



Larry WILSON

Nervous Nellies at NASA

Scientists by definition are too smart to mess with. When will the politicians learn that easy fact?

And, if the academic ones are, like journalists and other academics, more liberal as a rule (with plenty of exceptions to prove it) than other professionals, they also tend to be resolutely logical and apolitical when it comes to their work.

But when their research indicates something is true, they are also resolute about getting the word out. And they are wonderfully clueless about soft-peddling the news to protect other people's delicate beliefs.

These days, with this administration in Washington, D.C., it's amazingly easy to offend.

For instance, JPL scientists last month released news about what they'd found in comet dust around a distant white dwarf star.

"A white dwarf, a shrunken dense cinder about the size of Earth, is how our own sun is fated to spend eternity, astronomers say, about 5 billion years from now, once it has burned out its fuel," writes Dennis Overbye in the Science section of The New York Times.

When JPL mentioned that in a press release, it included a wonderfully human quote from NASA scientist Marc Kuchner: "I cringed when I saw the data because it probably reflects the grim but very distant future of our own planets and solar system."

According to Overbye, Erica Hupp at agency HQ nixed the quote from release, saying, "NASA is not in the habit of frightening the public with gloom and doom scenarios."

For God's sake. These guys think Americans are going to freak out about something that's going to happen 5 billion years from now? You want worries? Our dryer's on the fritz in the laundry room. We've got to do our taxes this weekend. Our sun's future life as a dwarf I put more in the category of abstract teleological cosmic musings. It's not going to keep me up at night.

And now NASA scientists are being ordered by Washington not to call what is happening around us by the simple, truthful and yet politically charged phrase "global warming."

"Climate change" is all they're allowed to say.

Is it getting hot in here, or is it just me?

FELLOW DRIVERS: You have read our stories. You understand that the new flashing yellow left-turn arrows at some Pasadena intersections mean, perhaps oddly enough, what no arrow at all means: You can turn left there if it's safe to do so when there's a green light in the intersection.

But you also know by now that other drivers who do not read the Star-News demonstrably think that the flashing yellows mean don't turn at all. Please join me in beeping and flashing your lights at them until they get the picture and move it.

Ditto at the nitwits who read the signs at such intersections as Lake and Colorado and think "Left turn yield on green" means don't turn left without an arrow even when the light is green and there's no oncoming traffic. It doesn't mean that. So turn left, already.

And could ya nudge out a bit into the intersection so I can turn left, too?

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Larry Wilson is editor of the Pasadena Star-News. His column runs Fridays, Sundays and Wednesdays.

City employees get boost

By PATRICIA HO
STAFF WRITER

Retirement benefits upgraded

ALHAMBRA — City employees are expected to soon give approval to a retirement plan that will cost the city an extra \$1 million a year.

The contract amendment to the city's California Public Employees Retirement System, or CalPERS, will increase retirement pensions by about one-third annually.

The City Council this week voted to approve the union-

ized employees' contract amendments.

"It makes us more competitive. It helps us retain employees that know the city and care about its residents," said Councilman Paul Talbot. "There's always a balance where you want to provide the best benefits to employees and services to your constituents."

As it is, retirement plans for non-sworn employees cost the

city about \$1.46 million annually, said Howard Longballe, director of finance. The changes will increase costs by about \$1.02 million a year — or 70 percent.

About 230 non-sworn city employees — those who aren't police or firefighters — will receive 2.7 percent of their salaries, multiplied by the number of years of service, when they reach 55. Currently, the rate is set at 2 percent.

For example, an employee who works for 20 years with a salary high of \$60,000 will be eligible for \$32,400 a year under the new contract, versus \$24,000 under the old one.

The change affects all full-time non-sworn employees, from landscapers to the city manager.

It is intended to catch up those city employees with firefighters and police officers,

who receive 3 percent at age 50.

The City Council had approved the 2.7-percent rate in 2002, but the city budget was unable to accommodate the increase until this year, City Manager Julio Puentes said.

The city also will contribute a greater percentage into retirement plans.

If approved, the plan will be effective in March.

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Monkey business



Local cafe used for TV commercial

Love Birds Cafe & Bakery in Pasadena was closed Thursday to accommodate the filming of a commercial for ask.com. Depicting how highly evolved the search engine and its users are, the ad features actors made up to resemble chimpanzees. As one man-chimp, left, uses the ask.com search engine, he evolves into a human being by the time he leaves the coffee shop. The other actors, above, remain chimpanzees and become increasingly frustrated using other search engines on their laptops.

PHOTOS BY
WALT MANCINI / STAFF

Charter teachers file wage lawsuit

Instruction time disparity cited

FROM STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

PASADENA — Eight charter schools, headquartered here, are suing the California Department of Education, challenging its interpretation of a state law that determines funding for each school based on the amount of time teachers spend instructing students.

The lawsuit was filed Tuesday in Los Angeles Superior Court on behalf of Options for Youth and Opportunities for Learning, which operates charter schools in San Gabriel, Baldwin Park, Burbank, Upland, Victor Valley, San Juan, Mount Shasta and Santa Clarita. The schools offer independent study programs for about 20,000 students a year who dropped out of traditional public school systems.

About 550 students from various districts attend the San Gabriel charter school location, said Options for Youth communications manager Ellen Harris. Harris declined to comment on the lawsuit.

The San Gabriel school on Las Tunas Drive was chartered in 1997 by the San Gabriel Unified School District, Harris said.

It is the main option for students who are expelled from the district, said SGUSD Superintendent Berjoui Koukryan. Ramifications from the lawsuit are unclear.

According to the suit, state law sets the minimum length of the school year at 175 instruction days and sets the amount of instruction time a full-time teacher is required to spend instructing students.

The education department interprets the law to determine that, for example, a Los Angeles Unified School District high school teacher is paid to provide five hours of instruction to students per day.

Because the charter schools operate 240 days a year, their teachers spend seven hours instructing students but aren't fairly compensated for their longer work day, the suit said.

The schools complained that the education department's miscalculation caused them to receive only 70 percent of state funding for which they're entitled. They're seeking a ruling that the department's interpretation of the law is "contrary to common, accepted practice."

A state Department of Education spokeswoman said Thursday she hadn't seen the lawsuit and couldn't comment on its specific complaints.

"The funds that they have received have been calculated using a method that's consistent with the independent study statute," said spokeswoman Hilary McLean.

She also said an audit examining funding for Options For Youth and Opportunities for Learning schools and how they use the money is being conducted.

"We're looking forward to seeing the results of that audit. We think a lot of questions that were raised will be resolved," she said.

Journalist derides American TV news

By EMANUEL PARKER
STAFF WRITER

PASADENA — CNN's chief international correspondent this week decried the lack of foreign news and the erosion of serious journalism on American television.

Christiane Amanpour said the scarcity of foreign news couldn't come at a worse time.

"It doesn't prepare American citizens," she said. "They're not getting the vital information they need to make important decisions."

Amanpour spoke Wednesday at the Distinguished Speaker Series at the Pasadena Civic Auditorium.

Since the fall of the Soviet Union and the first Gulf War, she has reported for CNN from most of the world's trouble spots, including Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Darfur, Paki-

stan, the Balkans, Rwanda, Israel and Somalia.

The award-winning journalist said she's appealed to television industry leaders to give their news departments a break.

"We should not be held to the same standards as a commercial product," she said. "News is a public service, not a commercial enterprise."

"Many news outlets are owned by corporations whose chief loyalty is to shareholders. But our job is to report on the world, not enrich shareholders. We live in a society, not just a marketplace."

Amanpour, 47, said real journalists pursue truth.

"You're either for that or you're in the propaganda business," she said. "Our objective is the truth, as close to it as we can get. We don't want to be assailed by ideology, partisan politics or the monopoly



BRYAN BIEDER / GETTY IMAGES
NEWS CRITIC: CNN's Christiane Amanpour, shown in New York City, criticized the lack of serious journalism on television at a forum in Pasadena.

British mother, and educated at the University of Rhode Island. Amanpour said it's a point of honor that she was banned from Iran, Serbia and Afghanistan for her hard-hitting reporting. But she admitted the bans made it hard to do her job.

Amanpour was raised in Iran, and her family fled that country during the Iranian Revolution. She said the recent election of radical president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has had a chilling effect on pro-democratic Iranians.

"I found the people of Iran are retreating from politics," she said. "The election results turned people off in droves. There will be no revolution, no regime change. Instead, people are censoring themselves, trying to survive in the new system. Hope has been snuffed out."

of one party. We certainly don't like being accused of being unpatriotic for reporting the truth."

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