

Opinion: Parks officials insulted public with buyout shenanigans

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The California state parks system – as state government itself – is in deep budget trouble.

Yet that did not stop the head of one division within the state parks system – administrative services, which handles accounting and personnel functions – from hatching a scheme to give himself and 55 managers immediate cash payouts for their unused vacation time.

This gaming of the system, by the very people who handle money transactions, came at a time when the state parks system was announcing the closure of 70 state parks and nonprofit organizations were striving to raise private funds to keep parks open. That \$271,000 could have helped keep parks running.

This betrayal, detailed in a November 2011 internal audit and an April state attorney general's investigation – and reported by the *Bee's* Matt Weiser – is despicable. While names have been redacted, details make it clear that the ringleader was Manuel Thomas Lopez, who was deputy director of administrative services. But he was not alone. Others were complicit in the outrage.

These people deserve public censure – not redacted names in a report. They should be terminated, with letters in their files so they can't return as "retired annuitants" to state service. Those who falsified documents should be prosecuted.

Let us be clear. This scandal reveals not just corruption by individuals but problems with the state's vacation leave system.

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