Editorial: Warped reality on budget fixes

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With "Alice in Wonderland" enjoying a revival in movie houses, it is hard not to notice a similarity between this fantasy tale and California's budget deliberations.

Lawmakers have been in special session since January on the budget, but you wouldn't know it from the results. There's little sense of urgency. The Mad Hatter is throwing a tea party, with a watch that is two days slow.

Consider the current state of play. Lawmakers were supposed to send the governor a budget solution by Feb. 22. Instead of doing so, they met the deadline by approving payment deferrals to manage the state's cash through June.

Then the Assembly sent the governor a budget bill that expressed intent to make cuts in the next fiscal year. The governor vetoed it Monday because it failed to enact cuts in the current fiscal year, as painful as those cuts might be.

The governor is right to stand his ground. As he notes, the state is spending $600 million a month more than it is taking in. The longer lawmakers wait to enact cuts, the larger the deficit will grow both this year and next.

So if they are not focused on the budget, what are lawmakers doing? Former Assembly Speaker Karen Bass, the Queen of Hearts, is running for Congress and raising money for a measure to kill redistricting reform.

Current Speaker John A. Pérez, the Knave of Hearts, is blocking the nomination of a moderate Republican, Abel Maldonado, to the lieutenant governor's seat and engaged in other sideshows.

As The Bee's Dan Morain noted in a column Wednesday, Pérez and others have been engaged in talks to torpedo an open primary measure on the June ballot. Far-left Democrats and far-right Republicans hate the idea of an open primary, because it creates the prospect for moderates such as Maldonado to slip into office.

All this might make Schwarzenegger sound like the only adult in the Capitol. Yet in recent months, he has been less than focused on the budget. He is starting to resemble the King of Hearts, motivated by good intentions but no match for his reckless and loony dominion.

If you are a citizen who cares about California, you might feel a bit like Alice right now. Your state has fallen into a deep rabbit hole. Nearly everywhere you go in the Capitol, you encounter a strange cast of characters who can't seem to work together and who distort reality. You keep asking serious questions, but all you get back are riddles.
Lawmakers and the governor are hoping the economy will rebound, or that President Barack Obama will save California with billions of dollars in aid.

It is all very curious, this wishful thinking.

Or, as Alice once said, "Curiouser and curiouser."