Lawmakers Ask State for $23 Million for Earthquake Early Warning System

Three state lawmakers introduced bills Monday that would direct $23 million in state funds toward an Earthquake Early Warning system being developed for the West Coast.

The concurrent legislation in both the Assembly and the state Senate would fund California’s portion of the $38 million ShakeAlert system that experts say could offer more than a minute warning before a temblor reaches a community. The system could slow trains, stop elevators at the nearest floor and give people a chance to take cover.

"We should have done this many years ago," said Senator Jerry Hill, D-San Mateo. "It's a low dollar investment for a major benefit."

Hill, along with Senator Robert Hertzberg, D-Van Nuys, and Assemblyman Adam Gray, D-Merced, introduced the bills, SB 438 and AB 1346, on Monday. The legislators said California is expected to end the next fiscal year with a reserve of $11.5 billion, making the investment only a small fraction of that overall budget. The bills strike language from an earlier law that prohibited using general fund dollars to develop the warning system.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency estimates that California accounts for $3.5 billion, or 66 percent, of the nationwide annual losses from earthquakes. Hill said he hopes the initial funding will attract more private-public partnerships
to pay for the ongoing operational costs estimated at $16 million a year. California’s annual cost is roughly $12 million of that total.

U.S. Rep. Adam Schiff, who has helped bring-in roughly $13 million in federal funding for the system in the last few years, said he was delighted to see California stepping up, as the federal government "can not and should not do it on its own." "None of us know how much time we have before the next big earthquake, but we just took a substantial step forward in getting this done in time to use it when we need it," Schiff said.

The U.S. Geological Survey, which operates the ShakeAlert early warning system, believes that California in the next 30 years has a 99.7 percent chance of having a magnitude 6.7 or larger earthquake. USGS partners with Caltech in Southern California.

"We've been working on this very actively for the last five or 10 years," said Hall Daily, Caltech's Director of Government Affairs. "If this passes, obviously it moves the whole project forward very positively, there’s no question about that."

The early warning system exists in a prototype version now, but the coverage is mostly focused around Southern California and the San Francisco Bay Area. Only about a third of the seismic stations needed for ShakeAlert exist today, according to Dan Given, earthquake early warning coordinator for USGS. Current test users include Los Angeles County Fire, LA City Office of Emergency Management, Disneyland, Metrolink, Caltrans and LA Department of Water and Power.

"Early warning is not prediction, it is detecting the earthquake after it begins, but doing it so fast that you can send alerts before the strong shaking arrives," Given said.

The early warning system could send out public alerts within two years of receiving funding, he said. Most of the funds received to date, from non-profits and the private sector, have funded research at Caltech, UC Berkeley and the University of Washington, rather than building out the system.

Source: SacBee

Legislature Unveils New Health Plan Tax Proposal

The California Legislature on Monday unveiled a bill imposing a new tax on health insurance plans that would prevent a massive $1.1 billion hole in the state budget. The tax is designed to allow California to continue receiving matching funds from the federal government to pay for health insurance for the poor. It would replace a tax that applied only to Medi-Cal managed care organizations, which the federal government said it would not renew.

Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown called a special session last year to deal with health
care financing but failed to find a solution. His administration has worked for months to broker a compromise with insurance companies, which warned that higher costs could get passed on to consumers.

A spokesman for Brown, Evan Westrup, said the bill "reflects the administration's proposal."

Insurers would get a reduction in other taxes to offset the cost of the new assessment. The effects on each company would likely be different, depending on their mix of Medi-Cal clients, their corporate structure and other factors.

The California Association of Health plans did not immediately take a position on the bill, spokeswoman Nicole Kasabian Evans said.

The measure requires bipartisan support in the Assembly and Senate to achieve the supermajority required of tax increases. It could begin moving through legislative committees as soon as this week.

It was not immediately clear whether Brown had lined up the needed support from two-thirds of each chamber. In the past, some GOP lawmakers have supported similar taxes if the affected industry was on board.

Insurers supported past iterations of the health plan tax because it was crafted to apply only to Medi-Cal managed care organizations. The money is matched by the federal government and pumped back into the Medi-Cal program.

But the Obama administration said the tax must apply more broadly, warning California that the state must find a new model to continue receiving the federal matching funds after June 30.

Source: AP

**Governor Comes Out Strong Opposing Proposed $9 billion School Bond Measure**

Gov. Jerry Brown on Thursday came out against a $9-billion school bond measure that will go before voters in November, erecting a political hurdle for advocates of new spending on school construction.

"I am against the developers' $9-billion bond," Brown said in a statement to The Times. "It's a blunderbuss effort that promotes sprawl and squanders money that would be far better spent in low-income communities."

Brown has hinted in the past at his displeasure with the ballot proposal. When he unveiled his budget plan last month, the governor said the bond measure
would not change the state program that determines how school facilities are built and maintained. That process prioritizes districts that submit early applications for projects - which Brown said favors affluent districts over cash-strapped ones.

"The Legislature could do a better job than the developers who put that one together," Brown said at the time.

But lawmakers' efforts to craft a smaller bond have stagnated.

Representatives for Senate leader Kevin de León (D-Los Angeles) and Assembly Speaker Toni Atkins (D-San Diego) confirmed that legislators will not be voting on an alternative measure in time to meet state election deadlines for the June primary ballot.

Outright opposition from Brown could prove politically damaging for the larger proposal. The governor notches high marks from Californians: 60% of registered voters approve of his job performance, according to a January poll by the Public Policy Institute of California.

But the $9-billion bond has racked up its own cadre of influential supporters, including the California Chamber of Commerce, the State Building and Construction Trades Council of California and Tom Torlakson, the superintendent of public instruction. Nearly a dozen legislators also have endorsed the measure.

Under the proposal sponsored by the Coalition for Adequate School Housing, a group promoting new construction, and the California Building Industry Assn., most of the money would go toward building and upgrading K-12 facilities. The proposal includes $2 billion for community college projects.

"California is facing at least $20 billion in projected school facilities needs over the next decade, and we have sponsored this bond to make sure school districts can continue to partner with the state to create quality learning environments for all students," David Walrath of the Coalition for Adequate School Housing said in a statement.

Source: LA Times

State Officials Disagree on Who Will Track Medical Marijuana Plants

California's new medical cannabis law will put the state in charge of tracking each marijuana plant from "seed to sale." But the Brown administration and the state's independent tax board are at odds about who will oversee it.

The state Board of Equalization is preparing to do the job. Board member Fiona Ma held a hearing with companies that supply software to other states. But Ma says
the governor's budget proposal doesn't supply the necessary funds.

"Because of the extra responsibilities that we have to do this track and trace program, we need extra employees," says board member Fiona Ma. "We don't have authority to hire new people."

The Brown administration says it's the job of the executive branch—not the tax board—to run the tracking program.

The law itself is murky. One section reads: "The Department of Food and Agriculture ... shall establish a track and trace program for reporting the movement of medical marijuana items throughout the distribution chain."

Another says: "The board [of Equalization], in consultation with the Department of Food and Agriculture, shall adopt a system for reporting the movement of commercial cannabis and cannabis products throughout the distribution chain."

The section goes on to say the board should not duplicate the department's database, but it also allows tracking to include any information "deemed necessary by the board for the taxation and regulation of marijuana and marijuana products."

Both sides say they're continuing to discuss the matter.

Source: Capitol Public Radio

**Female Lawmakers Introduce Legislative Package Seeking Pay Equity, Child Care Funding**

A package of proposals unveiled Thursday by female lawmakers would help women in California achieve equitable pay and expand family-leave job protections, as well as earmark more state funds for child care and for helping children on welfare. The Democratic members of the California Legislative Women's Caucus said they hoped to build on the success of last year, when they won approval of one of the toughest equal-pay laws in the nation.

"We positioned California as a leader in the fight to improve the economic lives of women and children," said Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson (D-Santa Barbara), the caucus' chair and one of 10 female lawmakers who attended a Capitol news conference. "Yet we lag behind the rest of the world in family-friendly workplace policy," she added. "Women and families must be part of California's public policy priorities for this year."

One bill would seek to reduce the disparity between pay to men and women by prohibiting employers from asking a job candidate's past salary history and
requiring them to disclose a salary range for an open job upon request.

"The idea to base a new wage on the old - possibly discriminatory - wage simply perpetuates the discrimination," Assemblywoman Nora Campos (D-San Jose) said. Another bill would provide three months of job-protected maternity and paternity leave for most California workers. Currently, those working for small employers can take up to eight weeks of leave without fear of losing their jobs.

Lawmakers also are reviving a proposal that failed last year to require that employers give workers adequate advanced notice of their schedules.

Another bill being brought back after failing last year would repeal a cap on benefits to families on welfare when they have another child.

Under the proposal, the additional child would increase the welfare check by $128 per month. That would cost the state $200 million annually, according to Sen. Holly Mitchell (D-Los Angeles), the author of the measure. The cap, she said, "has been the leading driver of childhood poverty."

The most expensive proposal made Thursday would allocate an additional $800 million to provide child care and early childhood education for tens of thousands more than receive it now.

A representative of the governor's office declined comment.

While united on the legislative proposals, the caucus members have varying opinions on the national presidential race, in which Democrat Hillary Clinton is a contending to become the first female president.

Jackson bristled when asked about former secretary of State Madeline Albright, a Clinton supporter, who recently said: "There's a special place in hell for women who don't help each other!"

Responded Jackson: "Everyone's entitled to their own opinions." She went on to say that Clinton was "well prepared to be president," but she complained that young women do not seem to be aware that the struggle for gender equity is not over.

"I don't think that younger women are as acutely aware of the battles that have been fought to pave the road for them to become professionals," Jackson said. Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez (D-San Diego) interrupted Jackson to note that the Legislative Women's Caucus has not endorsed in the presidential race. "We clearly are a caucus of different ideas," Gonzalez said.

Source: LA Times
Governor's Appointments

As chief of the Bureau of Medical Marijuana Regulation at the California Department of Consumer Affairs: **Lori Ajax**, 50, Fair Oaks, Republican, chief deputy director at the CA Dept. of Alcoholic Beverage Control. Salary: $150,636.

To Air Resources Board: **Diane Takvorian**, 64, San Diego, Democrat, executive director and co-founder of the Environmental Health Coalition. Pleasure term. Compensation: $41,889 with provisions for cost of living increases provided she devotes a minimum of 60 hours per month to board work.