

FREE

THURSDAY, APRIL 18, 2002

Volume 1, Issue 135

Santa Monica Daily Press

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School district facing serious financial troubles

Voters may be asked to increase parcel taxes by 250 percent over the next three years.

BY ANDREW H. FIXMER

Daily Press Staff Writer

Major tax hikes, lay-offs and program cuts loom for a school district reeling from statewide budget cuts.

And the board that oversees the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District will have to make some difficult decisions on how to bail the school system out.

In a memo to school board members Wednesday, Superintendent John Deasy provided details about how

to make up for the \$5 million deficit the district is facing over the next two years.

Deasy recommends a combination of budget reductions, tax increases and contributions from Santa Monica and Malibu, the two cities that make up the district.

According to Deasy's plan, property owners would be asked on the November ballot to gradually increase their taxes by 250 percent over the next three years. The current tax of \$101.14 would be increased to \$360 by 2006.

The district also would ask Santa Monica to increase its annual contribution to the school district from \$3 million to \$5 million. Malibu would be asked to increase its from \$27,000 to \$250,000. However, the school district may not get extra help from Santa Monica since it's facing a \$8.8 million shortfall in sales tax revenue this year.

"Failure to obtain the additional revenues suggested

in this memo will prove to be the whole-scale elimination of programs," Deasy wrote.

In addition to tax increases, Deasy said the school board still must make budget cuts and enact a hiring freeze and phase out some non-educational faculty over the next two years.

"Regardless of which option you choose, you will face budget reductions in the next two years," he wrote. "Our reduction strategy should be multi-faceted, which includes both revenue enhancement and budget reductions."

Deasy wrote another proposal that would cut \$4.3 million from next year's budget, including eliminating about 30 positions throughout the district. Travel for athletics and music programs would be eliminated.

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Big business focuses on private jets since Sept. 11



Carolyn Sackariason/Daily Press
Merv Griffin keeps his corporate jet at a hangar in Santa Monica, which has become a mecca for executives and their private planes.

Increased trend puts added pressure on small airports like Santa Monica

By staff and wire reports

In the wake of Sept. 11, there has been a surge of people flying privately, adding pressure to Santa Monica Airport.

Air charter traffic is one of the fastest growing segments of business aviation. But even more than charter air traffic, fractional ownership jets, which are planes owned by multiple

people, has increased more than 50 percent each year for the past three years, according to airport officials.

There used to be between four and six fractional jets taking off each day. Now about 17 such jets take off every day.

"A lot of corporations fly out of here," said Santa Monica Airport Manager Bob Trimborn. "From our perspective, more fractional ownership jets are being flown more than ever before."

Santa Monica is the busiest municipal airport in California, said resident Neil Cross, who watched several corporate jets take off and

See JETS, page 5

Pair found guilty of phony tax deductions

By The Associated Press

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — Two tax consultants accused of telling clients to deduct cat care as "rodent control" and to call a German shepherd a "mobile security system" were sent to prison Wednesday.

Donald Stuart Fletcher, 67, of La Honda, Calif., was convicted last year of conspiracy and other charges. U.S. District Judge Stephen Reasoner sentenced him to nearly six years in prison, fined him \$50,000 and ordered him to repay the government \$167,761.

He is already serving a 6 1/2-year prison sentence handed down in Montana.

"Any person of average intelligence should have known there was something not right about this," the judge said.

William Spencer Webber, 54, of Santa Cruz, Calif., pleaded guilty in the case and testified against Fletcher. The judge sentenced him to a year in prison on the Arkansas and Montana charges and fined him \$5,000.

"I'm an old hippie. Money has never been of value to me," Webber said in court, on the verge of tears.

BY ANDREW H. FIXMER

Daily Press Staff Writer

Many of the city's 150 board and commission members may have been flying blind when conducting the public's business.

But not anymore. Members of Santa Monica's 17 boards and commissions attended a Tuesday meeting to learn about what they can and cannot do in their volunteer roles as commission members and how to work better with the city's staff.

The majority of the meeting's time was spent discussing California's open meeting laws and rules of disclosure.

The city council called the meeting because some officials have questioned the conduct of some volunteer boards when it comes to conflicts of interest and public disclosure.

The Landmarks Commission and the Pier Restoration Corporation have come under attack by the public recently for conducting closed

meetings and having conflicts of interest.

After several questions directed toward City Attorney Marsha Moutrie and elected officials, it became clear that some volunteers didn't understand the state's complicated laws.

Conway Collis, the vice chairman of the Recreation and Parks Commission, asked if a member held a private dinner party and a discussion came up regarding commission business, could they still talk about it.

"Not unless you agendize the dinner party and make it a public meeting for anyone to attend," Moutrie said. "I know it's in conflict with how private business gets done, but you can't have a private get-together and discuss the public's business."

When it came to the nuances of the law, even council members had different opinions on what is acceptable.

Victor Ludwig, chairman of the Commission on Older Americans, wanted to know if his

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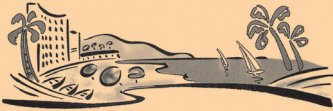

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★★★★ Deal with the basics. Confusion surrounds ideas and discussions. Make today's motto: Verify and Confirm. You won't be unhappy as a result. An investment looks good. Make sure it is everything that it promises. Seek out financial feedback. Tonight: Happy at home.

♉ TAURUS (April 20-May 20)
★★★★ Speak your mind loud and clear. Experiment with different ideas instead of walking at your usual conservative pace. You might discover that a more dynamic approach brings the results you desire. Others greet your inquiries with pleasure. Tonight: Chat with a friend.

♊ GEMINI (May 21-June 20)
★★★★ Your inner dialogue points you in the right direction. Sometimes you need to listen to your own advice. Use your strong money sense and you'll gain. Make it OK to spend a little to make a little. Others appreciate your efforts to make them relax. Tonight: Time for a financial review.

♋ CANCER (June 21-July 22)
★★★★ Listen more frequently to feedback. You make the best of a situation. You seem to be under a lucky star right now, making what you want happen. You also could be delighted by what could occur out of the blue. Tonight: Find your friends.

♌ LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)
★★★★ Trust your intuition when dealing with those who seem to impact your life. You'll discover that you naturally do and say the right thing. Unpredictability draws interesting responses. Carefully think about what someone is up to, rather than reacting. Tonight: Get plenty of sleep.

♍ VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)
★★★★ You hear news, which you reveal to friends or a group. You might be delighted by their feedback. Know that you're more in control than you realize. Work might take an unpredictable turn, but you land on your feet. Consider someone's financial input. Tonight: Start celebrating. Make up a reason if you don't have one.

♎ LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 22)
★★★★ Take charge rather than simply experiencing the effect. One-on-one relating takes you in a new direction. Listen to a friend or loved one. This person gives you powerful feedback that can only help your "public" image. Take charge now! Tonight: Be willing to work late.

♏ SCORPIO (Oct. 23-Nov. 21)
★★★★ Your perspective changes the more you listen to another's feedback. Your intentions might be well and good; however, others appear to be in the dominant role. Let everything happen without becoming a major player. Tonight: Follow the music.

♐ SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21)
★★★★ Work with another closely. You might not have this person's perspective, but you both share enormous optimism as a trait. Don't underestimate how this similarity could be drawing the two of you together. Be spontaneous with a child or loved one. Tonight: You're only answer should be "yes."

♑ CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19)
★★★★ Allow others to present their ideas. You might want to finish a project first, but in order to do so, you'll need to close your door. Count on being more social than you anticipated. Don't create a problem out of this before you need to. Tonight: Where the crowds are.

♒ AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)
★★★★ Your spontaneity could shock another, but on the other hand, you embody high energy and intellectual curiosity. You might be out of touch with a co-worker and his or her needs. Count on hearing about this. Make an adjustment. Tonight: Clean up your desk.

♓ PISCES (Feb. 19-March 20)
★★★★ You greet change in an inventive, dynamic manner. You won't take "no" for an answer. You'll find a way to make what you want happen. Your instincts lead you in a money matter. Maybe you should buy a lottery ticket. Tonight: Do something special for a friend.

QUOTE of the DAY

**"I am going to speak my mind
because I have nothing to lose."**
— S.I. Hayakawa

Santa Monica Daily Press

Published Monday through Saturday
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LOCAL



Decreased funding from state created district's budget crisis

BUDGET, from page 1

Deasy recommends that the school district reduce expenses for conferences and travel, consultants and capital improvements. Wages given to teachers for coaching sports or working with after-school groups also may be reduced or eliminated.

“Failure to obtain the additional revenues suggested in this memo will prove to be the whole-scale elimination of programs.”

— JOHN DEASY
SMMUSD Superintendent

The budget shortfall stems largely from a drastic decline in state funding to school districts throughout California — which has been hit hard from last year's energy crisis, the impact of the current business recession and

fallout from the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

The state decreased its cost of living adjustment in funding from 2.5 percent to 1.8 percent Tuesday, cutting an additional \$300,000 from the district's budget next year.

In addition to decreased funding, the school district is facing increased expenses. The school district is being asked for the first time in nearly a decade to pay into the retirement system. Deasy said health insurance costs and worker compensation insurance have also increased, while Federal aid from the 1994 Northridge Earthquake has run out.

Last year the state made mid-year budget reductions, and warned that more decreases in funding were coming. School districts across the state were warned to start making budget cuts.

“We have also been squeaking by with cuts/band-aids for years, thus we have failed to build any significant reserves,” Deasy wrote.

Another plan asks the school board to increase the number of students in the district because the state pays almost \$5,000 per student. The plan calls for increasing the student body by 600 students a year and making 25 percent of the needed budget cuts.

However, the school board recently enacted a policy eliminating approximately 300 students a year to relieve congested classrooms throughout the district.

Workshop teaches nuances of state's public meeting laws

BOARDS, from page 1

commission could endorse ballot measures and try to persuade residents of its opinion.

The answer from Moutrie was a resounding “maybe.” She said commissions can endorse measures when it sends resolutions to the city council for an official action, but it can't spend government time or money on persuading others.

Ludwig wanted to know if that meant he couldn't go to senior centers throughout the city and speak to groups advocating his commission's point of view.

Mayor Mike Feinstein said he thought it was OK as long as Ludwig is acting as a concerned citizen and uses his title as chairman for informational purposes.

Councilman Ken Genser believes that not only could Ludwig use his title when speaking to groups but also in campaign fliers and informational packets. Genser said people could differentiate between Ludwig and the commission as long as he said it was his own opinion

being expressed.

Moutrie said California law is so vague that both of them are right.

“You have to make sure the work you do for the public is done in public.”

— MARSHA MOUTRIE
Santa Monica City Attorney

“This must all sound like gibberish — I'm so sorry,” she said to Ludwig. “I know all you want to know is how to make something happen, but it's never quite that simple.”

E-mail correspondence was another gray area for

commission members.

Moutrie encouraged all board members not to send anything over e-mail and just provide the information during a public meeting.

Electronic messages about agenda items can't be sent to the majority of a board before the meeting or be forwarded to its members because the state's open meetings law prohibits it.

Genser said sending informational e-mail is OK, as long as board members tell their colleagues not to respond to the message.

However, Feinstein said if the e-mail was about a topic at an upcoming public meeting, it could be in violation of the state's open meeting law.

Even though board members can send an e-mail containing an informational item, Moutrie said it was better to make the announcement at a public meeting.

“You have to make sure the work you do for the public is done in public,” Moutrie said.

Balcony with a view



Carolyn Sackariason/Daily Press

A worker builds a balcony on a new apartment complex on Sixth Street.

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OPINION

Samohi rally celebrated Cesar Chavez, nothing more

Who is Richard Firth? That was the first question that came to me when I read his letter to the Santa Monica Daily Press. In his letter he states that I, "freely admit that the rally was for purely political/publicity purposes." He was obviously referring to the Cesar E. Chavez celebration that was organized by the Samohi community on April 11, 2002. I find it interesting that the Santa Monica Daily Press sent a reporter to cover this historic event but did not report to the community what actually occurred.

Instead of reporting the news in an objective and professional manner, the Santa Monica Daily Press chose to print a letter that was obviously written by someone who did not attend the event. Richard Firth never heard me utter any word regarding the purpose of the event he labels "disturbing." I have been misquoted many times but I have never had anyone write a letter to a paper and say that I said something when I never even talked to that person. Although dismayed at the lies espoused by Mr. Firth, I am more concerned about the censorship by omission that this paper has practiced.

Why would Andrew H. Fixmer attend an important and historic event, gather quotes from organizers and students, and

never publish a word about the event? Why would this paper substitute an article on an interesting and newsworthy event with a letter that favors one side of the conflict at the Double Tree Hotel? I would hate to think that the full page ad that was purchased by the management of the Double Tree Hotel against workers organizing was enough to guarantee the Daily Press' loyalty?

Since I have the opportunity to get this letter published, I want to take a few more lines to report on the event of April 11 and counter the lies Mr. Firth made in his letter. Students, teachers and community leaders planned the event to celebrate the vision and values of Cesar E. Chavez. As a former student body president and employee of Samohi I always work to provide meaningful opportunities for students to engage in activities that educate the heart and mind. Through two scheduled forums, students heard Dolores Huerta, a great American hero, discuss the importance of a workers union. Ms. Huerta talked to the students about the values of non-violence, compassion, unity, racial

equality and social justice. All of those who heard her speech were invited to attend an after school march in support of workers at the Double Tree Hotel. By marching in support of workers at the Double Tree Hotel, students, teachers and community leaders were given an opportunity to live the vision of Cesar E. Chavez and to practice their first amendment right in a peaceful demonstration. In essence, students were educated on how to be an American.

It is unacceptable for anyone to claim that administrators at Santa Monica High or any other adult involved in this event were acting irresponsibly. Many school district officials and other community leaders accompanied the students to insure that their safety was guaranteed. Each speaker before the march talked about the importance of non-violence and its practice. In a time of unprecedented violence in our schools the value and practice of non-violence is desperately needed, regardless of how it manifests itself.

In his letter Mr. Firth claims, "Lets not kid ourselves, this was not just a football game or any other school event. This was

clearly an organized labor rally and march with the potential for violent conflict." As a former co-captain of Samohi's football team I would argue that more students are at risk of playing football than attending a well organized, peaceful march. The fact remains that there has never been any violence in student-led demonstrations in Santa Monica's recent history. Many who attended the event on April 11 were more nervous about the more than 37 police officers in riot gear that were protecting the hotel on that day. By expecting violence when youth gather to exercise their rights as Americans we are sending the message that we do not trust them. As a result of the behavior of the Santa Monica Police Department, the Double Tree Hotel and the author of letters like the one I am responding to, the youth now know that they suffer from the same societal conditions that keep the workers from having dignity and respect in the workplace. In this new chapter the students taught the greatest lesson to those in power: injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. To be continued ...

(Oscar de la Torre is the founder and director of the Pico Youth and Family Center.)

Guest Commentary By Oscar de la Torre

Opinions expressed are those of the writer and do not necessarily reflect those of the Santa Monica Daily Press staff. Guest editorials from residents are encouraged, as are letters to the editor. Letters will be published on a space-available basis. It is our intention to publish all letters we receive, except those that are libelous or are unsigned. Preference will be given to those that are e-mailed to sack@smdp.com. All letters must include the author's name and telephone number for purposes of verification. Letters also may be mailed to our offices located at 530 Wilshire Boulevard, Suite 200, Santa Monica, 90401, or faxed to (310) 576-9913. All letters and guest editorials are subject to editing for space and content.

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Santa Monica's Daily Calendar



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MONSTERS BALL (R)
1:45 - 4:30 - 7:15 - 10:00

QUO VADIS
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LOCAL



Surge in corporate jet use rattles local airports

JETS, from page 1

land at the airport on Wednesday. Santa Monica Airport has become a hub for executives throughout Los Angeles.

"It used to be hooray for Hollywood, now it's hooray for Santa Monica," he said. "The executives can get in here so easily."

Company managers and wealthy individuals — those who typically fly first class — are seeking alternatives to commercial air travel, in which delays are frequent because of added security precautions in the aftermath of Sept. 11.

With the increase in scheduled airlines' delays and cancellations since the terrorist attacks, more corporations and managers are looking at jet ownership or charter services.

Business executives find fractional ownership jets more convenient because they can bypass congested airports that are bogged down with heightened security measures. It takes less time for people to travel and while they are flying, company executives can hold meetings on the small planes.

"Time is money for corporations and these airports provide better access and less hassles," Trimborn said.

Corporations also are finding value in investing in fractional ownership companies because they can get huge tax breaks from government.

A pair of Southern California entrepreneurs founded Air Group Inc. 22 years ago, which manages corporate jets and charters some of the planes when their owners aren't using them.

Air Group's founders and majority owners — Jon Winthrop, 47, chairman and chief executive, and Bob Christy, 72, now a company director who retired last year from daily operations — are seeing their brainchild expand in a booming industry.

But the story of that boom and their firm is not a simple one. It speaks volumes about changing patterns in air travel and about the pressures and pains faced by small firms in a marketplace that favors companies larger and stronger in capital.

Air Group is benefiting from the trend. The firm's revenue this year is expected to grow 26 percent to \$82 million, with about \$6 million in net profit, Winthrop says. The company, which has 164 employees, including 118 pilots, will increase its staff as it adds 10 jets, bringing its total to 50 jets under management.

Managing company planes at the Van Nuys Airport in the San Fernando Valley, for such nearby clients as Countrywide Credit Industries and Beverly Hills' International Lease Finance Corp., a division of American International Group, gives Air Group about 40 percent of its revenue in fees.

And it also gives it custody of the jets to charter. Air Group grew rapidly in the 1990s by chartering jets to such clients as Goldman, Sachs & Co., Bear, Stearns & Co. and UBS Warburg so their investment bankers could fly to three cities a day promoting new stock issues to local investment firms.

That business evaporated with the stock market bust of 2001. But chartering is coming back as companies find that their managers and salespeople no longer can get around to two and three cities a day on airlines.

Corporate jets fly out of smaller airports, such as Van Nuys and Teterboro, N.J., in the New York area, and so can operate with more flexibility. In addition, they can fly to smaller cities that now have only limited service from commercial airlines.

But Air Group is only a small bird in a very big sky.

A giant is emerging in the field of corporate jet management, air chartering and fractional ownership — in which time shares are sold on corporate jet aircraft.

Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway Inc. owns Executive Jet, a Woodbridge, N.J.-based firm that developed NetJets, an innovative operation that buys corporate jets and sells shares in them, promising time-share owners custom jet service on one hour's notice with any of its 350 planes.

NetJets is adding more than 100 jets a year, aiming to control a fleet of 1,000, which would be virtually a global airline of 9- to 18-seat planes.

Time sharing at rates of about \$4,500 to \$10,000 an hour, depending on size and range of jet, appeals to those in specialized occupations — such as golfer Nancy Lopez or baseball's Jason Giambi and basketball's Reggie Miller — who are customers of Marquis Jet Partners, a reseller of NetJets time shares.

Executive Jet, in another of its operations, is in the same business as Air Group — providing pilots, crew and maintenance of a company plane for an annual service fee. The management company normally puts the jets out on charter, earning some of the costs back for the owners.

Executive Jet already is bigger than Air Group, with 80 jets under management and "going up to 125 or 130 jets this year," says company spokesman Kevin Russell.

Where does all that leave Air Group? "We're a boutique firm; we can offer superior service," says Winthrop, a business graduate of USC who worked as a salesman for IBM Corp. before getting into aviation. The firm prides itself on running like the Marine Corps, because Christy — a former Marine lieutenant colonel, developed its operations.

As small firms must, Air Group keeps its rates low: \$2,500 an hour to charter a Cessna Citation, with a 3,000-mile range, to \$7,500 an hour for a Gulfstream V, with a 7,000-mile range. That's 12 percent to 33 percent less than Executive Jet's charges.

Winthrop and Christy drew up plans for the venture on a restaurant napkin in 1980. But they no longer are sole owners.

"We give stock options to employees who are 10 years with the firm," Winthrop explains, "so they can benefit if we go public or are acquired by another company."

Chartering works out cheaper than fractional ownership, Winthrop explains, because time-share owners must bear part of the capital cost of the airplane.

Keeping rates lower means that Air Group cannot earn the return on capital that a Buffett enterprise demands.

Still, Winthrop says, Air Group can prosper as a quality service firm with a niche in an expanding industry. He says Air Group will try to go public if revenue rises to \$110 million and the market is receptive. Or it could be acquired by a larger firm.

(Los Angeles Times reporter James Flanigan contributed to this report.)

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Canadian producers challenge new SAG rule

BY GARY GENTILE

AP Business Writer

LOS ANGELES — Canadian film and television producers say they will fight efforts by the Screen Actors Guild to enforce SAG contracts outside the United States.

SAG is scheduled on May 1 to globally extend its Rule One, which now requires its members working domestically to sign only union contracts. The main goal is to stem the migration of film and television production outside the country, most notably to Canada.

The Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists said Wednesday it would not cede jurisdiction to SAG for production in Canada, but would allow U.S. actors to work under contracts that enforce SAG contract provisions. Canadian actors, even if SAG members, would be expected to work under ACTRA contracts, the union said.

"SAG has every right to enforce its rules on its own membership," said Steve Waddell, ACTRA national executive director.

The Canadian Film & Television Production Association (CFTPA) challenged the authority of SAG to

enforce its jurisdiction outside the United States. The producers also objected to the Canadian actors' union support, saying it could undermine collective bargaining agreements it has with writers, directors and other unions.

"SAG has every right to enforce its rules on its own membership."

— STEVE WADELL

ACTRA national executive director

The producers said it was contemplating challenging the agreement as an unfair labor practice before the Canadian Labor Board.

The Canadian producers group said the SAG rule would increase the cost of production and likely drive much film and television production outside Canada — exactly the goal of SAG and other unions concerned about so-called runaway production.

"We're a sovereign nation and SAG's jurisdiction stops at the border," John Barrack, CFTPA national vice president, said Wednesday. "We find SAG's attempt to rule beyond its jurisdiction offensive, but we find more offensive ACTRA's decision to climb on board."

SAG contracts have higher minimum wage requirements than ACTRA agreements. They also require productions to give actors more "turnaround" time between the end of a day's work and the start of the next day.

That would make it more difficult and expensive for producers, especially when SAG and non-SAG actors work in the same production, Barrack said.

"It's not just about the wages, it's about the terms and conditions and that has huge ramifications for production," Barrack said.

One unintended consequence of Global Rule One could be that American production companies would hire even fewer SAG actors in order to trim costs.

"It's possible, although I think it would be unlikely," said Ilyanne Morden Kichaven, a SAG spokeswoman. "We still believe people use our members to sell their product and if people want a SAG member, they will still go after that SAG member."

Growth in transit ridership outpaces increases on highways

BY JONATHAN D. SALANT

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — More Americans are commuting on buses, subways and trains, new statistics show.

The American Public Transportation Association, the trade group for municipal transit agencies, reported Wednesday that mass transit systems carried 9.5 billion passengers last year, up 2 percent over the 9.3 billion trips reported a year ago.

At the same time, motorists drove 2.78 trillion miles in 2001, up 1 percent over the

2.75 trillion miles driven in 2000, Federal Highway Administration statistics show.

In California, the increase in transit use was nearly 6 percent.

"Americans want choice and freedom, and in places where transit service is improving, they are often choosing the bus or the train over their own car," said David Burwell, president of the Surface Transportation Policy Project, a coalition of public interest and professional organizations that supports alternatives to building new roads.

An official with The Road Information

Program, a research group financed by the construction industry, noted that most travel is still by car.

"The majority of surface transportation is taking place on our nation's highways," TRIP Executive Director William Wilkins said. "Both modes would be hurt if federal funding were cut."

President Bush's proposed budget for the fiscal year beginning Oct. 1 would cut federal highway funds by \$8.6 billion.

More people are riding the rails or trav-

eling by bus now than at any time since 1959, when 9.6 billion trips were recorded.

Transit officials said they are reaping the benefits of government investment in new routes and equipment. Los Angeles reported a 15 percent increase in ridership, while Denver had a 6.7 percent increase and the Washington area had an increase of 5.9 percent.

Between 1995 and 2001, mass transit ridership grew 22 percent, from 7.8 billion trips, while highway travel grew by 16 percent, from 2.4 trillion miles.

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NATIONAL



Government owns one vehicle for every three employees

BY LARRY MARGASAK

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — The government owns more cars and trucks than Hertz does after a buildup in the 1990s that left one vehicle for every three federal employees, a White House inventory shows.

The inventory, obtained by The Associated Press, shows the federal fleet includes 602,626 vehicles for 1.78 million workers, at a cost of \$2.29 billion a year.

"This is obviously the type of expenditure that will drive taxpayers crazy," said Tom Schatz, head of the budget watchdog group Citizens Against Government Waste.

The Bush White House is examining the massive fleet, with an eye toward reduction.

"One's first impression ... is that the numbers seem excessive in many cases and that significant reductions may be in order," White House Budget Director Mitchell Daniels Jr. wrote in a memo asking federal agencies for an explanation.

Daniels' Office of Management and Budget compiled the figures through the end of September 2000, the latest statistical period available.

At the Energy Department, there are 15,600 full-time employees and 16,351 vehicles. The department contends the number is misleading because some vehi-

"It's not a revelation that there are major management problems and waste problems in the federal government."

— MITCHELL DANIELS JR.
U.S. White House budget director

cles are used by the 100,000 workers of agency contractors.

The Agriculture Department had a ratio of one vehicle for every 2.4 people. Other ratios include a vehicle for every 2.7 workers at the Interior and Labor departments, and a car for every 3 Justice Department workers. The Defense Department has a vehicle for every 3.7 workers, a figure that does not include military vehicles.

The fleet is larger than that of Hertz, the largest car rental company in the world. In the past year Hertz has reported 525,000 vehicles in its worldwide inventory. Company officials there said that number was reduced after the economic slowdown following the Sept. 11 attacks.

Daniels said the review is part of an effort to crack down on waste in government.

"It's not a revelation that there are

major management problems and waste problems in the federal government," he said. "We're determined to get at it as soon as we can, no later than the budget submissions this fall."

Though the Energy Department feels its number of cars should be weighed in light of the large number of contract workers it uses, Secretary Spencer Abraham was nonetheless surprised at the size of the fleet and is looking for ways to reduce it, spokesman Alfonso Aguilar said.

He said the department has trucks, vans, ambulances and buses, and the vehicles are mostly at 31 sites away from Washington. Some are remote locations that use buses for transportation within a facility. The agency also transports unique items, including nuclear material.

Labor Department spokeswoman Sue Hensley said many agency vehicles are used

by inspectors who check workplace and mine safety, and enforce wage-and-hour laws. Two-thirds of the department staff works away from Washington, she said.

Justice Department spokesman Mark Corallo said the bulk of agency vehicles are driven by law enforcement officers from the Border Patrol, the FBI and the Drug Enforcement Administration.

Mark Pfeifle, spokesman for the Interior Department, said officials are studying ways to reduce the fleet but pointed out the agency has employees in 2,400 locations, manages 507 million acres and maintains the third largest law enforcement force in the government.

The Agriculture Department has 7,000 offices nationwide, many in rural areas and small communities, said spokeswoman Alisa Harrison. The agency also includes the Forest Service, which requires a diverse array of vehicles and a number of temporary workers, including firefighters.

Schatz, the government waste watchdog, said the fleet could be reduced by tightly regulating which federal workers receive a car and by changing government officials' attitude.

"It's easier to buy or lease a new car than figure out if you need one," he said.

Tax payments ease pressure on debt ceiling, Treasury says

BY LEIGH STROPE

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — A flood of income tax payments has helped ease pressure on the national debt ceiling and allowed the Treasury Department to begin restoring money shifted from pension accounts to avert default, officials said Wednesday.

Still, the Bush administration continued to press a deadlocked Congress to extend the government's authority to borrow because the \$5.95 trillion debt limit could be reached this summer.

"Why can't we stop this madness," Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill said at a hearing of a House Appropriations subcommittee. "We do not have a choice" but to raise the borrowing limit.

His testimony echoed past Treasury secretaries who have bemoaned how the process invariably gets entangled in politics and delayed. The administration wants a \$750 billion increase.

"Why we torture each other for six months is beyond me," O'Neill said.

O'Neill this month moved federal retirement funds into a noninterest-bearing account to free room for more borrowing. The juggling of federal retirement accounts has been done before in standoffs with Congress and has no effect on employees' retirement funds.

The money was moved back Tuesday and interest paid

after income tax payments began flowing into Treasury coffers after Monday's tax deadline.

Without the shifting of funds, the government technically would have been in default on the debt, something that never has happened before. That would cast a cloud over U.S. securities, considered the world's safest investment. It also would force the government to pay billions of dollars in higher interest payments on the national debt in the future.

Treasury officials warned that the accounting maneuvers taken to stay below the debt limit would be more difficult when the government approaches the ceiling again, possibly in June.

"You're going to have to raise the debt ceiling or you're going to have to find a new Treasury secretary, because I'm not going to go to jail because you failed to act and I have to take some extraordinary action that is unconstitutional. I'm not going to do that," O'Neill told Congress.

A \$750 billion increase by Congress should keep the government below the limit until September 2003.

The debt limit issue is more about politics than economics.

Some Democrats want to use the issue in November's election to help drive home their message that President Bush's \$1.35 trillion, 10-year tax cut last year was too generous and has pushed the country back

into deficit spending.

Republicans who control the House have lacked the votes to pass legislation increasing the debt limit because of opposition from conservatives, who are leery that it will lead to more spending.

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National Park Service wants visitors to take trash out when they go home

BY DAN NEPHIN

Associated Press Writer

PITTSBURGH — Visitors to four National Park Service sites in southwestern Pennsylvania will soon be taking something else home with their souvenirs — their garbage.

Beginning April 22, Earth Day, trash cans will be removed. Instead, park workers will give visitors garbage bags.

"We want to see this as an opportunity to educate the visitor," said

Mary Ellen Snyder, spokeswoman for Fort Necessity National Battlefield and Friendship Hill National Historic Site.

The sites — Fort Necessity, Friendship Hill, Allegheny Portage Railroad and Johnstown Flood National Memorial — spend about \$7,500 a year on garbage disposal and Snyder says they would rather use that money on preservation projects.

The move is also expected to eliminate overflowing trash cans that can stink and attract animals.

Several national park sites — including the Chesapeake & Ohio Canal National Historical Park in Maryland — and some state parks have already adopted the "Trash Free Park" program and Snyder believes the four sites will benefit from the advance publicity.

"We already have, I think, an educated audience," Snyder said.

Allegheny Portage and the Johnstown Flood memorial plan to offer posters explaining the program to the 180,000 to 200,000 people who visit each year.

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NATIONAL

Low inflation will keep the Fed from raising rates

BY MARTIN CRUTSINGER

AP Economics Writer

WASHINGTON — Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan said Wednesday the economy's future is looking brighter, and the central bank is in no rush to raise interest rates.

"There can be little doubt that prospects have brightened," Greenspan told Congress' Joint Economic Committee, sounding more upbeat than he had in early March during his last appearance on Capitol Hill.

Greenspan cautioned that risks persist that the fledgling recovery could falter unless solid consumer spending and business investment are robust in the months ahead.

"The strength of the economic expansion that is under way remains to be clarified," he said.

Greenspan said the Fed has the luxury of waiting to see how events unfold because, except for a jump in energy prices, inflation remains well behaved. There will be ample opportunity to adjust policy to fight inflation if necessary later on, he said.

The Fed chairman also let it be known that the federal funds rate, currently at a 40-year low of 1.75 percent, cannot remain at that level indefinitely with an expectation of keeping prices stable.

Analysts read Greenspan's remarks as a clear signal that the central bank is prepared to wait awhile before starting to boost interest rates. And, they say, even after the rate increases begin, they should be gradual quarter-point moves.

"The bottom line is it is going to be later rather than sooner before the Fed starts raising interest rates," said David Wyss, chief economist at Standard & Poor's in New York.

Wyss predicted the Fed would pass up the chance to raise

rates at its May 7 and June 25-26 meetings but probably would start a series of quarter-point moves at the Aug. 13 meeting.

"The bottom line is it is going to be later rather than sooner before the Fed starts raising interest rates."

— DAVID WYSS

Chief economist at Standard & Poor's

Some analysts said the central bank could delay for even longer, as long as inflation remains dormant.

"The Fed took a lot of heat the last time they used interest rate increases to slow the economy, and I think they are going to be very careful not to do anything to derail a recovery that is still on fairly shaky ground," said Neil Wolfson, head of KPMG Investment Consulting Group in New York.

The central bank last carried out a series of rate increases from June 1999 to May 2000, pushing the federal funds rate, the interest that banks charge each other, from 4.75 percent to 6.5 percent because of worries that tight labor markets would spark inflationary pressures.

The Fed reversed course in January 2001 with the start of an aggressive campaign to cut interest rates. The effort did not come in time to avert the country's first recession in a decade, although it was credited with helping make the

downturn milder by easing the shocks to the economy after the Sept. 11 terror attacks.

Normally, signals from Greenspan that the Fed was in no hurry to raise interest rates would bolster financial markets. Wednesday, however, investors were more focused on the Fed chief's continued misgivings about the sustainability of the economic rebound and mixed earnings reports. The Dow Jones industrial average lost 80.54 to end the day at 10,220.78.

"The markets are torn. They like the idea that there will be no immediate hike in interest rates. But Greenspan's statement about the uncertain economic future doesn't really support healthy increases in stocks," said Sung Won Sohn, chief economist at Wells Fargo in Minneapolis.

Greenspan rejected fears that the current rebound could become a jobless recovery with unemployment remaining stubbornly high as it did in the early years of expansion after the 1990-91 recession.

He said he believed the recovery would unfold like a two-stage rocket, with the first stage supplying the initial liftoff in the first quarter of this year with a big swing in inventory restocking by companies. For the rebound to be sustained, he said, it would have to be followed by a second stage of business and consumer spending.

Various committee members tried to get Greenspan to comment on Thursday's scheduled House vote to make President Bush's \$1.35 trillion 10-year tax cut permanent.

Greenspan said at some point over the next decade Congress would have to deal with the looming Social Security costs of the retirement of the baby boom generation. He also said he believed most businesses were operating under the assumption that last year's tax cut, due to end in 2011, would be made permanent, given the political pressures sure to come.

Intense lobbying precedes Senate Arctic drilling vote

BY H. JOSEF HEBERT

Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — Despite intense lobbying over oil drilling in an Arctic wildlife refuge, big oil companies largely have kept silent, their attention on exploration elsewhere.

The oil industry long has sought to drill for the billions of barrels of oil beneath the refuge in Alaska's northeastern cor-

ner. But drilling supporters complain privately that large oil companies have not pushed aggressively to open the site to development.

A Senate vote was expected Thursday on the future of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

"We have worked harder than anyone else...we've done as much as we can," insisted Red Cavaney, president of the American

Petroleum Institute, the companies' trade association. The refuge "is a very valuable resource," he said Wednesday.

But an industry insider, speaking on condition of anonymity, acknowledged that for many of the large companies, the refuge is only one place to find oil and that there are many fields around the world where development would

come more cheaply and with less political trouble.

In setting priorities, many companies have expressed more interest in other pro-industry provisions in the energy bill; for example, curtailing government regulations on how gasoline is blended for pollution control.

Still, the refuge has attracted lobbying for months as Republicans

sought for votes to overcome a threatened filibuster from Democrats and other opponents intent on keeping a drilling amendment out of the energy legislation.

Lobbyists for the Teamsters, working Senate corridors, tout the jobs that drilling would produce. Rival Alaska native groups have flown in from the North Slope to argue both

for and against drilling. The state of Alaska, which would get half the royalties from oil development, has poured millions of dollars into the pro-drilling effort. Environmentalists have bombarded Senate offices with e-mails challenging claims by the pro-drilling side.

Groups as diverse as military veterans and leading Jewish organizations have come to Capitol Hill to argue that the refuge's oil will reduce America's dependence on oil imported from the volatile Middle East.

In response, anti-drilling forces produced experts such as former CIA Director James Woolsey, who told reporters this week that drilling in the refuge would do little to enhance national energy security because America always will need Mid-east oil.

The most intense pro-drilling campaign has come from Alaska itself. Not only are the state's two senators leading the push for drilling, but the Alaska Legislature has contributed nearly \$5 million to the effort over the past two years.

Much of that money funds Arctic Power, a lobbying group whose sole purpose is to open the refuge.



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INTERNATIONAL



Powell ends peace mission without accord

BY BARRY SCHWEID
AP Diplomatic Writer

JERUSALEM — Secretary of State Colin Powell failed to get the cease-fire he sought as he ended his 10-day peace mission Wednesday, leaving Israel and the Palestinians mired in violence and recrimination.

Powell also was snubbed in Egypt as he returned home to report to President Bush. Still he pointed to what he called signs of progress, especially a promise by Israel to accelerate military withdrawal from the West Bank.

Prime Minister Ariel Sharon gave assurances of "real results in the next few days," Powell said. "Only with the end of the incursion and with the engagement in security talks can a cease-fire be achieved."

He admonished Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat anew to "decide as the rest of the world has decided, that terrorism must end." But U.S. suggestions before Powell's trip that the peace mission would be Arafat's last chance had vanished by journey's end.

"He holds the office of the presidency of the Palestinian Authority," Powell said at a news conference after his meeting with Arafat. "So whether one approves of that or disapproves it, or likes it or doesn't like it, it's a reality."

Bush, in a speech at the Virginia Military Institute, said Powell had made progress. He, too, urged Arafat to do more to stop violence.

"The Palestinian Authority must act — must act — on its words of condemnation of terror," Bush said.

The president will assemble his national security team Thursday to hear from Powell and discuss the possibility of a Mideast peace conference. Bush wants to be sure the idea makes sense before embracing it, said a senior administration official.

CIA Director George J. Tenet is considering going to the region next week, but no decision has been made, the official said. Bush and Powell also will discuss when Powell plans to return.

The United States hopes to "restart the clock" to conditions that were in place before the Passover bombing that killed 28 people in Netanya on March 27, with Israel getting a resumption of Tenet-led security talks and the Palestinians knowing that the political process is not far

behind, said the official, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Powell, after meeting with Arafat Wednesday, met in Cairo with Foreign Minister Ahmed Maher of Egypt and Foreign Minister Marwan Muasher of Jordan before heading home. Powell was supposed to see President Hosni Mubarak, but was told Mubarak was "indisposed," Powell said.

That rebuff came as some in the Arab world complained that Powell had not brought adequate pressure on Israel to end its offensive, which is designed to stop Palestinian militants from launching more suicide attacks.

Israel must leave the West Bank before Arab states comply with calls for a peace conference or a cease-fire, the Arabs said. "We explained to him (Powell) that any talk of political or security issues must be preceded by an Israeli withdrawal and an end to the Israeli threats of either attacking Arafat's compound or the Church of Nativity," Maher said.

Powell, who held talks with Arafat in the Ramallah office where the Palestinian leader is confined by Israeli tanks and troops, said: "He has a powerful voice and can be heard, so he should use his position of leadership and his powerful voice," to end terror.

Arafat saw Powell to the door of his battered headquarters after their two-hour meeting, but did not step outside. He then complained angrily to reporters about his confinement and appealed for international help.

"I have to ask the whole international world, I have to ask excellency President Bush, I have to ask the United Nations, is this acceptable that I can't go outside the door?" he said, his voice rising.

Just next door, Israeli gunners peeked through half-opened windows.

"They are returning," Arafat said, referring to Israel's latest surge into Palestinian areas, after Sharon had said he would withdraw Israeli troops within a week from all towns and villages except Ramallah and Bethlehem.

Bush, in his speech, repeated his call for Israel to continue withdrawing its troops from the West Bank but did not reiterate his former strong demand that it be immediate. Bush also called on Arab nations to "step up to their responsibilities."

"The Egyptians and Jordanians and



Hussein Hussein/Palestinian Authority

U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell, left, meets with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat at Arafat's headquarters in the West Bank town of Ramallah on Wednesday. In a two-hour meeting with Powell, Arafat demanded that the international community and the Bush administration work to break his isolation by the Israelis. Others are unidentified.

Saudis have helped in the wider war on terrorism and they must help confront terrorism in the Middle East," Bush said.

On the security front, Powell said the biggest problem was Israel's determination to arrest Palestinians in Ramallah accused of attacks on Israel. He said American diplomats would try to work something out between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

In the meantime, Powell said a cease-fire cannot be imposed while Israeli

troops remain in the West Bank.

Sharon adviser Dore Gold said Powell had not come away empty-handed, and faulted Palestinians for his visit's limited results.

"Secretary Powell goes away with a tangible Israeli timeline to withdraw its forces from Palestinian cities and bring the current operation to a close," Gold said. "Unfortunately, Yasser Arafat has not reciprocated, has not offered a meaningful cease-fire."

Venezuelans warned to forgive or lose democracy, more lives

BY JOHN RICE
Associated Press Writer

CARACAS, Venezuela — An unusually blunt Organization of American States chief warned embittered Venezuelans to talk to one another in the wake of a failed coup or risk the loss of their democracy — and their lives.

"This country has to learn from the traumatic events of last week," OAS chief Cesar Gaviria said Wednesday as he ended a fact-finding mission into the uprisings that overthrew President Hugo Chavez on Friday and brought him back to power on Sunday.

"Episodes such as those that occurred have enormous risks in human lives and in the preservation of institutions," Gaviria said.

Chavez, whose initial popularity in office allowed him to run roughshod over opponents, has admitted errors and appealed for the country to calmly retreat from violence.

Gaviria is to report his findings Thursday to the General Assembly of the Organization of American States. He declined to say what he might recommend.

"I think that if in the international community we are not able to do something, there is a risk — probably not

of another coup — but that social unrest will come again soon," Gaviria told foreign reporters.

He expressed alarm at the bitterness expressed both by Chavez's foes and friends after three years of growing confrontations that exploded over the weekend. At least 49 people died — some say far more — in massive street protests in the capital as soldiers first ousted Chavez, then brought him back. Both sides blame the other for most of the deaths.

"On both sides there is a theory that confrontation is inevitable, as if this is impossible to solve," Gaviria said. "Those theories lead to instability and war."

Pope John Paul II also appealed for Venezuelans "to leave aside all temptations for revenge or violence."

As the 1 million-member Confederation of Venezuelan Workers called for a referendum on whether the government should stay, the National Assembly began a bitter, partisan debate on the coup.

"Let us all resign and go to elections," urged opposition Congressman Julio Borges. "No more deaths!"

Loyalist deputies shouted "killer! killer!"

Chavez loyalists accused protesters of betraying the country on behalf of the United States, which has been skeptical of the populist president.

One political party has said it would not recognize Chavez as president, accusing him of breaking the constitution.

But the coup leaders' own temporary president, Pedro Carmona, had immediately abrogated the constitution and dismissed Congress and the courts.

A senior official in Washington said Wednesday that U.S. ambassador Charles Shapiro had warned Carmona not to dissolve the National Assembly.

Gaviria said Carmona's actions are "something that the countries of the Americas are not ready to accept."

He called on Venezuelans to accept the constitution and Chavez as president. He also implicitly criticized Chavez for packing the courts and legislatures with his supporters and for bringing the army deeply into political life. Gaviria said a balance of powers is crucial to democracy.

Chavez has promised that exports from the world's fourth-largest oil exporter would not be affected and has been seeking a new management for the state oil company, whose problems led to the protests last week.

An OPEC official said Wednesday that Chavez had offered the top oil post to OPEC secretary general Ali Rodriguez, who declined. Rodriguez did not immediately return calls for comment Wednesday.

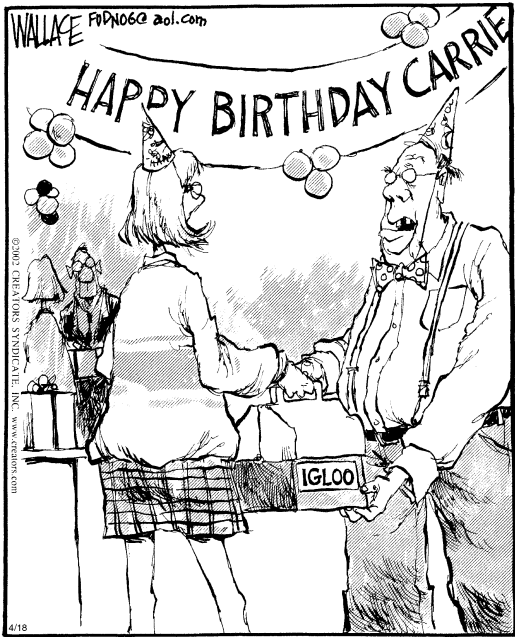


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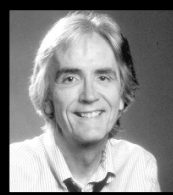
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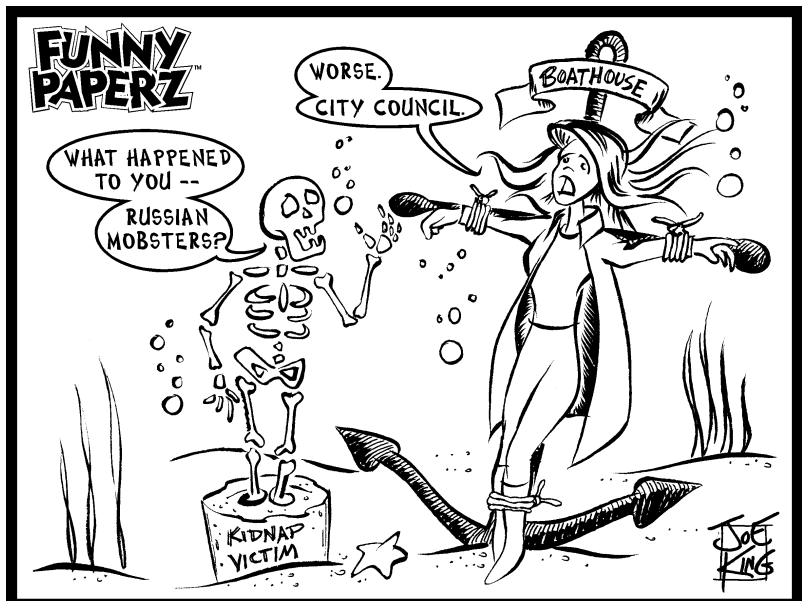


NEWS OF THE WEIRD

by Chuck Shepard

Student claims a 'tap' constitutes assault and battery

As a longstanding part of his lecture on "assault and battery," University of Virginia torts professor Kenneth Abraham said he gently taps the shoulder of a student at random in his class to illustrate the principle that even negligible unwanted contact can be costly if the victim is uniquely vulnerable in ways that no one could have expected. Indeed, Abraham did not know that a student he tapped recently, Marta Sanchez, had been raped a while back and that the tap apparently triggered fear and stress. In March, Sanchez filed a \$35,000 lawsuit against Abraham, claiming that the tap constituted assault and battery.



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BACK PAGE

Five planets visibly line up in rare celestial array

BY ANDREW BRIDGES

AP Science Writer

LOS ANGELES — The five brightest planets visible from Earth have lined up in plain sight to form a spectacular celestial array that won't be seen again until 2040.

Through the next four weeks, Jupiter, Mars, Mercury, Saturn and Venus will appear tightly clustered in the western sky, forming a knot of planets that can be viewed in the evening despite the glow of light-soaked cities.

"The five naked-eye planets are converging in one part of the sky and from now until mid-May you can see all five at one glance, which is pretty unusual," said John Mosley, an astronomer at the Griffith Observatory in Los Angeles.

Each evening, the alignment will assume different shapes, as the five planets continue on the orbital paths that take them around the sun. The planets orbit in the same plane, like grooves in a phonograph record, only at different distances.

Each planet also varies in the amount of time it takes to orbit the sun: Mercury zips around once every 88 days; Saturn takes more than 29 years; other three fall in between. At times the planets appear to cluster together.

Similar bunchings occur every 20 years or so, although they are not always visible. The last they were this visible was in 1940.

In May 2000, the five planets formed a tighter bunch, but were so close to the sun that they were washed out by its glare.

In 2004, they will appear together again in the night sky, but will be spread over a much wider area, said J. Kelly Beatty, executive editor of Sky & Telescope magazine. They won't be as easy to spy at a single glance again until 2040.

"This is the nature of the clockwork of the solar system," Beatty said. "We like to think of it as a way to

remind people there is a simple beauty in the heavens that doesn't require any special training to appreciate."

"This is the nature of the clockwork of the solar system."

— KELLY BEATTY

Sky & Telescope magazine, executive editor

Astronomers stress there is no astronomical significance to the pileup. It is, Beatty said, just a "pretty coincidence."

That hasn't stopped doomsayers in the past. In the months before the May 2000 lineup, some thought it foretold widespread catastrophe. No such disaster happened. In February 1954 B.C., a similar alignment led the Chinese to restart their calendar at year 0, Mosley said.

To view the planetary alignment, find a dark area and look west as twilight ends. Binoculars or a telescope are not needed.

The planets already are appearing together nightly, although they will be at their closest on May 14, when Jupiter will be high and bright in the sky. Below it, Venus will be paired with the crescent moon. Mars will lie below it, and Saturn below it. Farther down and to the right, Mercury will hug the horizon.

80-year-old woman sprays neighbor with pesticide, charged with battery

The Associated Press

PASADENA — An 80-year-old woman jailed last year for trying to run over a teen-age neighbor was arrested again, this time for allegedly spraying bug killer on another neighbor she considered a pest.

Dixie Carlene Granat of Altadena pleaded innocent Tuesday to the misdemeanor battery charge. Bail was set at \$50,000 and she was ordered back to Superior Court on

Monday for a hearing.

Granat was convicted on Nov. 14, 2001, of assault with a deadly weapon for trying to use her Suzuki Samarai to drive over a black youth walking near her home. Prosecutors had alleged she shouted racial epithets at the teen.

Last Friday, investigators said Granat approached a neighbor woman and sprayed Raid bug repellent in her face.

"The lady falsely accused me of

spraying her," Granat told Superior Court Judge C. Edward Simpson. The woman, who also uses the last names of Bailey and Aguilar, told the judge she has psychological problems.

"I'm bi-polar, bi-coastal and bi-a few other things," said the woman who brags of a storied life as a Vegas showgirl, actress, celebrity publicist, war correspondent and ally of late United Farm Workers union founder Cesar Chavez.

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