

September 20, 2010

Getting Squeezed



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The next issue of Capitol Journal will be available on October 4th.

Top Story

Federal jobs surged temporarily, then ebbed with completion of the 2010 census. Now, state and local governments are reducing payrolls and in some cases raising taxes, actions that impede the tepid economic recovery.

SNCJ Spotlight

Governments shed jobs and raise taxes in tepid recovery

Government usually thrives during economic downturns. Ever since Franklin D. Roosevelt launched the New Deal in the depth of the Great Depression, jobless Americans have turned to their government in time of need. Government employment at all levels — federal, state, and local—expanded in the dozen recessions since World War II with pockets of

A Cannon Perspective



With Lou Cannon

exceptions in the “Ronald Reagan recession” of 1982-1983. But it has been different during the Great Recession, which technically ended months ago but remains a fact of life in much of the United States. Federal jobs surged temporarily, then ebbed with completion of the 2010 census. State and local governments are reducing payrolls and in some cases raising taxes, actions that impede the tepid economic recovery.

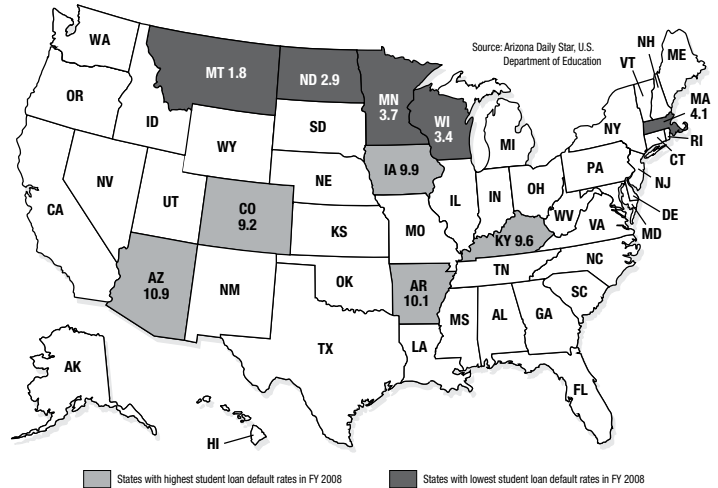
“State and local job reductions undoubtedly have been a drag on the economy,” said Leslie McGranahan, a senior economist with the Federal Reserve Bank of Chicago. “But the drag would have been much larger, however, without the federal stimulus legislation.”

This year, through August, states and local governments had shed 135,000 jobs, according to McGranahan’s data. A grim forecast by the National League of Cities issued in July anticipated

that local government alone will lose 500,000 jobs during the 2010-2012 fiscal years. The actual job losses may be less if the pace of the recovery quickens, but the experts are not optimistic that this will happen. Corina L. Eckl, fiscal program director of the National Conference of State Legislatures, anticipates that state revenues won’t reach pre-recession levels until 2014 in FLORIDA, GEORGIA, IDAHO, and NORTH CAROLINA and until 2015 in ARIZONA, MAINE, MONTANA and NEW MEXICO. In CALIFORNIA, the poster child for fiscal dysfunction, state revenues are not expected to attain pre-recession levels until 2016.

It could have been even worse. McGranahan said that the state job losses would have been “almost unimaginable,” without the federal stimulus bills that provided \$188 billion in various forms of aid to states and localities. The largest chunk of this was contained in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009, on which the total price tag has risen to \$862 billion. The latest injection to states, in a \$26 billion bill passed by Congress and signed into law by President Barack Obama last month,

Bird’s eye view



Arizona has highest student loan default rate

More student borrowers have defaulted on their loans in ARIZONA than in any other state, according to data released last week by the U.S. Department of Education. More than 24,500 borrowers — 10.9 percent of all student borrowers in the Grand Canyon State — have defaulted on their loans in the two years since their first payments came due between Oct. 1, 2007 and Sept. 30, 2008. The national student default rate for that same time period is 7 percent, up from last year’s 6.7 percent. The Education Department’s data also indicated that students attending for-profit schools are the most likely to default. Nine of the 10 colleges in ARIZONA with the highest default rates are private.



preserved the jobs of thousands of teachers and extended until June 30, 2011, a formula providing a more generous federal share of the funding for Medicaid, the federal-state program that provides health care for the poor.

Government contraction has damaged the recovery in several ways. It has marginally added to the unemployment rate, 9.6 percent nationally but higher in states where the housing bust hit hardest — NEVADA, FLORIDA and CALIFORNIA — and in MICHIGAN, where the auto industry cratered even before the recession. Unlike the federal government, most states and cities are legally required to balance their budgets. Their principal recourse in accomplishing this has been job reduction, often through attrition to sidestep battles with public employee unions. Brevard County, FLORIDA, is typical of the cuts made by local governments in hard-pressed states. With a budget reduction of 14 percent, the county laid off 118 employees and will not fill 86 vacant positions. Cities large and small have made similar reductions. Fresno, CALIFORNIA, cut its workforce by 660 employees and Dallas, TEXAS, by 500. Flint, MICHIGAN, eliminated 23 of 88 firefighter positions and closed two fire stations.

Tax increases, never popular and particularly questionable during a recession, were also used to close budget gaps. States raised taxes by an overall \$28 billion in 2009. This year, with elections approaching, most state legislatures avoided tax hikes. Even so, Eckl's data shows that nine states raised taxes by more than

one percent in 2010, with the largest percentage increases coming in ARIZONA (8.2 percent), WASHINGTON (6.4 percent) and KANSAS (5.5 percent).

Not all the damage done in the states by the Great Recession is fully quantifiable. State and local governments in CALIFORNIA shed 43,000 jobs from July 2009 to July 2010, according to economist Stephen Levy, director of the Center for the Continuing Study of the CALIFORNIA Economy. But Levy thinks that greater damage may have been done by reductions in the student bodies at University of California campuses, which he likens to “eating the seed corn” of future generations.

Education, embattled at all levels by the recession, is a vital segment of the nation's intellectual infrastructure. The physical infrastructure may be even more threatened. “Everywhere I go in the country, I hear the complaint that infrastructure has been neglected and is deteriorating,” said Scott D. Pattison, executive director of

The week in session

States in Regular Session: DC, MI, NJ, NY, PA, PR, US

States in Recess: CA

States in Special Session: PA “a”

Special Sessions in Recess: CA “f”, CT “a”, CT “b”, DE “b”, NY “w”

Upcoming Special Sessions: VA “a”
Regarding ABC Privatization: TBA - Nov.

States in Informal Session: MA

States in Skeleton Session: OH

States in Veto Session: MO (Held: 09/15/2010), NH (Scheduled: 10/13/2010)

States Currently Prefiling or Drafting for 2011: FL, KY, MT, ND, NV, VA

States Adjourned in 2010: AK, AL, AR, AZ, CO, CT, DE, FL, GA, HI, IA, ID, IL, IN, KS, KY, LA, MD, ME, MN, MO, MS, NC, NE, NH, NM, OK, RI, SC, SD, TN, UT, VA, VT, WA, WI, WV, WY

State Special Sessions Adjourned in 2010: AZ “a”, AZ “b”, AZ “c”, AZ “d”, CA “e”, CA “h”, FL “a”, HI “d”, HI “e”, KY “a”, MN “a”, MO “a”, MS “a”, MS “b”, NH “a”, NJ “a”, NM “a”, NV “b”, NY “w”, OR “a”, TN “a”, WA “a”, WI “b”, WV “a”, WV “b”

Letters indicate special/extraordinary sessions

— Compiled By JAMES ROSS
(session information current as of 9/3/2010)
Source: State Net database



the National Association of State Budget Officers (NASBO). Economics professor Robert H. Frank of Cornell University, writing in the *New York Times*, praised Obama’s modest proposal for a \$50 billion infrastructure renewal as a “small but welcome first step in this process.” With unemployment high and interest rates low, Frank sees this as the perfect time to launch programs that maintain and rebuild bridges, roads, and water systems.

If it’s any comfort, the squeeze on government is not unique to the United States. Your correspondent recently spent time in London, where localities are squeezed and the ruling coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats has proposed major budget cuts and elimination of 400,000 government jobs over several years, mostly

by attrition. A huge political debate has erupted in Britain over proposed cutbacks in social services, with the opposition Labor Party contending that they fall disproportionately on the backs of the poor.

There will be similar debates in the United States as the assistance provided by the federal stimulus bills is phased out and states struggle to make ends meet. Costs

of social services have risen in the states because of high unemployment and housing foreclosures. Meanwhile, state revenues lag behind recovery, as often happens after recessions. The difference this time is that the recession is deeper than usual and the lag time greater. Adding to the tension, says Pattison, are uncertainties about what the landmark federal health care bill will mean for the states. “Whatever one thinks about the health care bill, and it was certainly desirable to cover more people, it will probably mean more costs for the states,” Pattison said.

The first two years of the Obama administration have witnessed titanic struggles at the federal level between the two major parties on health care, the stimulus bills and various bailouts. In the next two years these struggles will shift to the states, where hard fiscal decisions will have to be made with diminished fiscal help from Washington.

— *By Lou Cannon*

“Whatever one thinks about the health care bill, and it was certainly desirable to cover more people, it will probably mean more costs for the states.”

Budget & taxes

PENSION REFORM TEST CASE HITS MN COURT: Budget pressures have forced numerous states to make changes to their public employee retirement plans, including raising the retirement age and cutting benefits for new hires.



But last year, MINNESOTA replaced its pension formula, which raised benefits each year to account for inflation and investment gains, with a flat 2.5 percent annual increase. A group of retirees who were receiving benefits under the old formula sued the state in May, and a state court in St. Paul took up the case last week.

Stephen Pincus, a lawyer for the retirees in MINNESOTA — as well as in COLORADO and SOUTH DAKOTA, where similar cases are pending — said courts have ruled that benefits for workers who have already retired can only be reduced when the employers funding the pension plans are on the brink of insolvency.

“Certainly ... [MINNESOTA] is not on the edge of bankruptcy,” he said. “There is just not any political will to go back to citizens and say, ‘We made these promises, and now we have to fulfill our obligations in total to the retirees.’”

The state, however, maintains that retirees have no legal right to expect a specific level of benefits.

“A retiree’s future benefits and rights are subject to reasonable legislative actions that are intended to preserve the fiscal integrity and stability of MINNESOTA’s public employee pension plans,” the state said in a court filing.

A decision in the state’s favor wouldn’t establish a single legal precedent across the country, but it would likely encourage other states, facing deep budget deficits and a wave of baby-boomer retirements, to take similar action. (WALL STREET JOURNAL)

REPUBLICANS OPPOSE HIGH SPEED RAIL IN WI: WISCONSIN won big this year in the national sweepstakes to secure federal funding for high speed rail. Of the 40 states that applied for stimulus funds for faster trains, WISCONSIN was the only one that got everything it asked for: \$810 million to establish high speed rail service between Milwaukee and Madison, the state’s two largest cities.

But some Republicans in the state are denouncing the project as a classic example of how Democratic leaders at both the state and federal levels are spending money they don’t have.

“More than anything,” said Milwaukee County Executive Scott Walker, who won the state’s Republican gubernatorial primary last Tuesday, “it symbolizes what people think of here when they think of runaway government spending.”

Walker wants the state to stop work on the project. He launched a website called NoTrain.com, advocating for using the federal money for other transportation needs. Walker’s opponent in the primary, former Congressman Mark Neumann, wanted to use the money for something other than transportation entirely: tax breaks.

But the supporters of high speed rail aren’t backing down. President Obama previewed his plans to improve the nation’s transportation infrastructure in Milwaukee two weeks ago. U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood said on a

Upcoming stories

Here are some of the topics you may see covered in upcoming issues of the *State Net Capitol Journal*:

- **2011 Preview**
- **Tea Party power?**
- **November elections**



recent visit to the state that “nobody can stop this train.” And the state’s Democratic candidate for governor, Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, is firmly behind the rail project. (STATELINE.ORG)

BUDGETS IN BRIEF: NEW JERSEY is temporarily halting work on an \$8.7 billion railway tunnel to **NEW YORK** because federal officials believe the project may go as much as a billion dollars over budget -- money the Garden State doesn’t have. The month-long suspension of all new activity will be used to take a closer look at the budget numbers (STAR-LEDGER [NEWARK]). • Also in **NEW JERSEY**, Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D) said last week he will not allow pension reforms proposed by Gov. Chris Christie (R) to pass until the state pays its share into the public employee retirement system, which is underfunded by \$46 billion. Sweeney’s opposition could block reforms until at least July, when a new state budget goes into effect (STAR-LEDGER [NEWARK]). • **COLORADO** has won a \$100.6 million federal grant to help build an affordable broadband network across the state, providing access for 178 school districts, 26 libraries and 12 community colleges. The state currently ranks 42nd among the 50 states for internet connectivity (DENVER POST). • **WASHINGTON** Gov. Chris Gregoire (D) signed an executive order last Monday (EO 10-04) mandating across-the-board cuts to state programs. The governor had previously warned state agencies to prepare for cuts of up to 7 percent, but she said Monday the cuts would likely have to be even higher (SEATTLE TIMES). • **SOUTH DAKOTA** Gov. Mike Rounds (R) asked all state agencies this summer to submit budget proposals for next year that are 10 percent below their current levels, State Finance Commissioner Jason Dilges confirmed last week. Dilges said, however, that the governor’s request wasn’t binding and wasn’t for a straight 10-percent, across-the-board cut (CAPITOL JOURNAL [PIERRE]). • **PENNSYLVANIA** Gov. Ed Rendell (D) said last week that the state would expedite the transfer of \$4.4 million in funds and grants to Harrisburg, enabling it to avoid an anticipated default on a general-obligation bond payment. A default on the capital city’s \$3.3 million Sept. 15th bond payment would have been the second largest such default this year, a development bond investors feared would weigh on prices in the \$2.8 trillion market (WALL STREET JOURNAL).

– Compiled by *KOREY CLARK*



Politics & leadership

TEA PARTY WIN THREATENS GOP CONTROL OF US SENATE: One of the most stunning results of last Tuesday’s primary elections was Christine O’Donnell’s decisive victory over Rep. Michael N. Castle in DELAWARE’s



Republican U.S. Senate contest. Castle had served two terms as governor of the state, had won elections consistently for four decades and had the backing of the state's GOP establishment. And yet he was defeated 53 percent to 47 percent by a former abstinence counselor who had failed in previous attempts to win elected office in the state.

Castle seemed as surprised as anyone.

"The voters in the Republican primary have spoken, and I respect that decision," he said, addressing supporters after the race. "I had a very nice speech prepared here, hoping I would win this race."

Much of the credit for O'Donnell's surprise win has gone to Sarah Palin and the Tea Party activists. And O'Donnell's was not the only primary victory last week attributed at least in part to their influence. Along with U.S. House candidate Glen Urquhart in DELAWARE, Tea Party-backed newcomer Carl Paladino soundly defeated former U.S. Rep. Rick Lazio in NEW YORK's Republican gubernatorial primary.

The movement has also been credited with at least three other U.S. Senate primary wins this year: Ken Buck in COLORADO, Rand Paul in KENTUCKY and Sharron Angle in NEVADA. But the result in DELAWARE's senate race may be the most resounding.

Republicans had been counting on that seat — vacated by Vice President Joseph R. Biden — to help them secure a majority in the Senate. And they believed the moderate Castle stood a much better chance of defeating Democratic nominee Chris Coons in the general election.

"There's just a lot of nutty things she's been saying that just simply don't add up," Karl Rove said in an interview on Fox News. "I'm for the Republican, but I've got to tell you, we were looking at eight to nine seats in the Senate. We're now looking at seven to eight. In my opinion, this is not a race we're going to be able to win."

Even if that turns out to be the case, and the GOP ends up failing to win control of the Senate, every Republican in Congress will be keenly aware of the cost of not being sufficiently conservative.

"That's going to make people very nervous about their votes," said former congressman Vin Weber (R-MINNESOTA), adding that particularly when it comes to appropriations bills, "the safest vote politically will be no."

That might be enough for O'Donnell and her Tea Party supporters for now, who have been saying all along that their movement is about more than just winning elections.

In the hopper

At any given time, State Net tracks tens of thousands of bills in all 50 states, the US Congress and the District of Columbia. Here's a snapshot of what's in the legislative works:

Number of Prefiles last week: 322

Number of Intros last week: 402

Number of Enacted/Adopted last week: 138

Number of 2010 Session Prefiles to date: 21,368

Number of 2010 Intros to date: 89,136

Number of 2010 Session Enacted/Adopted overall to date: 28,404

Number of 2009-10 bills currently in State Net Database: 188,824

— Compiled By JAMES ROSS
(measures current as of 9/16/2010)
Source: State Net database



“This is about changing the system,” O’Donnell said after her primary victory. (WASHINGTON POST, NEW YORK TIMES, NEWS JOURNAL [NEW-CASTLE-WILMINGTON])

At Issue in the States

Want to learn more about State Net, our legislative experts or the Capitol Journal staff? Visit our blog, <http://statenet.typepad.com/at-issue-in-the-states/>. It's a great way to find out in a flash what's going on in statehouses across the country...like yours!

STATES’ HOMELAND SECURITY EFFORTS

TOO AGGRESSIVE? PENNSYLVANIA Gov. Ed

Rendell (D) told reporters last week that the state was canceling a \$125,000 contract with a consulting firm that sent a bulletin to the state’s Office of Homeland Security referring to opponents of natural gas drilling as “environmental extremists” and suggesting animal rights demonstrations and war protests were potential threats to the state.

“I am appalled that information was disseminated about groups that were exercising their constitutional right to free speech and to protest,” Rendell said. “They shouldn’t be on any list [of possible security threats]. This is extraordinarily embarrassing.”

The state’s contract with the firm, the Institute of Terrorism Research and Response, was relatively small, and the description of anti-drilling activists as “environmental extremists” reportedly originated with the FBI. But the episode has rekindled concerns about the information states and their security contractors might be collecting about political groups or activists who haven’t broken any laws. Back in July of 2008, *The Washington Post* revealed that MARYLAND State Police conducted surveillance on anti-war and anti-death penalty activists for over a year during the administration of former Gov. Robert Ehrlich (R). (STATELINE.ORG, PROPUBLICA.ORG, WASHINGTON POST)

POLITICS IN BRIEF: The Republican attorneys general of 20 states urged a federal judge in **FLORIDA** last week to strike down the federal health care overhaul law before it takes effect, contending that Congress doesn’t have the authority to require all Americans to have health insurance. The conservative legal attack comes as some polls show that a majority of Americans oppose the health care law and some Republicans are campaigning for Congress on the pledge they will work to repeal it (LOS ANGELES TIMES). • A U.S. District Judge signed a consent decree last week allowing corporations to engage in “express advocacy” for or against political candidates in **OHIO**, as long as they work independently of candidates’ campaigns. The agreement essentially brings the state into alignment with the Citizens United case decided by the U.S. Supreme Court in January, striking down the federal ban on corporate political advertising (COLUMBUS DISPATCH). • **RHODE ISLAND** voters appear to have ousted nine state House incumbents in last Tuesday’s primary, jeopardizing House Speaker Gordon D. Fox’s (D) chances of being re-elected to his leadership post. Senate incumbents fared better, with just one, Republican Leo R. Blais, losing his seat (PROVIDENCE JOURNAL). • **NEW YORK** state Sen. Eric



“The older you get the more tolerant you become, the less judgmental you are, and that’s called wisdom,” Crist said. “Maybe I was more rigid earlier, but I don’t feel that way. And I know who’s supposed to be judging people, and it’s not me.”

Crist did not give a timetable for making his decision, noting only that he would be reviewing the matter. (ST. PETERSBURG TIMES, ORLANDO SENTINEL)

GOVERNORS IN BRIEF: A man accused of stabbing a Kansas City community college dean told police he actually meant to attack **MISSOURI** Gov. Jay Nixon (D). The 22-year-old attacker, who has a history of mental illness, told police he was upset over a class being cancelled due to Nixon’s visit to the campus and wanted to attack a government official. He mistook Penn Valley Community College dean Albert Dimmitt Jr. for the governor and stabbed him in the neck. Dimmitt is expected to recover (ASSOCIATED PRESS). • **KANSAS** Gov. Mark Parkinson (D) announced he will become president and chief executive officer of the Washington D.C.-based American Health Care Association and National Center for Assisted Living after he leaves office in January. Parkinson replaced former Sunflower State Gov. Kathleen Sebelius (D) in April 2009 when she left to become Secretary of Health and Human Services in the Obama administration. He declined to seek a second term (TOPEKA CAPITAL-JOURNAL). • A spokesperson for **ARIZONA** Gov. Jan Brewer (R) confirmed that the governor intentionally did not make her two required appointments to the Commission on Salaries of Elected State Officials. State law obligates the governor to name two panel members, including the chair, but Brewer declined to do so, saying it is not an appropriate time for the panel to consider pay hikes for elected officials and judges (EAST VALLEY TRIBUNE [MESA]). • **CALIFORNIA** GOP gubernatorial candidate Meg Whitman contributed another \$15 million of her personal fortune to her campaign last week, bringing her total to just over \$119 million. That makes her the largest self-funder in U.S. campaign history, surpassing New York City mayor Michael Bloomberg, who spent \$110 million of his own money on his successful 2009 re-election bid. Whitman, who has also collected around \$20 million in outside contributions, says she is willing to spend \$150 million of her own money on the race. Her opponent, Democratic Attorney General Jerry Brown, has accumulated approximately \$35 million (SACRAMENTO BEE).

— *Compiled by RICH EHISEN*

Upcoming elections
9/15/2010 - 10/6/2010

09/18/2010
Hawaii Primary Election
House (All)
Senate 2, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 24, 25
Constitutional Officers:
Governor, Lieutenant Governor
US House (All)
US Senate

10/02/2010
Louisiana Primary Runoff
US House (District 3)

Louisiana Special Election
House District 5
Senate District 2

Hot issues

BUSINESS: The **NEW JERSEY** Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee endorses SB 2220, which would cap the amount of unused sick time public employees can accumulate at no more than \$15,000. The measure would also freeze accumulated sick leave for workers who already have more than that amount saved up and bar workers from carrying over more than one year's worth of vacation. It moves to the full Senate (STAR-LEDGER [NEWARK]).

• **CALIFORNIA** lawmakers approve AB 605, which would allow grocery stores and large liquor outlets to offer free beer and wine tastings. It has moved to Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) for review (SACRAMENTO BEE).

CRIME & PUNISHMENT: The **OREGON** Supreme Court overturns its own 43-year-old decision that barred Beaver State judges from imposing harsher sentences on defendants who win their appeals and appear in court a second time. The new court decision said judges may increase a defendant's sentence after a successful appeal, but only if their reasons are clearly laid out and based on new information (ONTARIO ARGUS OBSERVER). • The **NEW JERSEY** Senate Law and Public Safety Committee endorses SB 2181, legislation that would double the fine for a first offense of talking or texting while driving to \$200. The fine would increase to \$400 for second offenses and \$600 for subsequent infractions. It is now in the Senate Budget and Appropriations Committee (PHILADELPHIA BUSINESS JOURNAL). • Still in **NEW JERSEY**, the Senate Transportation Committee approves SB 732, which would bar Garden State mass transit operators from using a cell phone while their train or bus is in operation. It is now with the full Senate (STAR-LEDGER [NEWARK]).

EDUCATION: The **CALIFORNIA** Legislature approves AB 2446, a bill that would allow K-12 students to choose from a broad selection of arts and career technical education or vocational classes instead of requiring them to take yearlong classes in arts or a foreign language. It is now with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) for review (SACRAMENTO BEE). • **NEW JERSEY** Gov. Chris Christie (R) signs AB 355, which allows up to 10 percent of a Garden State school district's students to attend any other public school in the state whose enrollment is not at capacity. The bill also requires home districts to provide and pay for students' transportation to new schools up to 20 miles away (STAR-LEDGER [NEWARK]). • Still in **NEW JERSEY**, the Assembly Higher Education Committee approves AB 1236, which would allow — but not require — the state's colleges and universities to establish textbook rental programs. The bill graduates to the full Assembly (STAR-LEDGER [NEWARK]).



ENVIRONMENT: Federal officials start an effort to remove gray wolves in **MINNESOTA, WISCONSIN** and **MICHIGAN** from protection under the Endangered Species Act. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service took steps to begin a new 12-month review to determine if delisting the wolves is warranted. It is the fourth time in recent years that federal officials have attempted to remove the wolves' protection (ANN ARBOR NEWS).

HEALTH & SCIENCE: Medical regulators in **WASHINGTON** add chronic kidney failure to the list of conditions for which medical marijuana is permitted under state law. Officials rejected, however, adding Alzheimer's and neuropathic pain to the list of approved conditions (SEATTLE TIMES).

SOCIAL POLICY: The **CALIFORNIA** Legislature gives final approval to SB 880, which would require minors to wear helmets while downhill skiing or snowboarding. It is now with Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger (R) for review (SACRAMENTO BEE).

— *Compiled by RICH EHISEN*

Once around the statehouse lightly

A REAL KICK IT WAS: A pair of Thai Senators in Bangkok came to blows last week, but it's not what you think. As the Associated Press reports, the two lawmakers donned gloves and short pants and climbed into the ring to promote the sport Muay Thai, or traditional Thai kickboxing. With the entire Parliament at ringside, 59-year-old Payap Tongchuen took on 64-year-old Direk Tungfang in a match of punches, kicks and elbow and knee strikes. Although the referee declared the two men — both former professional kickboxers — to be joint victors, the crowd seemed to favor Tungfang, who scored the only knockdown of the fight. Afterward, a tired Tongchuen might have agreed, saying, "It's good that I can still stand."

A LACK OF DIPLOMACY: United Nations diplomat Sha Zukang might want to start honing his resume. As reported by *Foreign Policy* magazine, Sha recently turned a toast for his boss, Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, into a world-class exercise in foot-in-mouth disease. As the magazine reports, Sha apparently had a few drinks prior to making his "tribute," which included telling Ban, "I know you



never liked me, Mr. Secretary General — well, I never liked you either.” That was bad enough, but Sha then refused attempts to get him to wrap it up without further damage, noting that he “never wanted to come to New York” anyway because he really didn’t like Americans. “It went on for about ten or fifteen minutes but it felt like an hour,” said one official. The 62-year-old Sha apologized profusely the following day, and Ban says he will not seek to have him removed. Right.

In case you missed it

More and more smokers are turning to electronic cigarettes to break their traditional tobacco habits. But federal and state authorities are skeptical about the e-cigs' safety.

In case you missed it, the article can be found on our Web site at

http://www.statenet.com/capitol_journal/09-13-2010/html

THE WORST IN WURST: We Americans are generally considered around the globe as an overfed bunch of porkers. But it turns out we aren’t the only chunkos out there. As Reuters reports, Germany has one of Europe’s highest obesity rates. To stem that tide, officials in Berlin recently took a creative path to try to educate their populace away from some of the unhealthy chow they have become accustomed to: creating a 1.5 mile long labyrinth in the shape of a giant sausage. The maze was intended to make people aware of the health risks associated with a particularly popular fast food, currywurst, or curried sausage. An official notes that visitors to the maze are asked questions on their way through and, if they give the wrong answer, are led down the wrong path so that they learn from it. We presume there are no fast food stands for those who get seriously lost.

NO HIT PARADE HERE: Speaking of places with sometimes strange customs, it’s time to check in with CALIFORNIA, where nothing is ever really too oddball to be true. Case in point, the nonpartisan California Voter Foundation recently put out a song containing a brief description of each of the nine ballot measures voters will be asked to decide on Nov. 2nd. As the *Sacramento Bee* reports, Foundation President Kim Alexander busted out her ukulele last week to demo the little diddy, which also laments its very reason for being, “Cuz the ballot is too darned long.” The song however is not afflicted with the same malaise, coming in at a nice, tight two minutes, 15 seconds.

— By RICH EHISEN

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