

STATE

# How California lawmakers are trying to speed up spending on voter-approved climate projects

BY NADIA LATHAN  
CalMatters

A Democratic lawmaker is pushing a proposal to speed up \$10 billion in funding for climate programs more than a year after voters approved Proposition 4, the state's biggest investment yet to combat climate change.

Assemblymember David Alvarez of Chula Vista introduced Assembly Bill 35 to cut certain regulations tied to Prop. 4 to more quickly disburse the billions of dollars voters approved for water improvements, wildfire and drought preparedness plans.

The bill, which advanced from the Assembly Appropriations Committee Thursday, would exempt Prop. 4 funding from review under the Administrative Procedure Act, which dictates how state agencies follow rules and regulations and can cause lengthy delays in implementing programs.

California voters have approved a slew of multibillion-dollar bonds over the past two decades, some of which have faced long delays from regulatory obstacles that balloon costs. Voters in 2014 approved Proposition 1, allocating \$1 billion for a water storage project in the Sacramento Valley that remains under construction. A proposal to speed up building high-speed rail by streamlining permitting failed in the Legislature last year despite voter approval of the \$10 billion bond to construct it nearly two decades ago.

For the environment bond, the largest portion of the money, \$3.8 billion, has been approved to go toward updating drinking water systems and drought resistance.

Alvarez has said his bill is a priority for addressing sewage pollution in the Tijuana River, which affects his district along the U.S.-Mexico border, and could provide as much

as \$30 million for cleanup projects near the river. The legislation could also help speed funding of other climate projects by 12 to 18 months.

"The exemption is not new or unprecedented," Alvarez said. "The urgency is especially real in my district where communities have endured years of sewage pollution."

The bill is supported by local governments and environmental groups such as the Wilderness Society and National Audubon Society. There is no formal opposition.

Opponents of the climate bond at the time criticized the amount of debt taxpayers would take on. They also cited likely project delays and a lack of accountability about where the money would go. It is expected to cost taxpayers \$16 billion over 40 years to pay off, according to a legislative analysis.

Last year, lawmakers allocated \$250 million from the \$10 billion bond toward unrelated projects in

their districts as the state faced a budget deficit and slashed social services and state positions. Some of those earmarks included \$50 million for a redwood trail in former Democratic Senate President Pro Tem Mike McGuire's Santa Rosa district and \$1 million for an interactive water exhibit at a Santa Barbara museum in the district of Democratic Sen. Monique Limón, who represents the area and currently leads the state Senate.

Voters approved Prop. 4 with the expectation it would quickly address climate-related issues and this bill would help accomplish that, Alvarez said at a committee hearing last week.

The Wildlife Conservation Board, one of the state agencies expected to receive funding from Prop. 4, had a quarter of its \$339 million allocation go toward additional earmarks for special projects in lawmakers' districts, like \$16 million to prevent

urban development on San Julian Ranch in the district of Santa Barbara Assemblymember Gregg Hart, a Democrat.

AB 35 would not affect the earmark lawmakers approved from the bond.

Senate Minority Leader Brian Jones, a San Diego Republican who led the opposition to Prop. 4 in 2024 and criticized its subsequent earmarks, is among 38 co-authors of the bill from both parties.

"It's my job to make sure San Diego participates in any of this type of funding," Jones said. "AB 35, in my opinion, is good government. Because its purpose is to eliminate delays and waste in getting these processes removed."

As many as nine projects could receive expedited funding for the river, where little action has been taken at the state level.

The bill awaits a floor vote in the Assembly next week.

the Patriots, Minnesota and Oakland before landing with the Eagles. He had 43 tackles, including seven sacks, and returned a fumble for a touchdown in two years with Philadelphia. He played 15 games for the Raiders in 1997.

Johnson later played in the Arena Football League for Orlando and Los Angeles. The L.A. native played collegiately at Texas Southern.

Investigators believe Johnson had been living at the encampment at the time of his death. Friends said Johnson had health issues later in life that contributed to his situation.

# Judge rules Trump administration must keep funding child care subsidies in five states for now

BY GEOFF MULVIHILL  
The Associated Press

A federal judge ruled Friday that President Donald Trump's administration must keep federal funds flowing to child care subsidies and other social service programs in five Democratic-controlled states at least for now.

The ruling Friday from U.S. District Judge Vernon Broderick extends by two weeks a temporary order issued earlier this month that blocked the federal government from holding back the money from California, Colorado, Illinois, Minnesota and New York. The initial temporary restraining order was to expire Friday.

Broderick said Friday that he would decide later whether the money is to remain in place while a challenge to cutting it off works its way through the courts.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services sent the five states notices in early January informing them it would require justifications for spending the money aimed at helping low-income families. It also said it would require more documentation, including the names and Social Security numbers of the beneficiaries of some of the programs.



Children watch television at ABC Learning Center in Minneapolis, Minn., Dec. 31.

for homeless families in New York City.

For TANF and the Social Services Block Grant, the request required the states to submit the data, including personal information of recipients beginning in 2022, with a deadline of Jan. 20.

Government lawyers said Friday that the department was working on more guidelines about what exactly was required before the initial restraining order was put in place.

Broderick asked whether the government picked the five states first and then did research into whether there were fraud claims there. Balachandran said she didn't know that either.

Broderick said he didn't understand why the government made it harder for the states to access money for the programs before any wrongdoing had been found.

"It just seems like the cart before the horse," he said.

The states, which all have Democratic governors, say the move was instead intended to damage Trump's political adversaries.

Around the same time as the actions aimed at the five states, the administration put up hurdles to Minnesota for even more federal dollars. It also began requesting all states to explain how they're using money in the child care program.

used that process.

They also say it's improper to freeze funding broadly because of potential fraud and that producing the data the government called for is an "impossible demand on an impossible timeline."

Jessica Ranucci, a lawyer in New York's attorney general's office arguing on behalf of the five states, told the judge that she was told only about a half-hour before the hearing that the government had been developing more information about what states needed to provide. That wasn't mentioned in the court filings, she said.

## THE PROGRAMS ARE INTENDED TO HELP LOW-INCOME FAMILIES

The programs impacted by the restrictions at the heart of this case are the Child Care and Development Fund, which subsidizes child care for 1.3 million children from low-income families nationwide; the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families program, which provides cash assistance and job training; and the Social Services Block Grant, a smaller fund that provides money for a variety of programs.

The states say that they receive a total of more than \$10 billion a year from those programs — and that the programs are essential for low-income and vulnerable families, including paying about half the cost of shelters

## THE ADMINISTRATION SAYS IT TOOK ACTION BECAUSE OF CONCERNS ABOUT FRAUD

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services said earlier this month that it was pausing the funding because it had "reason to believe" the states were granting benefits to people in the country illegally. At the time, it didn't explain why.

But in Friday's hearing, Mallika Balachandran, a federal government lawyer, said that the concerns were raised by media reports, though she told the judge she did not know which ones. Federal officials have previously cited a video by a right-wing influencer that claimed fraud by Minneapolis day care centers operated by people with Somali backgrounds.

## STATES CALL THE ACTION UNLAWFUL MANY TIMES OVER

In court papers last week, the states say what they describe as a funding freeze does not follow the law.

They say Congress created laws about how the administration can identify noncompliance or fraud by recipients of the money — and that the federal government hasn't

## THE ADMINISTRATION SAYS IT'S NOT A FREEZE

In a court filing this week, the administration objected to the states describing the action as a "funding freeze," even though the headline on the Department of Health and Human Services announcement was "HHS Freezes Child Care and Family Assistance Grants in Five States for Fraud Concerns."

Federal government lawyers said the states could get the money going forward if they provide the requested information and the federal government finds them to be in compliance with anti-fraud measures.

# Ex-NFL player killed at homeless encampment, medical examiner says

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LOS ANGELES — Former Philadelphia Eagles defensive lineman Kevin Johnson died from "blunt head trauma and stab wounds" at a homeless encampment, according to the medical examiner.

The Los Angeles County Medical Examiner said Johnson, 55, was pronounced dead Wednesday morning after being found unconscious. His death was ruled a homicide and is being investigated.

A fourth-round draft pick by New England in 1993, Johnson spent time with

the Patriots, Minnesota and Oakland before landing with the Eagles. He had 43 tackles, including seven sacks, and returned a fumble for a touchdown in two years with Philadelphia. He played 15 games for the Raiders in 1997.

Johnson later played in the Arena Football League for Orlando and Los Angeles. The L.A. native played collegiately at Texas Southern.

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Riders pass the California Tower in Balboa Park during a cycling race May 15, 2016, in San Diego.

# First-ever parking fees at Balboa Park in San Diego draw anger

BY DEBORAH BRENNAN  
CalMatters

For decades, parking lots at San Diego's Balboa Park were packed, with lines of drivers snaking through lanes in search of a rare open spot.

Last Saturday there were plenty of open spaces, and on Wednesday several lots were half empty, while people lined up behind kiosks to pay newly imposed parking fees.

This month the city of San Diego imposed the first parking fees for the century-old cultural site, provoking confusion and contempt. Museum directors reported that visitation dropped 20% immediately.

The negative impacts paid parking on Balboa Park have been immediate and they have been measurable," Jessica Hansen York, executive director of the Mingei Museum and president of the Balboa Park Cultural Partnership, which represents the park's museums, said at a press conference Wednesday. "Our visitors are feeling it and our cultural institutions and our museums are feeling it across the park."

San Diego Mayor Todd Gloria has said the parking fees will provide stable revenue for the park and its museums, and help close a city budget gap of roughly \$300 million this fiscal year and \$110 million next year.

"Mayor Gloria, with the support of the city council, made the difficult decision to put the program in motion last year to create a dedicated source of funding so that Balboa Park, the city's crown jewel, remains

a special space for future generations," Dave Bolland, a spokesman for Gloria, said in a statement to CalMatters. "We understand this is a major change, but it is a necessary one."

## INSTANT BACKLASH

The parking program got off to a rocky start. The city's current estimates for parking revenue this year are now about a quarter of its original goal. Meanwhile museum directors warn that lost admission fees could far outweigh the gains, as the fees hinder access to the park.

"I think we've always looked at parks of our city and region as a little more sacred than a way to balance the budget," said Jim Kidrick, president and CEO of San Diego Air & Space Museum. Even free days took a hit. On Tuesdays the park offers free admission to select museums for San Diego County residents. This month, participation dropped 25% compared to January last year, making it the lowest "Free Tuesdays" attendance in a decade, said Judy Gradwohl, president and CEO of the San Diego Natural History Museum.

Park staff and volunteers are exempt from fees, but they have to park in distant lots. Museum officials said that's a safety issue for staff who work nights and a burden to volunteers.

"My volunteers are almost exclusively senior citizens, and they bring trains and tools and everything that they use daily to operate the layouts," said Michael Warburton, executive director of the Model Railroad Museum.

"It's a challenge for them to bring all these things, and then find a place to park."

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