Teacher pension system targets gun sellers

Associated Press

WEST SACRAMENTO, Calif. — One of the largest public pension funds in the nation voted Wednesday to use its financial might to pressure gun retailers across the country to stop selling military-style assault weapons and accessories like rapid-fire "bump stocks" used at the 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting.

The $222.5 billion California State Teachers' Retirement System said it will try to unseat board members at companies that resist and could dump its stock in those retailers if they still refuse to conform to laws already in effect in California.

The fund plans an accompanying publicity drive to leverage the student-led nationwide push following the February massacre at a Florida high school. Fund officials also are lobbying other pension funds and investors to join their drive.

The system funds pensions for more than 900,000 public school educators and their families.

Aside from outlawing bump stocks and restricting assault-style weapons, California bans sales of magazines holding more than 10 bullets and assault rifles that can rapidly be reloaded.

Opponents said the board is setting a dangerous precedent.

If Congress and other states won't act to prevent schools "from becoming killing fields, then let's take the battle to where the money is," said state Treasurer John Chiang, a Democrat who led the push and is running for governor in next month's primary election.

The board acted as Democratic state lawmakers introduced legislation that would require the nation's largest public pension system to similarly pressure retailers to stop selling military-style weapons and attachments. The $350 billion California Public Employees' Retirement System declined to do so in March.

AP Photo/Rich Pedroncelli

California Treasure John Chiang, a member of the California State Teacher's Retirement System Investment Committee, discusses his proposal to lobby gun retailers to stop selling weapons and accessories in other states that are banned in California, Wednesday in West Sacramento, Calif. The board voted to approve the measure.

Both the teachers and public employee funds had already divested from assault weapon manufacturers after the 2012 slayings at a Connecticut elementary school.

San Diego area teacher Jessica Moore told board members Wednesday that her job now includes plotting exit routes and comforting children during lockdowns. "I think in terms of taking a bullet for them," she said tearfully.

Retired teacher and San Diego gun control advocate Carol Landale urged the board to "hit the gun industry in the pocketbook."

"I do not want my dollars invested in an industry that sells weapons that kill children," Landale said.

Gun Owners of California executive director Sam Paredes in an email called Chiang's support "a desperate move by a desperate politician trying anything to gain attention."

Firearms Policy Coalition spokesman Craig DeLuz said: "Lawmakers are moving beyond unconstitutionally regulating guns and towards using the force of government to bully and coerce the market. This isn't a slippery slope; it's a cliff that hostile government actors are forcing people and businesses to walk off."

The teachers' fund invests about $465 million in 10 retailers, but the bulk — $344 million — is in Walmart, which did not respond to a request for comment.

Walmart is among retailers that already stopped selling assault weapons and bump stocks, and Chiang could not say what more he wants the company to do. Sen. Anthony Portantino of La Canada Flintridge, who is carrying the related legislation, said recent changes by Walmart and other retailers show the power of public pressure.

Board member Paul Rosenstiel said the fund's investment represents less than 1 percent of Walmart's stock and questioned devoting $280,000 for two staff members to coordinate the fund's lobbying effort. But he went along when the fund's chief investment officer, Christopher Ailman, said he is working to recruit other funds to join the effort.

MARKET: Could decide to hold something in new festival area

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February against a nearby former coal bin building that Myers had been working to turn into a restaurant.

City employees had previously worked with Myers on various aspects of the Maxwell Pavilion project, located at 255 S. First Place across from Bi-Mart. Myers said he had conversations with parks and recreation director Larry Fetter about taking over the farmer's market, and in October the city signed an agreement with Mitco that the Hermiston Urban Renewal Agency would contribute up to $220,000 toward the project if the accompanying parking lot was left open to free use by the public.

But in an hour-long, often colorful speech, Myers told vendors present at Wednesday night's meeting that dealing with the city's building department was like "playing chess with a pigeon" because Woolsey was "full of poop" and others at city hall needed to "grow a pair" and handle the problem.

He said the Maxwell Pavilion was a pre-engineered metal shade structure less than 4,000 square feet with no walls, doors, restrooms, heating or other elements to complicate it. It would take two to four weeks to finish construction, he said. He asked the audience why the city building department chose to order all site preparation halted and mail him a long list of concerns he had to answer to, such as submitting a plan for door latches, before the site plan review could take place. Myers said it seemed that more was being required of him than more complex projects in town and the only reason he could think of was that a city employee was acting for personal reasons.

Vendors present at the meeting expressed disappointment in the cancellation of the farmer's market, which had been planned for Thursday nights from June 7 to October 4 at the Maxwell Pavilion. One questioned why the city would hold up the farmer's market, and some asked if sponsorships, entertainment bookings and other work Myers had done on the project couldn't be moved to a different location, or if they couldn't just erect tents on the pavilion site.

Myers said for liability reasons he felt he couldn't hold it there after some excavation had already been done. He said the city could always decide to hold something on the new downtown festival street — which he called "their monument to themselves" — which is expected to be completed around Memorial Day.

Myers encouraged vendors to share the news release on social media and show up to complain to the city council and city manager during their Monday meeting.

"They have been sitting idly on this and apparently they don't care about small businesses and people working to make the community better," Myers said.

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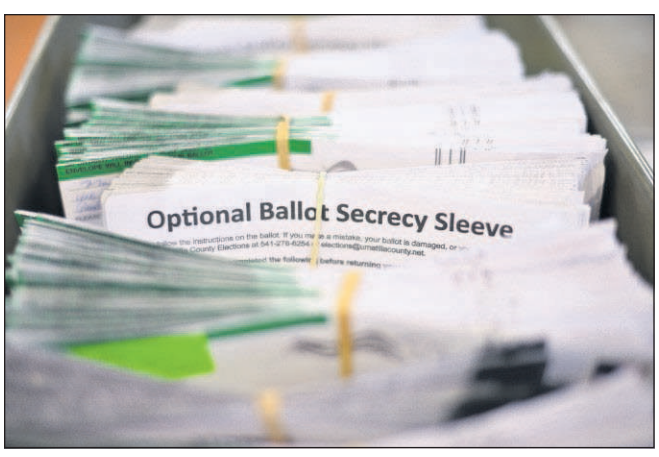

Staff photo by E.J. Harris

As of Wednesday morning, only 14 percent of Umatilla County registered voters had cast their mail-in ballots. Right: Umatilla County elections manager Kim Lindell, left, gives directions on how to handle a replacement ballot to Norman Staebler and Deanna Brandhagen at the Umatilla County Elections Division office in Pendleton.

BALLOTS: Election Day set for May 15

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on Wednesday, six election workers inspected ballots. Beside each woman sat a tray filled with ballots rubber banded into groups of 50.

The workers noted write-in votes and looked to see if the voter had darkened the circle next to the write-in line. If not, they filled it in. They looked for marks too light for the voting machine to detect and darkened them. If a ballot had a spill on it — such as sticky maple syrup or ketchup that could clog the machine — the spill was covered with tape.

The main thing, Lindell said, is to honor each voter's intent.

Each count is double-checked and verified.

"It's a check and balance system the whole way through," she said.

She said each election has an ebb and flow.

"The first week after the ballots go out, there is generally good turnout and then it slacks off until the Monday and Tuesday before the election," Lindell said.

Turnout varies by party. As of May 7 In Umatilla County, 1,267 of 8,941 registered Democrats (13.8 percent) had voted compared with 2,186 of 14,082 Republicans (15.5 percent) and 186 of 1,862 Independents (10 percent).

Lindell hopes voters from every party pick up the pace soon.

"We need to get the word out," she said. "I'd hate to see less than one half of voters decide who runs this county."

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BOND: City budgeted $2M to prepare site, build the foundation

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In an interview after the meeting, City Attorney Nancy Kerns said the deal cannot be closed until it gets approval from a board associated with Catholic Health Initiatives, the parent organization of St. Anthony.

The board meets on a quarterly basis, Kerns said, and she expects the sale to close once the board meets in June.

St. Anthony Hospital spokesman Larry Blanc did not return a request for comment as of press time.

Although the property still belongs to the hospital, the organization granted the city permission to send municipal employees to clear the site of brush and debris.

The city is seeking similar permission from the hospital to allow the city's contractors on the property shortly after the city breaks ground.

In the meantime, the city is preparing for the station's construction phase.

At the workshop, Public Works Director Bob Patterson said the council would approve a bid to build the station's foundation and prepare the site at its next meeting. The city budgeted $2 million for those projects and the bids came in under that amount.

Patterson said the council would approve the rest of the construction costs at a future meeting.

The new facility, which will replace Pendleton Fire Station No. 1 at 911 S.W. Court Ave., is expected to open in 2019.