

The Carmel Pine Cone

Volume 96 No. 53

On the Internet: www.carmelpinecone.com

December 31, 2010 - January 6, 2011

YOUR SOURCE FOR LOCAL NEWS, ARTS AND OPINION SINCE 1915

Rose Parade float features Carmel Mission

By MARY BROWNFIELD

THE MAJESTIC Carmel Mission Basilica — one of California's most historic buildings — will be replicated in flowers and seeds for the Tournament of Roses Parade in Pasadena on New Year's Day.

With a float named "Sueños de California" ("Dreams of California"), the city of Sierra Madre's Rose Float Association hopes to win judges' hearts and wow crowds with one of its most ambitious endeavors in the near century the town has been participating in the Rose Parade.

Tapping into the 2011 parade theme of "Building Dreams, Friendships and Memories," award-winning float designer Charles Meier, a Pasadena native, created a piece that "highlights California's Latino heritage by remembering the pioneers who built our Golden State," according to the association, which receives all its funding from private donors.

Meier's design calls for a burro at the front of the float drawing a produce-laden cart to market, while fluttering monarch butterflies alight on the San Carlos Borromeo de Carmelo Mission. Women gather around a fountain in a courtyard of blooming bougainvillea, saguaro, prickly pear and citrus.

In a feat of animation, the burro's head nods, the cart's wheels turn, the butterflies' wings flap, and the fountain circulates hundreds of gallons of water. According to SMRFA, folk dancers in colorful dresses will perform alongside the float as it travels the Rose Parade's 5.5-mile route on Jan. 1.



A floral rendition of the Carmel Mission is set to cruise through Pasadena at 2.5 mph on Sierra Madre's Rose Parade float Saturday.

During its 94 years of parade participation, the all-volunteer group has constructed 79 floats, and this year's is one of its largest, at 33 feet tall, 55 feet long and 22 feet wide. With the help of Meier, the association has won awards for its floats for the past five years.

In this year's effort, roses in jewel tones will carpet its base, and dendrobium, mokara and phalaenopsis orchids will simulate the Mission's bougainvillea. The gardens will feature live succulents, orchids, leucadendron, sansevieria, ginger and protea, while the facade of the adobe structure will be replicated in rolled oats, cinnamon and sesame seeds. Beans, lentils and peas — applied one at a

See **FLOAT** page 19A

PUC takes aim at water district funds

■ MPWMD could lose half its budget

By KELLY NIX

A TOP official with the California Public Utilities Commission decided last week that the Monterey Peninsula Water Management District should not be entitled to \$3.5 million in "user fees" that have been tacked onto customers' water bills — a decision that could reduce the agency's budget by 50 percent and prompt numerous layoffs.

In a proposed decision issued Dec. 21, Public Utilities Commission administrative law judge Maribeth Busby rejected an application by California American Water to recover an 8.325 percent user fee it had been charging customers for the MPWMD's Carmel River mitigation work.

The judge's decision — which still has to be adopted by the CPUC — could be devastating to the water district, established in 1977 to "manage, augment and protect water resources for the benefit of the community and the environment," but which has drawn fire from many community lead-

See **PUC** page 18A

Local nursing homes rank poor to above average, feds say

■ Facilities must post ratings

By KELLY NIX

IT'S GOOD news and bad news for nursing homes on the Monterey Peninsula. A half dozen facilities in Monterey and Pacific Grove fare poor to above average, according to federal government rankings.

The rankings, which Medicare posts on its website, rate nursing homes from one to five stars, five stars being "much above average" and one star indicating "much below average." The rating system has been in place since 2008.

However, beginning with the first of the year, 1,235 nurs-

See **HOMES** page 17A

Three rescued after fall from cliff

By MARY BROWNFIELD

A HOLIDAY at a spectacular oceanfront home near Garrapata Beach turned into a nightmare for one of the vacationers when he fell down a cliff at the property's edge Monday night and ended up injured on the beach below as the tide came in and threatened to drown him.

Two others who scrambled down the cliff to save him are being hailed as heroes, even though they had to be rescued as well, according to Cal Fire Battalion Chief Dennis King.

"They were holding him up out of the water," he explained.

Firefighters at the Carmel Highlands station received a

call around 10:15 p.m. Dec. 27 that a man had fallen over a cliff at a Highway 1 home just south of Garrapata Creek, according to King.

"It's a house right on the edge of the ocean," he said. "This individual had been walking out in the backyard of the house and somehow slipped and fell over the side of the hill."

Initial reports indicated the man had fallen 14 feet, which would have required a fairly routine rescue, but it turned out the situation was not so simple. "The embankment was undercut, and there was a large cave underneath, so that complicated setting up a system to lift him up," King said.

In addition, the man, whose name was not released, had suffered a head injury and was drifting in and out of consciousness, and he and the two others were freezing in the encroaching surf. "The patient was partially in the water when the paramedic got down there, and the two civilian rescuers were in the water, too, so everyone was wet, cold and hypothermic toward the end," he said.

Helicopter sent

The whole ordeal took about two hours, according to King. Paramedic/engineer Noelle Bahnmiller and Capt. Sunny Smith handled rescue operations from the base of the cliff, setting up a lift system with a Stokes litter to get the critical patient to safety. When he was about two-thirds of the way up, members of the Monterey County Sheriff's Search and Rescue Team arrived and completed the haul by using the winch on their truck.

An ambulance rushed the patient to Carmel Middle School, where a CALSTAR helicopter landed to fly him to the Regional Medical Center of San Jose.

A second ambulance took the other two patients to Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula for treatment of scrapes and bruises, as well as hypothermia.

"The gentleman had a back injury that he sustained going down that cliff, and the lady got scratched up going down as well," King said.

He could not say whether alcohol was a factor.

See **NAB** page 8A

Cartier White

P.G. inn owes nearly quarter-million in TOT

■ Bankruptcy may forestall collection

By KELLY NIX

THE OWNERS of one of Pacific Grove's best known inns owe more than \$200,000 in back taxes, according to the city, which is in the process of trying to recoup the lost revenue as the inn's owners make their way through federal bankruptcy court.

According to city officials, the operators of Lighthouse Lodge and Suites, Jacqui and Brian Pfeiffer, owe \$231,602 in transient occupancy tax — the 10 percent tax innkeepers in Pacific Grove collect from visitors and are required to pay to the city every quarter, the

See **TOT** page 19A

AN OAKLAND man with a long rap sheet for theft spent Christmas Eve in Carmel shoplifting — until he made the poor decision to try to rip off a clothing store where clerks have a strong record of catching thieves — according to Carmel P.D. Sgt. Paul Tomasi. As a result, 44-year-old Cartier White, who also allegedly tried to run down one of the employees with his car, ended up going to jail.

"Apparently, he decided to go into Palooosh, and they were occupied in the back with customers," Tomasi said of the trendy, pricey Ocean Avenue clothing store. "And when they walked out, they noticed he was holding something



FLOAT

From page 1A

time — will make up more than 100 detailed Mexican tiles.

Float building began in November, when the nonprofit hosted a one-day Construction Blitz inviting return volunteers and newcomers to help assemble its structure, from bending and welding pencil steel in the shape of palm fronds, vines and trees, to covering the float in foam to prepare it for the flowers.

In mid-December, the SMRFA hosted a Deco Blitz, bringing helpers together to decorate the Mission spires in oatmeal, cinnamon and seeds, create palm-tree bark and bougainvillea vines, intricately detail monarch butterfly wings with orange lentils, rice and strawflowers, and undertake other tasks. Organizers hoped to complete at least 35 percent of the work before Christmas.

And the day after Christmas, they launched into Deco Week — a full-tilt effort to get the float finished in time for the first round of judging Thursday and final judging Friday afternoon. Their masterpiece is set to be dedicated at 5 p.m.

TOT

From page 1A

city's budget director said.

Once the Pfliegers got behind, Jim Becklenberg told The Pine Cone, staff sent them a series of letters about the past-due TOT, per the city's municipal code that outlines TOT enforcement rules. The couple was later afforded a city hearing.

"Based on the hearing, we were able to determine what they owed the city including tax and penalties and interest," Becklenberg explained. "Around that same time, once we finalized that, we learned [the Pfliegers] filed for bankruptcy protection, which effectively put our claim on hold."

According to bankruptcy documents filed Dec. 15, Lighthouse Lodge LLC, employed 35 workers and in the last fiscal year had \$3.2 million in gross revenues. It owed about \$8.7 million on a to Orix Capital Markets, had \$291,000 in "priority" unsecured debt and \$5.7 million in other debt, owed to more than 175 suppliers and other vendors. Court records show the property was valued at \$18.5 million and the company had \$213,000 in cash.

The owners apparently stopped making payments on the mortgage sometime before March 2009, when Orix declared the loan in default. U.S. Bankruptcy Judge Stephen Johnson ruled Dec. 28 the inn should be sold to pay off creditors.

Jacci Pflieger, who is listed on the inn's website as the general manager, couldn't be reached for comment via phone and email messages. The Pfliegers also own Anton Inn off Lighthouse Avenue.

Becklenberg said he's confident the city will be able to collect the TOT after the Pfliegers' bankruptcy proceedings have been finalized.

"Hopefully the city will find out in the next few months when we will be able to collect that debt," Becklenberg said.

Pacific Grove collects about \$2.8 million in TOT every year, which trails behind the \$4 million it collects in sales tax and is just shy of the \$2.9 million it gets from property tax.

Becklenberg said Pacific Grove inns don't often fall behind on their TOT.

"The vast majority are current," he said. "Occasionally we have someone who falls behind a quarter, but they pay with penalties and interest promptly, in most cases."

Chamber of Commerce President Moe Ammar said it's a "sad day in Pacific Grove when a nice property like Lighthouse Lodge fails." Ammar said visitors to the chamber office on Central regularly ask for directions to the inn.

"The Pfliegers had a huge following, especially from [visitors from] the Central Valley," Ammar explained. "They ran a good operation but were victims of the prevailing economic conditions."

New Year's Eve, and at 8 the next morning, the float bearing its three-story Mission of flowers will begin the two-hour journey at Green Street and Orange Grove Boulevard in Pasadena.

"In the last five years, Sierra Madre has received five consecutive awards," according to the group. "The association is steadily building a reputation for fine craftsmanship and outstanding floral design."

Meier, in his early 30s, has been responsible for several of those award-winning efforts, beginning with his first design for Sierra Madre in 2006. During a 2008 interview with Bill Coburn of www.sierramadrenews.net, he commented, "One of the things I find so delightful about the Rose Parade is that

it's a display of extravagant beauty for no good reason at all. And I think that's something that people need; it's something that I need ... Fish swim because that's how they're made, and I seem to design floats because that's how I'm made." In fact, Meier has designed floats since he was a kid, and his first design to become reality was selected by South Pasadena for the 1992 Rose Parade, when he was a teenager.

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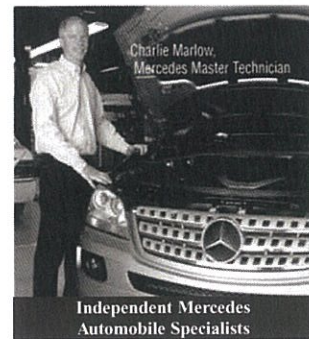
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