

A pet rock bill and other pebbles of wisdom

Robert Rector, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 7-17-10

I hate to keep harping on the antics of our elected officials in Sacramento. After all, there's enough buffoonery going on in Washington each and every day to fill the pages of this newspaper.

But the boys and girls in Sacramento seem to be starring in a political vaudeville act. Just recently, we've seen enough pie-in-the-face, seltzer-down-the-pants antics to keep us in stitches for weeks. I couldn't make this stuff up.

First, State Sen. Curren Price of Los Angeles proposes that the state could make a bundle of cash by requiring digital license plates that display advertising. In other words, turn every car and truck in the state into a rolling billboard.

Great idea. Of course, there's the distraction issue. Digital license plates would be a boon to body shops. And product placement could be dicey. Want the family sedan to hawk triple cheeseburgers from some fast food joint, or a sperm bank, or some political candidate you loathe? I didn't think so. But the last time I checked, this bill was still active.

Next up on stage is local Sen. Gloria Romero who wants to toss serpentine as the official state rock of California.

There are two questions here. One, how is it that we have an official state rock? And two, why does Sen. Romero want to get rid of it, symbolically speaking.

As to question No. 1, serpentine, a shiny, green and blue rock found throughout California, was named the official state rock in 1965. It contains the state's principal deposits of chromite, magnesite, and cinnabar. California was the first state to designate a state rock, once again proving that we are on the cutting edge of civilized society.

It is not to be confused with benitoite which was designated as the official state gemstone in 1985.

California also has an official fossil (the saber toothed cat), a state grass (purple needlegrass), state reptile (the desert tortoise), state soil (San Joaquin soil), state theater (the Pasadena Playhouse) and state colors (blue and gold). Take that, Trojans.

As to question number two, serpentine has "known health effects," according to Romero's bill. And that's because chrysotile, a naturally occurring form of asbestos, can be found in it.

Some geologists say chrysotile is less harmful than other forms of asbestos and would be a danger only if its dust was inhaled repeatedly.

Malcolm Rose, a geologist who spent his career with the U.S. Geological Survey, told the New York Times that "there is no way anyone is going to get bothered by casual exposure to that kind of rock. Unless they were breaking it up with a sledgehammer year after year."

Critics of the legislation say that if the rock is removed from its state status, or declared a carcinogen, it could unleash myriad lawsuits against property owners and other sites where it is found.

Which leaves us to ponder the question: Is Sen. Romero protecting her constituents or instituting the Lawyers Full Employment Act?

Not to be outdone, Assemblyman Mike Davis is backing a plan to turn Michael Jackson's "Neverland Ranch" in Santa Barbara County into a state park.

The idea is the brainchild of NAACP president Alice Huffman, who also sits on the state parks commission. "I think Michael's history is world history and I think it would become the No. 1 attraction for the state parks if we could pull it off," said Huffman.

Put aside for a moment your feelings about Michael Jackson, his fans, Neverland's checkered past or the fact Ms. Huffman thinks it would outdraw all the other state parks (Old Town San Diego State Historic Park has attracted nearly 8 million visitors annually).

Instead, consider this: The property is controlled by Santa Monica-based Colony Capitol LCC, a private equity firm that acquired it when Jackson was facing foreclosure in 2008. The company President Thomas J. Barrack Jr. told Bloomberg News last month that he hoped to sell it for more than \$100 million.

Last year, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed closing 220 of California's 279 state parks to save money, but later backed down. Instead, he and lawmakers agreed to close half the parks on certain days and reduce services.

The state budget deficit is \$26 billion. Is this anytime to introduce a plan that would cost taxpayers more than \$100 million? Mike Davis does. He said the plan makes "great sense."

It's no wonder people in other states think we're nuts.