

LATEXTRA

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Fight over health agency

L.A. city and county officials oppose the initiative and wage a legal battle to knock it off the June ballot.

BY SEEMA MEHTA

City Hall and Los Angeles County elected leaders are warning that if voters pass a June ballot measure that forces the city to create its own health department, it will increase costs and erode essential services now provided by the county.

But the officials find themselves in a quandary: Although they vehemently oppose the measure, state law blocks them from publicly financing an opposition campaign.

"It's a real challenge," said Miguel Santana, the city's chief administrative officer. "We have a responsibility to lay out the facts as we understand them. Obviously, we're not going to campaign. That's inappropriate, not within our purview."

Michael Weinstein, president of the AIDS Healthcare Foundation, which created the proposal, contends that the county and city have both clearly crossed the line.

"If they're not supposed to be campaigning, they're doing a great imitation," he said.

Weinstein's group has frequently complained that the county department is too big and does a poor job of controlling sexually transmitted diseases and other health problems. A smaller city-run agency, they argue, would be more effective and accountable to the people of Los Angeles. So the group [See Health, AA4]

More questions on iPad program

L.A. Unified officials say they hope to have a fuller picture to present next week.

BY HOWARD BLUME

Los Angeles school district officials acknowledged Tuesday that they understated the cost of providing iPads to students, but also said the deal could ultimately save millions of dollars.

The L.A. Unified School District hopes to provide a tablet to every student and teacher, and, for months, has reported the cost as \$678 per device. But a revised budget released Monday found that the tablets could cost as much as \$770.

The previous amount, officials said Tuesday, did not include taxes and a mandatory recycling fee. Once those costs are added in, the price rises to about \$744, said Daphne Congdon, a district information technology administrator. The cost rises to \$770 if the district buys fewer than about 520,000 devices, because it wouldn't qualify for a volume discount until it pays Apple Inc. \$400 million.

The price of the tablets was one of many budget items that came up at back-to-back L.A. Unified meet- [See iPads, AA2]



Photographs by MARK BOSTER Los Angeles Times

A NEWLY hatched Komodo dragon is held by L.A. Zoo curator Ian Recchio. It's one of the first females to be sexed in the egg using DNA. Managing reproduction will prevent inbreeding and improve health.

SAVING KOMODOS

L.A. Zoo has found a way to identify the dragon's gender before eggs are hatched, allowing more females to survive.

BY LOUIS SAHAGUN

The Los Angeles Zoo is trying to raise the population of female Komodo dragons, a giant and endangered lizard, by using a DNA test originally devised to identify the gender of bird eggs.

Swelling the female ranks would help close a gender gap in captive dragons in North America, which is home to 71 males, 46 females and six of the giant lizards whose sex remains unknown. It would also move the species closer to a self-sustaining and genetically diverse population, which scientists believe they would reach with 75 males and 75 females.

"Until now, we couldn't control the gender of the dragons we hatched out — creating a lopsided male-heavy population," said Ian Recchio, curator of reptiles and amphibians at the L.A. Zoo. "In captivity, it's not uncommon for males to kill females, and females are prone to often fatal complications in pregnancy."

Another reason for wanting to manage the number and sex of Komodo dragons hatched each year: They are expensive to keep and grow big enough to eat a human being.

"Komodos are like keeping tigers," he said, admiring one of the two adults on exhibit at the zoo, a 10-foot male with a powerful tail, slashing stiletto claws and toxic saliva.

The procedure, first attempted at the L.A. Zoo, involves insertion of a fine needle into the leathery shell of a baseball-sized dragon egg halfway through its 260-day incubation period, and extracting a small sample of blood without killing the embryo. The sample is submitted to a labora-



VISITORS SNAP photos of the giant Komodo dragon male at the L.A. Zoo. There are 71 males and 46 females in captivity in the U.S.

tory for DNA testing to determine the sex.

Curators then put a dab of glue over the puncture and place the egg back in its nest in precisely the position it was laid. "Unlike bird eggs, reptile eggs cannot rotate at all during incubation," Recchio said.

Only female eggs were allowed to complete incubation.

As part of a cooperative research project, the DNA procedure also has been used at the Memphis Zoo, which has five dragon eggs — all females — expected to hatch any day.

"Now, we can manipulate our breeding efforts according to captive population goals at any given time,"

said Chris Baker, assistant curator of herpetology at the Memphis Zoo. "Right now, we want females."

The Los Angeles and Memphis zoos are among a dozen zoos in North America that have bred the species first discovered by Western zoologists in 1912.

Having more strategically bred dragons to choose from will help prevent captive populations from becoming inbred over time, making them susceptible to hereditary disease, Recchio said.

Zoos with captive breeding programs already routinely donate or swap specimens in "genetic ex- [See Dragons, AA4]

Onus put on BART train victims

The NTSB says that the 2 workers killed during the strike were responsible for their own safety.

BY MAURA DOLAN

WALNUT CREEK, Calif. — Two Bay Area Rapid Transit workers killed Saturday during an employee strike were operating under employer rules that made them responsible for their own safety, a federal transportation investigator said Tuesday.

James Southworth, who is leading the probe of the BART accident for the National Transportation Safety Board, said the men who died on the second day of the strike were inspecting tracks under a procedure BART calls "simple approval."

"The responsibility for their safety is on themselves," Southworth said.

He said the employees obtain approval from headquarters to be on the tracks, but the protocol does not call for giving them any warning of approaching trains, nor does it require train operators to slow down.

"No, they do not get warning," he said of the track workers. "They are to expect the train at any direction and at any time."

Dispatch does inform train drivers of their presence, however.

One worker is supposed to act as a lookout and determine "how and where to move into the clear" when a train comes along, Southworth said. He said the NTSB will examine the procedure as part of its investigation of the accident.

"We are looking at all rules and all operating practices," he said.

BART was preparing managers to run trains in the event the strike was protracted, and the person running the train that killed the workers was one of two trainees on board.

Southworth said both trainees "shared time in the seat" operating the train [See BART, AA6]

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RICK LOOMIS Los Angeles Times

KING OF STRING

Yo-yo champ Alex Hattori, 15, of Torrance has his own trading cards, his own line of yo-yos and another title: top double player in the nation. AA3

College costs rise more slowly

A study says the increase this year is the lowest in decades. AA3

Huizar admits 'huge mistake'

The councilman opens up about his relationship with an aide. AA3

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Judge accused of injuring woman

Craig Richman allegedly pushed a woman in a dispute over pet waste in Chatsworth.

BY JACK LEONARD AND RICHARD WINTON



IRFAN KHAN Los Angeles Times

CRAIG RICHMAN'S lawyer says the accuser was the aggressor.

It started out as a neighborhood dispute about cleaning up after pet dogs.

But the argument has escalated into a criminal case against a prominent local judge who has been charged with battery for allegedly pushing and injuring a woman who was walking her dogs.

City attorney officials said the quarrel occurred July 18 when Los Angeles County Superior Court Judge Craig Richman saw Connie Romero place a plastic bag of animal waste on the curb next to a street. Romero accuses Rich-

man of pushing her from behind and knocking her to the ground, said Rob Wilcox, a spokesman for the city attorney's office. Romero told authorities that her face struck the sidewalk as she fell, and that she suffered a cut over her left eye, a scrape on her left shoulder and swelling on her wrist. An LAPD spokesman said the incident occurred near Richman's [See Judge, AA2]