

Why California is between a rock and a hard place

Dennis Wyatt, Manteca Bulletin, 8-5-10

California has a \$19 billion deficit. The state's water plan for the next 20 years is non-existent. Education from kindergarten to the University of California is in crisis mode.

So what kind of earth shattering legislation would you expect to be proposed in Sacramento to address our problems? How about a proposed law to assure that we have a politically correct state rock?

Nero may have fiddled while Rome burned but the California Legislature is whistling Dixie.

State Sen. Gloria Romero, D-Los Angeles, is the politician trying to save California from glorifying a rock that has - heaven forbid - asbestos.

"This is a question of health and public awareness," Romero offered as to why capping serpentine as the state rock is a pressing issue. There's no suggestion yet from Romero on what to replace the deep green rock prevalent in the Mother Lode with but rest assured it'll probably be something that doesn't offend the political sensibilities of California trial lawyers.

It was the Asbestos Disease Awareness Organization that has significant funding from law firms specializing in asbestos litigation that helped Romero's office draft the legislation. Senate Bill 624 blasts serpentine for being essentially insensitive to human health and as an awful role model for rocks. That's right. Rocks also need politically correct role models.

We're assuming it is referring to actual rocks and not the 120 folks up in Sacramento that are going to be voting whether to stone serpentine.

Forget the fact geologists - who happen to be rock experts - will tell you all serpentine does not contain chrysotile asbestos. They also might mention to you that in its natural form there is no health problem. It is only after it is processed that it becomes a health issue.

Although the whole thing seems frivolous, it isn't. Besides diverting time from serious stuff like the budget and rethinking government instead of just throwing money around and piling on regulations, it costs money to introduce legislation.

Even the most inane proposed law - such as stripping the serpentine of its state rock status - costs thousands of dollars.

If you have a tight budget and are worried about losing your home, paying your bills and feeding your family a responsible person doesn't spend money on collecting penny comic books. But then again, no one has ever accused the California Legislature as being the epitome of responsibility.

On the other hand, Romero and her colleagues can look voters straight in the eye and say they've protected us from the evil serpentine rocks that they made sure would no longer have the official blessing as California's state rock.

I don't know about you, but I'll feel safer at night going to bed knowing that the legislature is protecting

California's reputation by trying to crush serpentine's future as the state rock.

Of course, Romero could always suggest the state offer to "sell" state rock naming rights. Perhaps ACME Concrete could cement a million-dollar-a-year deal to have their product touted as California's official rock. Maybe that way the legislature will chip away at the state deficit just a little bit.

Romero's piece of legislation is exactly why California is between a rock and a hard place. Too much attention is being diverted to special interest legislation that has narrow public interest or is downright frivolous.

There needs to be a limit on the amount of legislation that each of the 120 lawmakers can propose in any given session. If you capped it at three, that would require each any every lawmaker to think real hard about what they want to get involved with. It would also create less bills jockeying for attention as it would be capped at 360 per session. That might encourage more earnest legislation such as the lawmakers actually reading what they are voting on instead of relying on executive summaries from paid staff that tends to be populated by political animals.

More time could be spent on debate and venting. Better yet, you might actually get more thoughtful legislation such as a plan to overhaul California's taxing system or its oppressive regulations on business instead of a bill trying to make sure we have a politically correct state rock.