Opinion: Legalizing drugs is constitutional

By Katie Kieffer

I believe states have the constitutional right to legalize drugs. For, the Constitution is silent on the federal government's ability to regulate or ban substances that adults choose to digest at their own peril—or medical relief.

The Constitution is so silent on this matter of individual liberty (choosing to digest or use drugs) that in order to ban the sale of alcohol during the Prohibition era, we passed the 18th Amendment. When we wised up and realized that banning alcohol doesn't work, we repealed the 18th Amendment via the 21st Amendment. I contend that federal drug laws are unconstitutional because they do not stem from a constitutional amendment.



Katie Kieffer

Since the Constitution defines our freedoms negatively, states and individuals retain all rights that are not explicitly delegated to the federal government. The 10th Amendment states: "The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people." In other words, because the Constitution is silent on drugs, states alone have the constitutional power to regulate drugs.

Voters in states like California have exercised their constitutional right to legalize drugs, specifically medicinal marijuana to help cancer patients and those suffering from chronic pain due to autoimmune diseases like multiple sclerosis.

Californians aren't flower power hippies. These voters realize that if it's constitutional for individual Americans to binge on four-to-five alcoholic drinks in one sitting—drinks that incidentally do nothing to relieve chronic pain—it makes sense to legalize a far less lethal substance like marijuana with verified pain-relief benefits.

A prestigious medical study published by The Lancet in November 2010 reveals that alcohol is more lethal than heroin and crack cocaine and drastically more harmful than marijuana, ecstasy and LSD. On Jan. 6, 2012, The Lancet reaffirmed these findings with a global study revealing that: "marijuana was the world's most widely consumed illicit drug … [and] the least likely of all illicit drugs to cause death," as the New York Times relays.

We have not amended the Constitution to outlaw drugs. Nor did the war on drugs germinate in Congress. Instead, successive court rulings and executive orders have unconstitutionally banned drug use at the federal level—even to the point of overriding the sovereignty of states that explicitly legalize drugs.

And when the court decides to apply the Bill of Rights to state law, it winds up trampling … on the most important safeguard of our liberties: the division of power between the federal and state governments. … By the middle of the twentieth century the "due process" clause within the Fourteenth Amendment had come to be seen as the catchall phrase for federal intervention,' writes author Jason Lewis in "Power Divided is Power Checked."

Today, the Federal government, via the Department of Justice, has violated the separation of powers that the Founding Fathers wrote into the Constitution. Federal agents allege that medical marijuana dispensaries and growers violate "federal law"—ripping out medicinal cannabis plants and destroying legitimate livelihoods overnight.

The New York Times reports: "Federal law classifies the possession and sale of marijuana as a serious crime and does not grant exceptions for medical use, so the programs adopted here, in 15 other states and in the District of Columbia exist in an odd legal limbo. … federal prosecutors have raided or threatened to seize the property of scores of growers and dispensaries in California that, in some cases, are regarded by local officials as law-abiding models. At the same time, the Internal Revenue Service has levied large, disputed tax charges against the state's largest dispensary, threatening its ability to continue."

The war on drugs began when President Richard Nixon bypassed Congress and declared a war on drugs on July 17, 1971. He said that drug abuse was a "national emergency" and America's "public enemy number one." He signed the "war" into law on January 28, 1972. By unconstitutional executive order, Nixon created the first drug czar and also created an extra-congressional agency to regulate drugs called the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA). Successive Presidents have sustained this war.

Article I, Section 8 of the Constitution gives Congress (not the president) the "Power … To declare war." Federalist and framer Alexander Hamilton further explains the Constitution's checks on executive reach in The Federalist No. 78. He says the president publicly declares and enforces the laws Congress makes and the decisions or appointments Congress approves: "The Executive not only dispenses the honors, but holds the sword of the community."

Some might object that America's 40-year-long and over $2.5-trillion fight against drug abuse isn't technically a "war." But that's a hard position to defend when scores of innocent Americans and Mexicans have died throughout our combat with brutal Mexican drug cartels. Since 2006 alone, when President Felipe Calderón declared his own war against drugs, between 40,000 and 50,000 people (depending on your source) have died in this conflict.

Moreover, the right to own your entire person is a fundamental human right and it is foundational to the Constitution. Unless you use wrongful force against another person or their property, you retain full ownership over your body. As John Locke points out, reason tells you that you fully own your body. No one else owns your body—not your neighbors, your family or the government.

Rep. Ron Paul explains: "All of our freedoms – the freedom of religion and assembly, the freedom of speech, the right to bear arms, the right to be free from unnecessary government searches and seizures – stem from the precept that you own yourself and are responsible for your own choices. Prohibition laws negate self-ownership and are an absolute affront to the principles of freedom. I disagree vehemently with the recreational use of drugs, but at the same time, if people are only free to make good decisions, they are not truly free. In any case, states should decide for themselves how to handle these issues and the federal government should respect their choices."

Freedom is the power to choose between good and bad options for our own private property and body; freedom is the power to opt for healthy behaviors like prayer, aerobic exercise and strength training over unhealthy behaviors like self-mutilation, chain smoking, binge drinking and inhaling pain thinner. I think the federal government needs to respect individual freedom by deferring to the states in matters like drug use where the Constitution is silent.

Katie Kieffer is a conservative multimedia personality, writer and public speaker who runs KatieKieffer.com.

Opinion: Accomplishments and challenges of sheriff's department

To the citizens of El Dorado County,

The year 2011 is wrapped up, and so is my first year as your sheriff. This year end report is to provide you, the community we serve, with information outlining some of the achievements by the men and women who make up your sheriff's office. I believe it is my obligation to keep you, as the taxpayers of El Dorado County, informed as to the direction and accomplishments of this office.

To recap all the achievements of the last year would take up more space than I have, so I will simply highlight some of the more significant successes. Please know that the accomplishments were a result of teamwork, leadership, and action taken by all levels and divisions of the sheriff's office.

Employees and statistics



John
D'Agostini

Your sheriff’s office is budgeted for 357.5 staff members, of which 159.5 are peace officers, 88 correctional staff, and 110 professional staff. Our current approved budget is $54 million. Your tax dollars support many programs, including the operation of two correctional facilities, patrol of over 1,700 square miles, the Office of Emergency Services, coroner services, civil services, court, bailiff, and transportation services, dispatch and radio communications, criminal records, boat patrol, public administration, investigations, and property and evidence.

We are very proud of the many volunteers that donate their time to make our county a better place. Our volunteer programs consist of over 600 citizens who support programs including search and rescue, S.T.A.R.S., C.E.R.T., Explorers, the air squadron, and our reserve deputies.

Concealed weapons

One of the first policies I directed be modified was the concealed weapon policy. I am a strong believer in the Constitution and the Second Amendment guaranteeing our right to keep and bear arms. The primary changes were removing the requirement for reference letters and accepting personal protection as justification of good cause for the permit. Our staff has been working hard to keep up with the applications, as we issued 844 concealed weapon permits in 2011, a 275 percent increase over the prior year.

Community outreach

In order to be better informed on the issues facing our county, as well as keep our citizens informed of the hard work accomplished by our staff, I attended and/or took part in over 600 individual meetings with citizens, service clubs, schools,

and other community events in 2011.

The welfare of our children is a top priority for the sheriff’s office, and in addition to our on-going school resource officer program, our staff reinstituted the Safety Pup program. The program includes presentations at local elementary schools which reinforce safety awareness for our children.

In 2011 we published the first Sheriff’s Annual Report, which includes statistics and information concerning operations, services, and accomplishments. The statistics are eye-opening, but they also display the hard work being done every day by sheriff’s office employees, and frankly, it highlights the services you—the taxpayers—are receiving for your tax dollars. The annual report can be viewed online.

In order to improve our interaction and transparency with the public, we also have revamped the patrol Citizen Ride-Along Program. In the past, the program was restrictive as to who was allowed to ride. We made changes specifically to increase the number of citizens allowed to take part in the program. The result has been a significant increase in participation.

This last year we had 106 citizens ride-along, a 54 percent increase over the prior year.

We have also continued the Citizen’s Academy, which is a 10-week program, designed to educate the public on the functions and responsibilities of the sheriff’s office. In order to improve access and accessibility in the El Dorado Hills area, we began staffing the El Dorado Hills Substation with our S.T.A.R.S. volunteers during normal business hours.

Crime

I strongly believe that we have a moral responsibility to provide high quality patrol and investigative services to all of our communities. Last year, at the request of our patrol

staff, we changed patrol shifts to a 12-hour schedule. This schedule has reduced overtime and increased the number of deputies on patrol in your neighborhood. In order to quickly address specific crime issues we more than doubled the size of the Special Enforcement Detail, which is a team of deputies and one supervisor who ad dress specific neighborhood, community, and county-wide crime problems.

Early last year we experienced a surge in residential burglaries in the west end of the county. Our investigators proposed an action plan that included extra patrol, increased surveillance, and concentrated investigation and patrol resources. This successful process resulted in numerous suspects arrested and thousands of dollars in stolen property recovered and returned to the victims.

We have reinstituted the long dormant volunteer reserve deputy program. At this time we are in the process of hiring unpaid reserve deputies which will increase our patrol staffing as well as our presence at community events, at minimal cost to taxpayers.

It is my belief that if a citizen calls for service, they should have a deputy sheriff respond to address their problem. In the past, many citizens were referred to an online computer system to file a report. We have changed our policy so that if you want a deputy you get a deputy. The computer system is still available but only as an alternative option, as decided by the victim. It is my hope that this change will improve our knowledge of neighborhood issues and increase the number of contacts between patrol deputies and those we serve.

Internal processes

As with most organizations, I strongly believe we should listen to those who do the work by asking for their input on improving efficiency and effectiveness. Last year we conducted a confidential employee survey asking for input regarding job

satisfaction, employee relations and work environment, management and supervision, ethics, fairness, standards and training and equipment. Through this survey we were able to determine things the Office does well and areas where we can improve. The response was excellent and we have made many internal policy changes based on employee recommendations. I can assure you that your sheriff’s office employees strive to provide high quality services to our communities.

Last year we implemented officewide performance expectations for every employee in the organization. The performance expectations include professional ethics, human relations, and management and supervision expectations.

Public access

We have modified office hours at our lobby reception, records, and civil sections to improve public access. In the past those services were not open during lunch or until 5pm when most business is handled.

Budget

Regarding the budget, my goals from day one have been to avoid employee layoffs and avoid any reduction in public safety services in El Dorado County. We made many changes in order to reduce costs and I am happy to report that we continue to operate within the budget established by the county. At this time we are operating at lower staff levels than we had in 2001, and continuously review each and every function we provide and prioritize it as something vital, important, or just nice to have. We are focusing on our core functions and services.

We have been able to make significant reductions in overtime organization-wide by changing schedules in our Custody and Patrol Divisions, weekly overtime reporting and justification, and reducing non-mandated training.

During the past year we reduced our overtime budget by approximately $900,000. In addition, we recently conducted an audit of cellular telephones, desk telephone lines and pagers. We identified and disconnected 96 unused cellular telephones, 70 unused pagers, 43 unused desk telephone lines, and 28 unused data lines. This will save approximately $60,000/year.

You should be aware that sheriff office employees made personal sacrifices by voluntarily reducing their benefits and increasing their county retirement costs, resulting in an approximate $1 million reduction in county costs.

We also made changes in our contract with the Superior Court, eliminating peace officers at security screening locations. We will provide highly trained “sheriff’s security officers” to do the same job at reduced costs. As a result, the sheriff’s office is able to increase the number of staff and services provided to the Superior Court without increasing costs.

Future challenges

As you may be aware the state passed AB109, which will forever change the criminal justice system in this state. The state has passed their responsibility for housing certain inmates and supervising those released from custody to the county. This is not a good thing for El Dorado County.

Of most concern is that the state is not covering the actual costs of housing and supervising the inmates, resulting in an unfunded or under-funded state mandate. It is very possible that at some point in the near future we will reach capacity at both of our custody facilities and be forced to release inmates before their sentences are completed, impacting public safety in our county.

The sheriff’s office needs a new home. We are currently spread out in six locations and spend over $330,000 a year on leased space for our staff. We are in the process of evaluating space needs with the goals of reducing or discontinuing the use of

leased space, and housing most or all sheriff’s office employees within a new facility in the future.

The sheriff’s office has outgrown the current facility, which was built over forty years ago. This situation not only increases costs for leased property, but it reduces our span of control, fragments our operation, has a negative impact on morale, reduces crime solving communication between divisions, and requires that our staff work in less than ideal conditions. A new facility will reduce county costs, increase our level of customer service, and create one location where all public services will be available to our citizens.

As we move into a new year, your sheriff’s office is committed to providing you with high quality public safety service and will be responsive to your concerns and safety needs.

As sheriff I pledge to work with you and faithfully honor the oath of office I took on Jan. 3, 2011. We must continue to work together to make El Dorado County a better and safer place to live. If you have community or public safety issues, or suggestions on how we can improve service please do not hesitate to schedule a meeting or call me at (530) 621.6566.

In closing, I want you to know that I am privileged to serve as your sheriff and would like to thank you for your continued support of our sheriff’s office.

John D’Agostini, sheriff-coroner of El Dorado County

Opinion: Freedom and the Internet are victorious

By Tom McClintock

Long ago, Jefferson warned, “The natural progress of things is for liberty to yield, and government to gain ground.” The exceptions to that rule have been few and far between recently, and ought to be celebrated when they occur.

One did this past week with the announcement that supporters of the so-called “Stop On-Line Privacy Act” and the “Protect Intellectual Property Act” have indefinitely postponed their measures after an unprecedented protest across the Internet.



Tom McClintock

SOPA and PIPA pose a crippling danger to the Internet because they use the legitimate concern over copyright infringement as an excuse for government to intrude upon and regulate the very essence of the Internet – the unrestricted and absolutely free association that links site to site, providing infinite pathways for commerce, discourse and learning.

It is not the Internet per se that has set the stage for the next quantum leap in human knowledge and advancement – but rather the free association at the core of the Internet. And this is precisely what SOPA and PIPA directly threaten.

But as dangerous as this concept is to the Internet, it pales

in comparison to the danger it poses to our fundamental freedoms as Americans.

It is true that rogue websites operating from off-shore havens are stealing intellectual property and then selling it.

We already have very good laws against that, as evidenced by the recent arrest of Mr. Kim Schmitz and his associates in New Zealand, who now stand accused of operating one of the biggest of these rogue sites.

Theft of intellectual property is fundamentally no different than the theft of any other kind of property. It should be taken no less seriously than the thefts perpetrated by the likes of Bernie Madoff, John Dellinger or Willie Sutton.

It is no different and it should be treated no differently. In every such case, it is the individual who commits the theft and the individual who is culpable and accountable to the law. And it is the individual who is accorded the right of due process, including the presumption of innocence, while he stands accused.

This is what SOPA and PIPA destroy. Upon mere accusation, these measures would allow the government to shut down web sites, ruin honest businesses, impound property, disrupt legitimate speech and dragoon innocent third parties into enforcing laws that may or may not have been broken.

When property is stolen, we hold accountable the individuals who knowingly commit the act, and place the burden of proof on the accuser. The accuser must demonstrate to the satisfaction of a jury that the defendant stole property or that he received property that he knew was stolen.

Yes, it is a ponderous system. Yes, it means you actually have to provide evidence. Yes, it means you have to convince a jury. Yes, it means we can’t catch and successfully prosecute every criminal. But the experience of mankind over the

centuries has proven that this is the best possible way to protect the innocent and to protect our freedom while also punishing the guilty. In part, we punish the guilty to discourage others we might not be able to punish.

And as the arrests recently in New Zealand prove, it works. Let Mr. Schmitz and his confederates be extradited and let them have their day in court. Let evidence be presented. Let a jury be convinced of that evidence. And if convicted of one of the greatest thefts in human history, let us mete out the full measure of punishment provided by the law to stand as a fearsome example to others.

That doesn't and won't stop all theft and it isn't perfect. But to replace it with one where mere accusation can bring punishment or inflict ruinous costs upon innocent third parties, would introduce a despotic and destructive concept that is antithetical to the ancient rights that our government was formed to protect.

The developments of the last few weeks have saved the Internet and saved these fundamental principles – at least for now. But Jefferson was right that the natural order is for government to grow at the expense of liberty. That is why we have our Constitution.

And to the protection of that Constitution, the Internet has now empowered its rightful owners, "We, the People," to defend it more effectively than ever before.

Which leads me to conclude that because of the events of this past week, we will see many more victories for freedom in the days and years ahead.

Tom McClintock represents the California side of the Lake Tahoe Basin in the House of Representatives.

Opinion: Brown’s budget ideas decimate child care

By Linda Asato

On Jan. 6, 2012, Gov. Brown released his 2012-13 budget proposing severe changes and devastating budget cuts to the systems that support low-income children and families. These proposed cuts destroy the pathway to success for children and families and dismantles decades of investment in California’s long-established system of child-care services that support the dual goals of helping parents earn and children learn.

Child care is a critical support ensuring parents can participate in the paid workforce. High quality and reliable child care is the only way a parent can go to work and offers multiple benefits for employers. Quality early care also offers substantial benefits to children during their earliest years which narrows the achievement gap, increases high school graduation rates, and reduces crime and delinquency.

We are outraged that the governor’s proposed $516.8 million budget cut to child care, which he wants adopted by March, would eliminate 62,000 child care slots. This is on top of $883 million child-care reductions, equivalent to 114,762 child-care spaces, lost since 2008.

This level of assault delivers a damaging blow to families that are struggling to improve their lives. The proposed March 2012 adoption/implementation date is unreasonable, unnecessarily forcing families into crisis, without adequate transition time. His proposed changes significantly limit parental choice for low-income parents and their ability to choose quality care for their children.

Long term, his proposal begins to dismantle the backbone of our stable child-care system by eliminating contracts for our highest quality child development centers and reducing the reimbursement rates to an unrealistic level of operation. These small businesses and nonprofit centers will close their doors, stalling economic recovery especially in low-income communities.

The governor's proposal to move the administration of child care (except part-day preschool) out of the Department of Education's Child Development Division and transfer it to the Department of Social Services doesn't acknowledge the critical role education plays in the child-care setting.

While we value the important role the California Department of Social Services plays in licensing child-care facilities and conducting background checks for all categories of child-care providers, we highly value the California Department of Education's mission to educate all students from early childhood to adulthood.

The Network strongly believes child care is a dual investment that supports children and low-income parents. In order to maintain this dual investment in California's families, administration of child care must remain with the California Department of Education.

CDE was recently awarded a $52.6 million federal Early Learning Challenge Fund grant to develop a quality rating system to inform parents and policymakers of program ratings. Destroying the child-care supply and dislodging it from the CDE goes counter to the purpose of this federal investment.

Overall, these cuts destroy the dreams of thousands of low-income families who yearn for economic self-sufficiency. These cause irreparable damage to the quality of care that is currently available to all families.

The Network will work with our partners to inform legislative

leaders and the governor of the harm this budget and corresponding policy changes will inflict on families, providers, and our fragile economy. California cannot afford the devastating impact that will be caused by the proposed budget cuts and administrative changes to our recovering economy and to our long-term economic prosperity.

Please contact Choices for Children to share your voice and join local advocacy efforts at (530) 541.5848 or online.

Linda Asato is executive director of California Child Care Resource and Referral Network.

Opinion: Winter's arrival means taking precautions

By Trista Cunningham

The foothills and Sierra regions are prone to winter storms, and the Capital Region Chapter of the American Red Cross urges residents to take steps now to stay safer when severe weather threatens.

"By preparing together for winter storms, we can make our families safer and our communities stronger," Christy Woods, director of preparedness, said. "We can help you and your family create a disaster preparedness plan now, before our community is threatened by dangerously low temperatures, snow, ice and strong winds."

As with any disaster, preparation can be the difference between life and death. The Red Cross recommends that

individuals and families prepare for winter storms by:

Assembling an emergency preparedness kit: Pack a winter-specific supply kit that includes a warm coat, hat, mittens or gloves, and water-resistant boots, along with extra blankets and extra warm clothing. Sand or non-clumping kitty litter is good to have on hand to help make walkways or steps less slippery. Additionally, make sure you have a first aid kit and essential medications, canned food and can opener, bottled water, flashlights and a battery-powered radio with extra batteries in your home in the event of a power outage.

Heeding storm warnings: A winter storm watch means winter storm conditions are possible within the next 36 to 48 hours. People in a watch area should review their winter storm plans and stay informed about weather conditions via NOAA weather radio, or local radio or television stations. A winter storm waring means that life-threatening, severe winter conditions have begun or will begin within 24 hours. Individuals in a warning area should take precautions immediately.

Preparing your home and car: Winterize your vehicle and keep the gas tank full, which will help to keep the fuel line from freezing. Make sure your home is properly insulated by installing storm windows or covering windows with plastic from the inside to help keep cold air out. Maintain heating equipment and chimneys by having them cleaned and inspected every year.

For more information on winter storm preparedness, contact the Capital Region Chapter of the American Red Cross at (916) 993.7070. We urge you to share these Red Cross winter storm preparedness tips with every member of your household, because the best protection is to be prepared ahead of time.

Trista Cunningham works for the Red Cross.

Opinion: State, union leave TTUSD no choice but to layoff teachers

By Steve Jennings

Financial news for school districts has taken a turn for the worse over the past month. School funding shortfalls at the state level have caused a mid-year drop in revenue for busing that will impact Tahoe Truckee Unified School District by about $500,000 this year and $1 million a year starting next fall.

The district had previously projected its 2012-13 budget deficit to be $4 million; now the deficit has grown to $5 million.

Currently the school board plans to address this deficit with $1.8 million in budget cuts as well as spending down reserves by $3.2 million. It is important to note that, because 80 percent to 90 percent of our expenses are in employee payroll, about $1.4 million of the $1.8 million will be a reduction in employment across the district.

There are two primary ways of reducing employment costs:

Reduce the amount of money being paid in wages and salaries – which must be negotiated with the district's employee groups, or

Reduce the number of employees – which is a legal process that occurs by action of the school board.

The district is taking action to rectify the financial crunch,

and the goal has been to find solutions that will have the least impact on the students. The first step is seeking concessions from the employee unions. Negotiations have not yet begun with the classified union (non-teachers). The district and the teachers union (TTEA) have met several times this year and discussed options including salary reductions, step freeze (which would halt the automatic salary increases based on years of experience), and, as a last resort (due the effect on student class days) furlough days.

At a Jan. 13 meeting the TTEA informed the district that it was not interested in pursuing any negotiated concessions. As a result of this and the fact that we have experienced a decline in enrollment we are beginning a layoff process. This will start with school board action at the Feb. 15 board meeting. The district is still hopeful that we can work collaboratively with our labor organizations on alternatives to layoffs.

The district is not viewing the negotiation process as a win-lose situation. Instead, it is approached as an opportunity to build trust with our union leaders and provide transparency to our employees and public. Regardless of the impact of negotiations on the District's future budget deficits, the district will go on. The district will hold high student achievement and financial stability both as high priorities. How we choose to obtain success in both of these areas appears clear – be open, honest, trusting and transparent. Getting through these difficult times and still having our teachers focused on the most important work for our future is the win-win opportunity that we cannot afford to miss.

In any financial cut back, inevitably there are tradeoffs for all the stakeholders. In this case, layoffs mean budget savings but also larger class sizes and a loss of jobs.

The district continues to pursue other saving including the reduction of utility costs, increased transportation charges

to families, district office and administration cuts, etc.

There is still time to find savings and lessen the impact of revenue reductions and budget cuts. We are hopeful that will happen as we proceed through the budget process.

If you'd like to email me with any comments or questions, my email address is sjennings@ttusd.org.

Steve Jennings is Tahoe Truckee Unified School District superintendent.

Opinion: Boosting U.S. tourism a good idea

Publisher's note: *This editorial is from the Jan. 20, 2012, Reno Gazette-Journal.*

President Barack Obama got off to a bad start with Nevadans when, early in his administration, he told federal government agencies to avoid Las Vegas when scheduling meetings.

The president undoubtedly meant no slur on the Silver State. It was, rather, a ham-handed attempt to rein in spending by government bureaucrats – an idea that normally would be likely to find favor in Nevada – by warning members of his administration that meetings should be for work, not for playing golf or going to see Celine Dion.

But, by singling out one convention and meeting destination out of the many, the president was taking direct aim at a large segment of the Nevada economy based on an unfortunate stereotype – that the delights of Sin City would take the convention-going bureaucrats away from their business, all on

the taxpayers' tab. And Nevadans didn't appreciate it.

On Thursday, President Obama began to make amends, not, regrettably by apologizing to Nevadans and urging government workers to return to Las Vegas – or, better yet, Reno – but by announcing a handful of much-needed initiatives to boost travel and tourism in the United States, and not incidentally to Nevada.

That we can appreciate.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Is Internet freedom or Web piracy the bigger issue?

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the Jan. 20, 2012, Los Angeles Times.***

Wikipedia went dark for a day. Google hid its logo under a black shroud. And hundreds of other websites darkened their pages temporarily in a massive, coordinated protest against a pair of bills that would step up enforcement of copyrights and trademarks. Wednesday's demonstration provoked such an intense backlash against the Protect IP Act and the Stop Online Piracy Act (better known as PIPA and SOPA) that by the end of the week, more than 100 lawmakers had declared their opposition and both bills had been placed on hold.

It was a stunning – and in some ways troubling – show of lobbying muscle by some of the Web's most popular companies. Shell-shocked supporters of the bills complained that the tech

industry had misled the public and glossed over the damage being done by foreign-based websites peddling unauthorized copies of U.S. movies, music and brands. But the bills went too far, giving rights holders the power to do much more than proponents said they would. That's a problem lawmakers need to solve before moving ahead.

The original versions of PIPA and SOPA would have enabled the Justice Department to seek court orders to seize the domain names of foreign sites that were either "dedicated to" infringing copyrights and trademarks or just facilitating infringement. Such orders would require Internet service providers to steer users away from the sites, search engines to block links to them, and payment processors and advertising networks to cut off their financial support. The measures would also have authorized copyright holders to seek similar court orders against any site dedicated to infringement.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Water bond needs to be taken off the table

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the Jan. 12, 2012, Orange County Register.***

The last thing California needs now is more state bonds, with the interest and principal paid from the general fund. The state already can't pay its current bills, including debt service on past bonds.

There are signs the Legislature might dump from the November ballot an $11 billion water bond measure originally planned

for two years ago. It was originally called Proposition 18, but in 2010 the recession was in full force, and voters were in no mood to continue their decade-long splurging on bonds. So the Legislature pushed the vote off another two years.

Assembly Speaker John Perez, D-Los Angeles, believes that "$11 billion is, I think, higher than voters would be willing to support right now. And there are superfluous projects that are included in that water bond that would be nice to have, but aren't crucial." He also believes water storage is important. He was quoted in an article by John Myers, Sacramento bureau chief for KQED/TV. And he correctly pointed out that a supermajority – a two-thirds vote – in both houses of the Legislature is the reason a Niagara of pork projects was included to bloat the bill.

Mr. Myers reported that "it also takes a two-thirds vote to either delay the water bond or rework it for 2012. Early signs on bipartisanship are good; Assembly GOP leader Connie Conway said … she's also willing to take a second look at the issue."

Read the whole story

Opinion: Demise of Kodak a good example of a free market

By Thomas Sowell

The news that Eastman Kodak is preparing to file for bankruptcy, after being the leading photographic company in the world for more than a hundred years, truly marks the end of an era.

The skills required to use the cameras and chemicals required by the photography of the mid-19th century were far beyond those of most people – until a man named George Eastman created a company called Kodak, which made cameras that ordinary people could use.

It was Kodak's humble and affordable box Brownie that put photography on the map for millions of people, who just wanted to take simple pictures of family, friends and places they visited.

As the complicated photographic plates used by 19th century photographers gave way to film, Kodak became the leading film maker of the 20th century. But sales of film declined for the first time in 2000, and sales of digital cameras surpassed the sales of film cameras just 3 years later. Just as Kodak's technology made older modes of photography obsolete more than a hundred years ago, so the new technology of the digital age has left Kodak behind.

Great names of companies in other fields have likewise vanished as new technology brought new rivals to the forefront, or else made the whole product obsolete, as happened with typewriters, slide rules and other products now remembered only by an older generation. That is what happens in a market economy and we all benefit from it as consumers.

Unfortunately, that is not what happens in government. The post office is a classic example. Post offices were once even more important than Eastman Kodak, and for a longer time, as the mail provided vital communications linking people and organizations across thousands of miles. But, today, technology has moved even further beyond the post office than it has beyond Eastman Kodak.

The difference is that, although the Postal Service is technically a private business, its income doesn't cover all its costs – and taxpayers are on the hook for the difference.

Moreover, the government makes it illegal for anyone else to put anything into your mail box, even though you bought the mail box and it is your property. That means you don’t have the option to have some other private company deliver your mail.

In India, when private companies like Federal Express and United Parcel Service were allowed to deliver mail, the amount of mail delivered by that country’s post offices was cut in half between 2000 and 2005.

What should be the fate of the Postal Service in the United States? In a sense, no one really knows. Nor is there any reason why they should.

Thomas Sowell is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institute and author of The Housing Boom and Bust.