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Editorial: Shed light on public pay

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Struggling under mounting budget deficits, declining revenues and skyrocketing costs, California's government agencies are heading for a train wreck. And California taxpayers will be the casualties.

Either they will be forced to pay more taxes, or will be forced to do with less essential government services.

The essence of government is to serve and protect. But how much service and how much protection can be provided by already cash-starved government agencies state and local when increasing amounts of their revenues are being spent on public employee salaries and pensions?

Increasingly powerful public employee unions are leaning on sympathetic and beholden elected officials to grant higher and higher salaries and approve increasingly generous, labor-protecting contracts. The result is less money left to fix the potholes in the streets, to keep the fire trucks rolling, to have deputies patrolling and to support county hospital medical services.

Now more than ever, public spending particularly spending on public employee salaries must be placed under the microscope. *The Californian* intends to do that.

The Californian now is reviewing the salaries and overtime pay in the Kern County Fire Department. A review of spending in other departments in other agencies will follow.

Of particular interest in the Kern County Fire Department review is the combination of high salaries and overtime pay the outgrowth of staffing level increases dictated in negotiations with unions and approved by the Board of Supervisors.

For example, documents obtained so far by *The Californian* revealed one unnamed battalion chief received a base annual salary in the \$80,000 range, but was paid nearly twice that amount more than \$160,000 as a result of overtime.

More questions than answers have resulted from this preliminary review of salaries. At the heart of this review is the question: Is there any motivation in the Kern County Fire Department to save money and control overtime costs?

Before the dots can be connected in this spending maze, the dots have to be known. However, county officials only have been willing to reveal general information that makes tracking the taxpayers' tax dollars impossible.

As a result, the newspaper has turned to the courts to force Kern County officials to reveal specific salary information information the public is entitled to have and which is critical to evaluating local spending.

Unless the public can match the names of public employees with the amounts of public money they are receiving, spending questions cannot be answered.

The county's system of shielding this information from the public makes following the money impossible. It makes public scrutiny of the government it supports impossible.

By shedding sufficient light on public salaries, cost efficiencies can be sought and the public can take control of its government agencies.

The public must not be regarded as the cash cow that allows itself to be docilely milked its money flowing into the public coffers and it receiving less and less in return.

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