

Garamendi Challenges Opponent on Backing

Election: On a campaign stop in Sherman Oaks, the insurance commissioner candidate criticizes Calderon for accepting contributions from the industry.

By STEPHANIE STASSEL
TIMES STAFF WRITER

On the eighth anniversary of the Northridge earthquake, state insurance commissioner candidate John Garamendi on Thursday visited a Sherman Oaks apartment complex still in need of repairs and criticized an opponent for taking campaign money from insurance companies.

Assemblyman Thomas Calderon's acceptance of campaign contributions from insurance companies could create a conflict of interest, as it did for ousted Insurance Commissioner Chuck Quackenbush, Garamendi said.

"He is headed down that path, taking money from the insurance companies, and then he'll dance to their tune if he's ever elected," Garamendi said. "The voters just can't have that happen."

Calderon, a Democrat from Montebello who chairs the Assembly Insurance Committee, responded that he can stand up to the insurance industry.

He cited a bill he is sponsoring, AB5, which would prevent companies from using credit records to set rates.

"It's only a problem if you don't know how to say 'no' to the insur-

'He is headed down that path, taking money from the insurance companies, and then he'll dance to their tune if he's ever elected.'

John Garamendi, state insurance commissioner candidate, on opponent Thomas Calderon's acceptance of campaign contributions from insurance companies

ance companies," Calderon said.

Garamendi, who served as insurance commissioner from 1991 to 1995, said he and another Democratic candidate in the March 5 primary, former Orange County Assemblyman Tom Umberg, will not accept campaign contributions from insurers.

Garamendi on Thursday visited the Horace Heidt Estates, where \$2 million to \$4 million in repairs for earthquake damage remains to be completed, according to the owner's attorney.

In preparation for a lawsuit filed in November against Farmers Insurance, engineers inspected the 10-acre complex of 159 apartments, 18 homes and a subterranean garage. The damage they found includes a large crack in the foundation.

Although some repairs have been made, Horace Heidt, who owns the complex built by his father in the 1950s, said the insurance adjusters didn't look hard enough to find damage. "These are hidden things the experts are supposed to know," Heidt said.



LUIS SINCO / Los Angeles Times

Secretary of State Bill Jones, visiting South Gate on Thursday, addresses the city's residents.

Jones May Take Elections Out of South Gate's Hands

Politics: Secretary of State visits to warn that he could turn over the town's electoral duties to L.A. County officials if problems persist at City Hall.

By RICHARD MAROSI
TIMES STAFF WRITER

Secretary of State Bill Jones, making a rare visit to South Gate, announced an unprecedented plan Thursday to restore order to city elections long marred by violence, intimidation and allegations of fraud.

Jones said the state will monitor the electoral process in the blue-collar community. If problems persist, he warned, he will force the city to hand over election duties to the Los Angeles County registrar-recorder's office.

"Never before has the state been required to employ such strict supervision of a city's election administration," said Jones, "but never before have we seen the crisis level of problems, intimidation and loss of voter confidence we have encountered here in South Gate."

Jones, a Republican candidate for governor, visited in response to an appeal from City Clerk Carmen Avalos, who was stripped of her electoral duties by the City

Council majority last month.

Avalos, who stood at Jones' side during the news conference in front of City Hall, was cheered by a boisterous crowd of about 80 supporters, many of them police officers and others seeking a voter recall of the city's leading officials.

Jones, during his speech, said he would order South Gate officials to provide a status report regarding the security of the recall petitions.

He said that corruption probes by the district attorney's public integrity squad are continuing and that federal authorities have also taken note of South Gate's volatile situation. FBI officials would not comment on whether they have launched a probe.

Jones' visit drew cheers from South Gate police officials.

"The state's involvement verifies what we've known all along: Something stinks," said Lt. Vince Avila.

Conspicuously absent from the event were Avalos' political opponents, Treasurer Albert Robles and members of the City Council majority.

Mayor Raul Moriel said he had not been notified of Jones' visit. Vice Mayor Xochilt Ruvalcaba dismissed the event as a political ploy by Avalos. She claims Avalos is inept and biased.

"I respect the secretary of state, but he should leave local issues to us," Ruvalcaba said. Avalos has been battling for

control of the clerk's office ever since she defeated Ruvalcaba's sister in elections last year. The council has slashed Avalos' salary and staffing and taken away many of her normal duties, such as supervising elections.

When voter recall drives were launched last year against every elected official, including Avalos, the council replaced Avalos with an interim clerk, Julia Sylva, an attorney.

But some residents are questioning whether Sylva can be impartial, since county prosecutors said that she once represented two of Robles' allies who have been charged with electoral fraud. Sylva denies that she represented the pair, saying she accompanied them to a meeting with prosecutors as a friend.

Still, Sylva's involvement in the case came as a surprise to Moriel, who originally supported her appointment. "That makes me have second thoughts," he said.

The city's politics have long been racked by turmoil.

Last year, the business of a recall organizer was firebombed, an unsolved crime that police suspect was politically motivated. And in 1999, then-Mayor Henry Gonzalez was shot in the head after a council meeting in a crime that has never been solved. Gonzalez was slightly injured. Now a city councilman and an ally of Avalos, Gonzalez is also the target of a recall drive.

Antonovich to Postpone Decision on Newhall Ranch

Planning: Another legal tangle over the water supply for the massive development triggers another delay. Opponents applaud the board member's action.

By SUE FOX
TIMES STAFF WRITER

The biggest development in Los Angeles County history—already stalled for 20 months by a judge who questioned its water supply projections—has been swept off course again by another legal tussle over water.

Newhall Ranch, a proposed 21,600-home subdivision in the fast-growing Santa Clarita Valley, was scheduled for action next week by the county Board of Supervisors.

But Supervisor Mike Antonovich, who represents the area, said Thursday he will ask to delay the board decision for at least three months until courts resolve water rights in a valley whose population is expected to at least double during the next two decades.

"We need to ensure that there is sufficient water for the residents of the Santa Clarita Valley before any project is approved," Antonovich said in a brief statement.

Opponents of Newhall Ranch said they were pleased by his decision. Ventura County Supervisor Kathy Long applauded his "leadership and due diligence."

"They should take another look at it," she said, adding that Ventura County still disputes Newhall's latest analysis of water supplies.

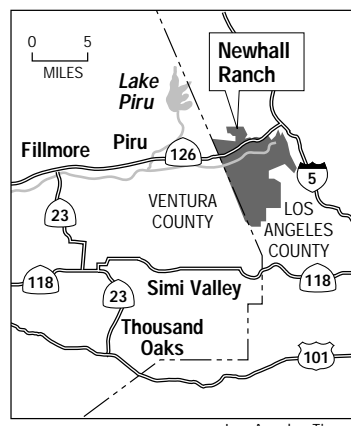
The delay underscores California's growing recognition of the need to tie suburban growth to water availability.

Newhall Ranch has played a key role in the evolving debate as it reverberated from the farms of Kern County to the corridors of Sacramento.

Antonovich was reacting to a court decision last week that could jeopardize water supplies for the Castaic Lake Water Agency, a wholesaler that serves the Santa Clarita Valley.

At issue are rights to 41,000 acre-feet of water a year from the Kern County Water Agency to Castaic.

Antonovich decided that because that source of the Newhall Ranch water has been thrown in



Los Angeles Times

doubt, the supervisors should delay action on the environmental impact report for the development.

Even though Newhall Land & Farming Co. proposes to use only a small portion of that water for its Newhall Ranch development, about 1,600 acre-feet annually, Los Angeles County officials said Thursday they want to make sure the Castaic agency's rights are clear.

"The status of water in the Santa Clarita Valley is unclear," Antonovich deputy Conal McNamara said. "The board is not in a position to make any kind of a decision [on Newhall Ranch]."

Los Angeles County supervisors unanimously approved Newhall Ranch in late 1998, over the objections of Ventura County and several environmental groups, which challenged the action in court.

In May 2000, Kern County Superior Court Judge Roger D. Randall blocked construction of the 12,000-acre development on the banks of the Santa Clara River until Newhall Land could prove it had enough water to supply the new community.

Marlee Lauffer, a spokeswoman for Newhall Land, said Thursday that the developer has since conducted more than 30 studies and cut deals to buy and store enough water to meet nearly twice the expected demand of 70,000 residents.

The water wars and other environmental challenges to Newhall Ranch have knocked the project years off schedule.

Construction, once scheduled to start in late 2000, may now be delayed beyond 2004, Lauffer said.

Lauffer said the most recent court decision "will have minimal, if any, effect on Newhall Ranch's water supply."

The suburb is expected to need 17,600 acre-feet per year, less than 10% of which would come from the Castaic Lake transfer.

Judge Halts Work to Rehabilitate Venice Waterway

Lawsuit: Environmental groups laud decision in their fight against the Coastal Commission and city over the Grand Canal Wetlands project.

By SUFIYA ABDUR-RAHMAN
TIMES STAFF WRITER

A judge Thursday halted all work on a project to rehabilitate the Grand Canal Wetlands in Venice until an environmentalists' lawsuit is resolved.

The order came one week after the same San Francisco Superior Court judge granted a temporary restraining order halting the draining, damming and deepening of the

waterway.

The project, by the city of Los Angeles and the California Coastal Commission, has been challenged by local and national environmental groups.

"We have a reprieve for the animals in the Grand Canal," said Marcia Hanscom, director of the Malibu-based Wetlands Action Network. "We are elated."

Hanscom and the nonprofit network filed a lawsuit Jan. 8 alleging that the commission violated the Coastal Act by failing to consider alternatives and that it has endangered a sensitive habitat.

On Wednesday, the Ballona Wetlands Land Trust, the Coalition to Save the Marina and the Sierra Club joined that suit against the city and the commission.

The \$1.5-million project would

deepen and landscape the Grand Canal near Washington Boulevard to make it more aesthetically pleasing. It also is intended to improve the canal's water quality, public access and wetland habitat.

But Hanscom said that "so far, the things they've tried to do here have been problematic." For example, she said, saltbushes that have been planted along the canal aren't natural to the environment.

"You have to know what to plant. Plant what Mother Nature would have planted," she said.

But Assistant City Atty. Susan Pfann said, "We feel quite strongly that the project will be beneficial for the area. We're anxious to get the project going."

The judge's stay means no work can be done until the lawsuit is settled, which could take six months

or longer. The next hearing is set for March 12.

A condition of the project is that the southern portion be finished by April 30, when the local population of least terns returns to feed. That now appears improbable.

"It's going to be difficult. We already were delayed one week by the temporary restraining order," said Russell Ruffing of the city engineer's environmental group.

Originally, the project was supposed to make the Grand Canal resemble the Venice Canal on the other side of Washington Boulevard. But, Ruffing said, the city had to make substantial compromises to comply with the Coastal Commission's guidelines.

Still, the groups challenging the work say the Venice Canal should not be a model.

"It might look nice and neat, but it doesn't do much for the ecology," Hanscom said.

Concrete planters make a wall along the Venice Canal, and gravel lines the bottom. Marine biologist Roy van de Hoek said it's so artificial that the area's natural plants can't grow there and rare animals such as the fiddler crab can't survive.

The Grand Canal, he said, "shows how marine biology should work" and the Venice Canal shows "how it can go wrong."

Also on Thursday, the Coastal Commission faced another setback when the Sierra Club and six other public interest groups filed a lawsuit challenging the commission's approval of road expansion projects that the groups say threaten Los Angeles wetlands.

STEVE HARVEY
ONLY IN L.A.

Plaintive Singers Croon a Universal Tune: We're Entitled to Those Royalties

Did you notice that the lead plaintiff among the singers claiming royalties from Vivendi Universal is Peggy Lee. One of her hits, of course, was "Is That All There Is?"

No slowing down: And some people can't bother to stop for stop signs, as the flattened one found by Alan Frisbie illustrates (see accompanying). Norma Kleiner noticed that an anonymous resident went so far as to attach a plea to a sign in Westport, Conn. Larry Stirling, meanwhile, came upon a cowboy version in Miles City, Mont. Maybe the answer is more signs at the same corner, such as the group snapped by Katie Shibana. Alas, they were actually in the back of a truck advertising an airline that had "pulled out all the stops."

All chocolate, all the time: The Next Stage offers such unusual bus expeditions as the Aroma Tour (citrus goods in the Produce Market and other "good smells"



KATIE SHIBANA



ALAN FRISBIE

around the Southland), the Insomniacs Tour (an all-night jaunt) and Chocolate-Covered L.A. (stops at factories and restaurants

that make the candies).

Of the Chocolate Tour, which includes See's candy served on the tour bus, owner Marlene Gordon



LARRY STIRLING

said: "It could be a good last hurrah before joining a gym."

Even Gordon can't predict all the sights, especially on the Insomniacs Tour (price: \$35).

There was the man on Olive Street who was hanging from a lamp post and threatening to jump—though he was just a few



NORMA KLEINER

feet off the ground. A nude jogger, with only a towel around his neck, ran out of his way to greet one tour bus on 9th Street. "I guess he was a true exhibitionist," Gordon said.

On another occasion, she was serving refreshments to her customers at Union Station when a street person got in line.

After receiving a bagel and coffee, he told Gordon: "I sure do thank you, ma'am. I had no idea Union Mission was serving in Union Station."

Pioneer Valley businesses: In the new book "Movie Love in the '50s," author James Harvey writes

that the late director Douglas Sirk ("Imitation of Life" and others) said his "happiest time in Hollywood" came while living in the San Fernando Valley in the 1940s.

"He and Mrs. Sirk (mostly Mrs. Sirk, he emphasized) ran first a chicken farm and then—when the chickens at last defeated them—an alfalfa farm," Harvey writes.

I wonder if any of those victorious birds were related to the infamous Freeway Chickens who later patrolled the shoulders near the junction of 134 and 101?

miscellAny: The movie "The Shipping News" has a scene in which some drunken men in a fishing town destroy a boat. That's the only explanation Hank Rosenfeld can figure for the designation he noticed in the credits: "Stunt Looter."

Steve Harvey can be reached at (800) LA-TIMES, Ext. 77083, by fax at (213) 237-4712, by mail at Metro, L.A. Times, 202 W. 1st St., L.A., 90012 and by e-mail at steve.harvey@latimes.com.