

California lawmakers accept fewer freebies

By Jim Sanders, Sacramento Bee

California lawmakers accepted food, travel, tickets and other gifts totaling more than a half-million dollars last year, ranging from a \$14,000 trip to Brazil to a \$1.89 Coca Cola drink with straw.

Gift-giving to the Senate and Assembly totaled about \$500,500 – roughly \$171,500 in gift items and \$329,000 in travel, according to annual financial disclosure statements released Saturday.

The total represents a belt-tightening from 2011, when lawmakers accepted more than \$750,000 in gifts of all kinds, including travel. The bottom line was about \$520,000 in 2010.

A key reason for the lower total last year, however, is that it represents records of current legislators, including 39 rookies, not veterans who were termed out or not re-elected last December.

Unusual gifts to lawmakers last year included a \$5 reusable bag, \$5 handkerchief, \$7.50 stuffed animal, a \$90 desk pen, \$20 in Big Foot beer and \$110 in first aid kits.

Sports and entertainment tickets were a hot item, with lawmakers receiving thousands of dollars' worth for football, baseball, basketball, Disneyland, SeaWorld, musical concerts and Rose Bowl-related events.

Lawmakers also took numerous trips bankrolled by Capitol interests, nonprofits or foreign groups. Hawaii, Brazil, China and Korea were among destinations last year.

Assembly Speaker John A. Pérez topped the Legislature by

accepting \$8,000 in gift items. The Los Angeles Democrat also received more than \$9,800 in travel assistance, including \$836 from the Association of Life and Health Insurance Cos. to attend a Pebble Beach event.

The Senate leader, Darrell Steinberg of Sacramento, reported receiving \$2,297 in gift items and \$2,116 in travel. He also attended the Pebble Beach event, receiving \$959 from the insurance group.

Gifts to Pérez included nearly \$700 in cigars or cigar boxes, more than \$500 in crystal ducks (he collects ducks), a \$250 UC Berkeley football helmet and two bobblehead dolls worth \$53 and \$40, respectively.

By comparison, Gov. Jerry Brown reported receiving \$2,500 in gifts. He also accepted travel valued at more than \$3,700 from a business-backed nonprofit group, the California State Protocol Foundation.

The Legislature's top recipients of gift items included Assemblyman Das Williams, D-Santa Barbara, \$5,274; Assemblywoman Bonnie Lowenthal, D-Long Beach, \$4,348; and Assemblyman Curt Hagman, R-Chino Hills, \$4,332.

Sen. Alex Padilla, D-Los Angeles, and Assemblyman Luis Alejo, D-Watsonville, reported receiving \$6,572 and \$5,495 in gift items, respectively, but many of the freebies were wedding presents.

The Assembly leader in free travel was Norma Torres, D-Pomona, who accepted \$20,000 in trip aid, including \$10,811 from the American Israel Education Foundation.

Sen. Anthony Cannella, R-Ceres, was the Senate's top recipient of travel gifts, \$18,979, including a Brazil trip underwritten by the California Foundation on the Environment and the Economy.

State law permitted legislators to accept gifts valued at up to \$420 from a single source in 2012.

No dollar limit is imposed for travel provided by foreign governments or by nonprofit groups if the trip is for a governmental, legislative or policy purpose.