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Salary for CIRM head despite deficit

The board of California's state stem-cell agency has voted to pay its chairman a salary, even as the state plunges deeper into financial crisis.

Robert Klein, architect of the ballot initiative that led to the creation of the California Institute for Regenerative Medicine (CIRM), is a real-estate developer who has chaired CIRM's board without pay since the agency was conceived in 2004. On 10 December, the board decided to give Klein \$150,000 a year for his work, defining his role as a half-time position.

The vote took place on the same day that governor Arnold Schwarzenegger described the state's growing budget shortfall — almost \$15 billion for the current fiscal year — as a potential "financial Armageddon". On 4 December, Schwarzenegger had sent a letter to CIRM's board expressing "deep concern" about

the plan to award salaries to its chairman and vice-chairman. "I urge you to ensure that compensation for these positions is offered only if and to the extent absolutely necessary to implement its mission," Schwarzenegger wrote.

But Klein said last year that he needed the salary owing to the bad economic climate, leading CIRM to conduct a survey and set the salary range for Klein's position with an upper limit of about \$500,000 a year. Some, such as John Simpson of the taxpayer's group Consumer Watchdog in Santa Monica, had objected to that figure, pointing out that the director of the National Institutes of Health makes about \$200,000 a year.

Simpson called the salary agreed by the board last week "at the high end of reasonable," and said that Klein will have new responsibilities: "Now that Klein



CIRM chairman Robert Klein.

is taking a salary he must truly act like a state employee, something he's not always done in the past." For instance, while chairman, Klein vilified state senator Deborah Ortiz (Democrat) and served as head of an advocacy organization, Americans for Cures, that attacked another lawmaker, Sheila Kuehl (Democrat). He has since resigned as president of that organization.

Klein's salary also raises issues about the board's vice-chair position. That open slot was previously held by Ed Penhoet, a businessman who took no compensation. Two competing candidates for the job have been nominated. One, Art Torres, leader of the state's Democratic party, requires a salary; the other, Duane Roth, is already on the CIRM board and would not need a salary. The position could be worth up to \$332,000 a year.

Klein's term is set to expire in 2010; he has said he won't be seeking to extend it, but in the past also said he would serve just three years. ■

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