

KHSD's quest for PR is just lipstick on a pig

Lois Henry

OK. Maybe it's all on the up and up. But it looks more like either KHSD used taxpayer money to try to influence the bond election or it spent taxpayer money on PR that its own trustees say was worthless.

Really, Chad? "Our PR sucks."

That was Kern High School District Trustee Chad Vegas' summation after an open battle Monday night with fellow Trustee Jeff Flores over whether to approve a nearly \$380,000 contract with Providence Strategic Consulting to, essentially, soft focus the district's image.

Aside from the inappropriate language from a supposed grownup, it's beyond ludicrous that Vegas and/or this district thinks it

can gloss over its very real problems with — what? — a slick brochure? Some feel-good commercials? Maybe a snappy slogan? No.

The problem isn't a lack of "messaging." The problem is an appalling lack of leadership and focus.

And trustees have only themselves to blame.

They feel they've received an undo amount of bad press over the last year about the "chicken suit," guns on campus and whether to adhere to a federal mandate to let students choose which bathroom to use based on their own gender identification. (See sidebar)

"We do need a PR firm. We need support," whined Trustee Flores, who wasn't arguing against spending the \$380,000. He just wanted to give the money to a different firm. He later decided against hiring a PR firm at all.



LOIS HENRY ONLINE

Read archived columns by Lois Henry at Bakersfield.com/henry. Lois Henry appears on "First Look with Scott Cox" every Wednesday on KERN 1180 AM and 96.1 FM from 9 to 10 a.m. The show is also broadcast live on www.bakersfield.com. You can get your 2 cents in by calling 842-KERN.

Meanwhile, KHSD board Chairman Mike Williams revved up the old saw about how the media focuses on the negative.

Oh brother.

Guys, here's some free advice: If you think the press is gunning for you, stop giving us bullets.

Speaking of which, this whole PR issue is now bringing up serious questions about whether the district crossed the line by possibly spending taxpayer money to influence

voters on its upcoming \$280 million bond measure.

Back in March, KHSD awarded a \$70,000 no bid (that means no one else got a chance to vie for the job) contract to Providence for "public outreach and strategic communication."

It says right at the top of the contract, in big, bold letters, that the agreement does not include any work regarding the district's bond measure.

It was only for Providence to develop a "message" for the district, do "public presentations" and "coordinate public information."

OK, except a couple of things.

First, the district already pays someone nearly \$98,000 to do exactly what's listed in that contract.

Second, if we take the "this isn't about the bond" bit at face value, it means Providence has already been doing PR for the district for

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Frazier Park Fiesta Days



PHOTOS BY CASEY CHRISTIE THE CALIFORNIAN

ABOVE: Frazier Mountain High School students in the Law Enforcement Leadership Academy lead the way as the flag bearers during the Fiesta Days Parade in Frazier Park.

RIGHT: Courtney Ann Peterson dressed as Snow White gets ready for Saturday's Fiesta Days Parade in Frazier Park.

BELOW: The 2016 Fiesta Days Queen and her court ride in style, Saturday, in Frazier Park along the Fiesta Days Parade route.



ABOVE: Smokey Bear and a helper ride on top of a U.S. Forest Service fire vehicle in the Fiesta Days Parade, Saturday, in Frazier Park.



LEFT: Horses, cheerleaders and law enforcement personnel are all participating in the parade, Saturday, in Frazier Park.

Local MADD now has advisory board in efforts to fight DUI

BY JASON KOTOWSKI
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For more than a decade, Carla Pearson has essentially done it all for the local chapter of Mothers Against Drunk Driving.

She comforts the families of victims of drunken drivers and accompanies them to court proceedings. She runs court-ordered panels where DUI offenders listen to the relatives of those who have been killed or injured.

And she has done her best to promote MADD and alert the community that drunken driving

is an epidemic in Kern County. Pearson has finally received

some long-awaited help.

An advisory committee composed of various community leaders was formed this year to determine how best to implement programs and services, increase awareness of drunken driving in Kern County and raise money to accomplish its



Pearson

goals.

The committee frees up Pearson to spend more time in court with families impacted by drunken drivers.

"It's nice to have community partners to support this cause," Pearson said. "When

more people out there are aware of this problem in the community, that's when we'll really slow it



Barrientos

down and say 'enough's enough.'"

The new board is MADD's latest addition following the formation of a planning committee three years ago to oversee the Walk Like MADD & MADD Dash 5k fundraiser, which has raised more than \$100,000 since 2014. The committee meets monthly to discuss how best to make the fundraiser, MADD's annual flagship event, a success.

Planning Committee Chairman Jorge Barrientos, spokesman for the law firm of Chain Cohn Stiles, said one of its attorneys was approached by Pearson three


years ago to form a committee for the event. Pearson knew the firm represented victims of drunken driving crashes in civil cases and believed it would be a good fit.

The first Walk Like MADD event in 2014 raised \$50,000, double what organizers had expected. All the money raised stays in Kern County, funding MADD's programs, helping victims or victims' families on an emergency basis, and paying Pearson's salary.

"From there it just kind of snowballed," Barrientos said.


MADD National noticed those

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State / Local

Climate retreat? Legislature could ditch emissions plan

BY LAUREL ROSENHALL
CALmatters

Gov. Jerry Brown has taken the national stage to tout California's fight against global warming, telling cheering throngs at the Democratic National Convention that the state has "the toughest climate laws in the country." Yet inside the state Capitol, the fate of the policy's centerpiece — legislation to drastically reduce greenhouse gas emissions — is in peril.

One ominous sign: Brown on Thursday opened a fundraising committee, taking the first step toward putting an environmental initiative on the 2018 ballot in case the bill fails in the Legislature.

Failure was already a looming threat, with Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon saying earlier in the week that "it's not imperative" the bill clear his house this year.

"We just want to make sure that if we're going to set something up for the long term, that we get it right," said Rendon, D-Paramount, who has a background as an environmentalist but rose to speaker this year with support from a powerful bloc of business-friendly Democrats.

Senate Bill 32 had been shaping up as the biggest fight lawmakers faced in what remains of the legislative year. It pits environmentalist Democrats, mostly from the state's more prosperous coastal areas, against Democrats and Republicans from struggling inland areas who side with oil companies and other businesses, and whose constituents could be harder hit by rising energy prices.

The bill, which sets ambitious targets to cut planet-warming emissions by 2030, faces a critical deadline with the Legislature set to wrap up for the year on Aug. 31. Brown's office expressed support for the bill's goal while signaling that it might not get done this month.

"We are going to extend our climate goals and cap-and-trade program — one way or another," Brown aide



Gov. Jerry Brown delivers a speech during a meeting at the U.S. Center during the World Climate Change Conference 2015 at Le Bourget, near Paris, France, Dec. 8, 2015.

Nancy McFadden wrote in a statement. "The governor will continue working with the Legislature to get this done this year, next year or on the ballot in 2018."

A pioneering agenda

Sen. Fran Pavley — the Agoura Hills Democrat widely regarded as an environmental champion — authored SB 32 to build on a pioneering climate change agenda the Legislature enacted a decade ago, when it passed her Assembly Bill 32. That bill set targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 2020 and led to California's cap-and-trade system, which limits how much climate-warming gas businesses can emit while allowing them to buy and sell permits to pollute.

Pavley, now serving her last year in the Legislature, wants to extend the approach further into the future. But the Legislature has changed a lot since her earlier bill passed in 2006 — no one currently in the Assembly was in office then — and the lower house rejected SB 32 last year amid intense lobbying by the oil industry.

Failure again this month would indicate a major

about-face for the California Legislature, reversing course on the environmental leadership role that Brown routinely boasts of in national and international appearances. It would also mark defeat for Pavley, a maverick in the war on global warming who is leaving the Capitol because of term limits.

"It's really not about me," she said earlier in the week, but about the Legislature's commitment to keep combatting climate change.

"This should be easier to pass this year than it was 10 years ago, because now we can show that putting a cap on emissions and rolling it back does send signals for investment (in clean energy businesses). And we're seeing those new jobs here in California. We have success stories to tell but the challenge has been that the Assembly, of course, hasn't been paying close attention because they weren't here."

Her effort is backed by a big advertising push from environmental groups. NextGen Climate, headed by San Francisco billionaire Tom Steyer, is spending \$1.2 million to air television ads around the state criticizing oil companies for "trying to weaken our clean air laws."

The California League of Conservation Voters has launched a social media campaign urging voters to contact Democrats who helped defeat SB 32 last year.

"We saw what happened last year," said spokeswoman Jenesse Miller, "so this year going in we knew we were going to have to ask those lawmakers to do the right thing and vote the way their constituents want."

Recent polling found that a majority of Californians support reducing greenhouse gas emissions, even if it means paying more for gas and electricity.

But businesses that use lots of electricity say their costs have already gone up too much — and they fear SB 32 will trigger continual increases without enough oversight from legislators.

"When we're moving from 2020 to 2030, we need to understand what the policies are going to be that will be available to be used," said Dorothy Rothrock, president of the California Manufacturers and Technology Association, which opposes the bill. "With simply a goal with nothing else attached to it, it's throwing it all over to (the Air Resources Board) to

do whatever they want to do."

A plan B

That board, largely made up of Brown appointees and beyond the Legislature's control, is already at work on a Plan B — drafting rules that could act as a back-up for Brown's environmental agenda in case SB 32 withers. But environmentalists want the state's climate policy to have the political backing of the Legislature, knowing that it's hard to reverse a law.

If the policy is carried out simply as the go-it-alone work of a governor who will leave office in two years, it could be undone, or face a legal challenge.

And the board's work to require emissions cuts and continue cap and trade — along with a Chamber of Commerce lawsuit asserting that cap and trade is an illegal tax — could also stymie climate policy action in the Legislature.

Dean Florez, a former state lawmaker from Shafter who now sits on the air board, said he's talked to lawmakers who feel less pressure to vote for a controversial bill because the governor is pursuing his agenda without them.

"They are 'sitting pretty' because they can say the governor has spoken and the courts will ultimately decide and thus there's no hurry to act on SB 32 now," Florez said by text message.

These Democrats "can have their cake and eat it too," he wrote. "They get to say they are with the governor AND with the oil companies."

Thursday's statement from Brown's aide emphasized California's leading role in curbing carbon pollution and "our dangerous addiction to oil."

"That's why we can't buy into the fallacy that a vote on any single measure over the next 27 days will make or break our climate agenda. We will not play into the hands of oil companies by telegraphing our strategy or settle for measures that weaken, undermine or

diminish our world-leading climate programs," McFadden wrote.

Pavley was not available to comment following the announcement from Brown's office. Earlier this summer she had been trying to rescue her bill by working with new allies. One of those is Assemblyman Eduardo Garcia, a Coachella Democrat who did not support SB 32 last year. The two got to know each other during the global climate negotiations in Paris last year.

Now, Garcia is carrying a bill to give legislators more oversight of the Air Resources Board, and it is linked to Pavley's emissions reductions bill — each one can only pass if the other one does, too. The alliance illustrates how Pavley is working to win over previous opponents, particularly Democrats who represent people in struggling inland areas who could be hit harder by rising gas and electricity prices.

"The goal is to be more encompassing of California's economically disadvantaged communities," Garcia said of his bill. "I think it is a piece of the puzzle in order to get people closer to supporting Senate Bill 32."

Another puzzle piece: money.

Assemblyman Jim Cooper, an Elk Grove Democrat who leads the caucus of moderate Democrats, argues that too many incentives for solar panels and electric vehicles have gone to California's wealthy enclaves. "Take care of the poor people first," he said.

Democrats who objected to SB 32 last year could be persuadable if, say, their districts get new money for environmental projects. And it just so happens the state is sitting on \$1.4 billion from cap-and-trade auctions — money that legally must be spent on projects that reduce emissions.

CALmatters is a non-profit journalism venture dedicated to exploring state policy and politics. For more stories by Laurel Rosenhall, go to calmatters.org/newsanalysis.

HENRY

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several months.

Annnnnnd, according to Vegas, "Our PR sucks."

If so, why hire Providence for nearly six times the money for more sucky PR?

Oh, and then there's this from the March 7 meeting when that \$70,000 contract was awarded.

Trustee Bryan Batey told an audience member who

was upset the contract wasn't put out to bid that he had recommended Providence partly because its owner, Tracy Leach, "is active in the local business community and oil industry and I thought it was a positive outreach to industry and people who would be paying big portions of the bond if that ever happened."

Hmmm.

A contract that supposedly has nothing to do with the bond, given to a person

specifically because of her ability to reach out to those people who would be paying for the bond.

Even Gillette couldn't give a closer shave than that. Maybe it's all on the up and up.

But from here, it looks more like either KHSD used taxpayer money to try to influence the bond election or it spent taxpayer money on PR that its own trustees say was worthless.

Which is it?

I won't hold my breath for an answer.

I will just say this: rather than hiring someone to try to make their doo doo smell pretty, KHSD trustees should just stop with the doo doo.

Opinions expressed in this column are those of Lois Henry. Her column runs Wednesdays and Sundays. Comment at <http://www.bakersfield.com>, call her at 395-7373 or email lhenry@bakersfield.com.

SHAMED INTO IT?

Also at Monday night's meeting, it almost seemed as if Trustee Chad Vegas was saying the only reason the proposed \$380,000 contract went out to bid at all was because of the conflict of interest thing. Vegas' nephew works for Providence, which The Californian noted in March as a possible conflict. Vegas pooh poohed the conflict but promised he'd recuse himself from any action or discussion on contracts with Providence. A promise he promptly broke during his fight with Trustee Jeff Flores Monday night. Anyhow, Vegas went on in a rambling statement to say this (lightly edited for space): "I don't remember the process, but we don't go out to RFP for every single thing we do at the KHSD...Then because of some articles floated, some ridiculous articles floated in the paper because of a claim of — sorry Harold (Pierce). I love your writing, Harold, but this piece was

terrible, about a conflict of interest stuff. I mean you're my favorite Californian writer. But this piece, I thought, 'Wow, he's missing the boat on this one' — that some ridiculous charge of conflict of interest was floated out there...so now we go to RFP on the process, somehow I supposed from an administrator making a request, that one of the board members sit through the RFP process you ended up sitting through it and that's great but I come back to the fact that in 12 years of experience I have yet to see a board member, including myself, and I don't think anybody's questioned the administration the last 12 years more than I have, and I've yet to see a board member come into a board room and be at odds to staff recommendation to say a staff is recommending an anemic company." Well, that certainly clears things up.

LITANY OF BAD PRESS

The chicken suit

The district's insurance carrier settled a civil suit mid-trial in June, awarding \$10.5 million to Mitch Carter. The former Bakersfield High School student wore a chicken costume to mock an opposing school's mascot and became the victim of a violent dog pile during a pep rally gone wrong. The story of Carter's brain injury, including photographs of

Carter's high-profile attorney, Nicholas Rowley, donning a chicken suit during closing arguments, received international media attention. Beyond the settlement, the autonomy of KHSD's police force, which investigated the incident, was called into question after it was revealed at trial that administrators were taking witness statements and not sharing them with officers. District lawyers attempted to put a gag order on anyone involved in the case and have media barred from

the court proceedings. A judge denied that request.

Guns in classrooms

The same week the chicken suit story broke, trustees voted to allow concealed carry weapon permit holders to tote guns on campus, despite heated opposition from safety advocates. Trustees are expected to decide whether to allow school employees to carry firearms during a September board meeting.

Bathroom questions

Before the guns, trustees

took up the issue of whether to allow individuals identifying as transgender to use the bathroom of their choice, as federal guidelines now dictate. When The Californian asked Trustee Chad Vegas about transgender bathroom use being a civil rights issue, he called it "stupid" and "laughable on its face" after vowing to violate any state law violating his religious conscience. He later decided not to run for reelection so he wouldn't have to uphold those laws.

MADD

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numbers, and recommended an advisory board be formed for the Bakersfield chapter. Those who joined work in law enforcement, health care, a school district, credit union and the District Attorney's office.

Prosecutor Brandon Stallings, the board's chairman, said he got to know Pearson through handling a number of misdemeanor DUI cases, and participating in DUI checkpoints and MADD events.



Stallings

"Out of that, we began talking about having an advisory board in this area to pull in individuals in the community to work together in eradicating DUI deaths and, really, DUI cases," Stallings said.

Much work remains to accomplish that goal. According to D.A.'s office statistics, there were 4,223 DUIs in Kern County last year, just under the 4,293 in 2014. Since 2009 there have been at least 4,061 DUIs every year in the county, with a high of 4,939 in 2011.

Since 2000, the deadliest year for DUI-related crashes countywide was 2006. Fifteen people were killed that year.

Thirteen people died in DUI-related crashes in 2013, 14 in 2014 and 10 last year, according to the statis-

tics. And the grim toll continues this year. Most recently, a 30-year-old man is charged with second-degree murder in an alleged drunk-driving crash Tuesday that killed an 81-year-old man.

In combating these stats, the advisory board is trying to reach out to teens by planning events at schools where students will learn how their actions can impact their lives — and the lives of others. One program, described by Stallings as an "immersive" experience, takes the school through a DUI death.

A mock funeral is held for a student "killed" in a drunken driving crash, and the school is taken through an investigation and taught the consequences of driving

while impaired. It's hoped the students will take note and avoid bad decisions in the future.

Stallings said the board also plans to reach out to segments of the community that have historically been ignored. Public service announcements will be done in both English and Spanish, and the board is seeking to partner with local media in raising awareness of Kern's DUI problem.

Those efforts free up Pearson, well known in the D.A.'s office, to be by the side of those in mourning. Well-versed in the law regarding drunken driving offenses, she acts as families' eyes and ears during court proceedings, explaining what's happening during each step of the legal

process.

Pearson, stepmother of Adam Pierce, 23, killed by a drunken driver in a 2002 crash, was instrumental in pushing a law requiring drunken drivers to sign a statement that they are aware they can be charged with murder if they drive drunk and kill someone.

"The pain never goes away," Pearson said. "It never even dulls. It's just there every day." Deputy District Attorney Jim Simson, who has handled a number of cases resulting in murder convictions for fatal DUI crashes, said there's the immediate impact of the victim's death, then the ripple effect that comes afterward as everyone who knew and loved that person copes with the loss. Those people

are never the same.

"You really can't overstate it," Simson said of the impact DUI crashes have had locally. "It's a disastrous problem."

Pearson said she wants to thank everyone who has volunteered for the planning committee and advisory board, law enforcement, prosecutors and everyone involved in the efforts to stop drunken driving.

"Until it affects you, you really don't know that it's a problem," she said. "I don't want it to affect more families."

This year's Walk Like MADD event is scheduled from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. Sept. 24 at the Park at River Walk. To register or donate, go to www.walklikemadd.org, and click on the link for Bakersfield's walk.