes dark in the midst of life-and-death emergencies.

It is a system in such bad shape that county law enforcement officials have publicly described it as "a public

safety nightmare." And why has it not been fixed yet? Not enough money. This at a time when county supervisors can find enough money for large pay and benefit increases.

Did you know fire stations are closing in Fresno County? Riverdale lost its fire station March 1 of last year, and a report released to the public back then predicted as many as three more stations might have to be closed by 2006. Why? You guessed it. The excuse again is not enough money.

New debt

It gets worse. Back in 2002, county supervisors went on a borrowing binge. They floated a bond loan to refinance the county's long-term debt. The excuse they gave the public was that the new debt was at a lower interest rate. So far, so good.

What you might not know is that they also extended the debt out another 10 years costing county taxpayers an additional \$76 million in interest payments. They used the borrowed money to pay for ongoing expenses.

Steven Frates, a senior fellow at the Rose Institute of State and Local Government at Claremont McKenna College, got it right in a study of government spending he produced for the institute this year. The study showed that spending for public employees' salaries, benefits and pensions had soared to record levels in recent years, far outpacing similar costs in the private sector. Concludes Mr. Frates, "There has been a wealth transfer. It has gone from the citizens to the people in government."

Are you steaming yet? You should be. County government workers are set to get an early Christmas gift this year. Much more money. While county taxpayers get a lump of coal in the form of insufficient sheriff's deputies, a broken 911 system, closed fire stations and more debt.

Can I get a "bah humbug?"

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