



## Steve Wiegand: No clout? So sorry -- no cash

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As anyone who has ever had a checking account can attest, the hardest thing about it (aside from getting your spouse to keep track in the register where the checks went) is making it balance.

This is, of course, the same problem Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and legislative leaders face in putting together a new budget for the state.

They have to do that because it's mid-May, and a reassessment of the budget figures the gov proposed just five months ago has thrown frigid liquid on Schwarzenegger's initial try to align revenues with expenditures.

The do-over, the gov says, offers three choices: "We increase taxes, or we make deep cuts, or both."

In actuality, however, there is only one choice, since the gov has slavishly adopted the modern California politician's no-new-taxes-EVER mantra.

So what gets cut? Not K-12 education. That's the most sacred of Capitol cows. Prisons? Not this year, we have enough trouble with the federal courts as it is. Environment? Nope, that's the governor's pet cause. Transportation? Well, sort of. The road-building stuff stays in, but a bunch of money for general mass transit programs would be siphoned off to transit programs with a specialized clientele, such as schoolkids or the developmentally disabled. Higher ed? Well, sort of. The gov gives the colleges a fair amount of new money -- only he jacks up tuition 7 percent to 10 percent.

So that basically leaves programs for poor people. Under the gov's revised proposal, the fixed incomes of old and blind and disabled people would stay fixed. About 200,000 welfare kids would no longer get cash assistance from the state, and people who now get \$500 a month to care for foster children and people who get \$11.10 an hour to take care of shut-ins would keep getting \$500 and \$11.10, respectively.

The gov doesn't want to do this. We know this because he said so. "I'm not very happy about it," he said. "I think a lot of people deserve this money."

Sure. But the cold, hard fact is poor people, bus riders and college students don't have much political clout, don't make campaign contributions and therefore don't count very much under the Dome.

What this lack of political juice means is that there will be maybe six or seven weeks of tears and flapdoodle by Democrats about the poor people and the students and the bus riders getting screwed, and an equal amount of harrumphing and galumphing by Republicans about how we have to live within our means and how higher taxes would kill jobs and drive employers into states like Nevada or Arkansas.

Then the Big Four legislative leaders will huddle with the gov for a day or two. They'll compromise where they can, and work out the rest with one-year-only gimmicks. Any hard look at the basic structure of how the state takes in money and funds programs will be left for someone else, some other time.

And unless you happen to ride the bus or have a kid at UC or the Cal State system, or are a foster parent, or are blind or just poor, who cares?

After all, it could be argued that a timely and balanced state budget benefits all Californians. And to those who would thus argue, I refer you to the last words written by Bat Masterson, the legendary Old West gunfighter who became a New York City journalist and died at his typewriter in 1921.

"There are those who argue that everything breaks even in this old dump of a world of ours," Masterson observed. "I suppose these ginks who argue that way hold that because the rich man gets ice in the summer and the poor man gets it in the winter, things are breaking even for both. Maybe so, but I'll swear I can't see it that way."

Me neither.

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