

NEW REVELATIONS in investigators' reports
on top Atherton officials. Page 5

The Almanac



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THE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER FOR MENLO PARK, ATHERTON, PORTOLA VALLEY AND WOODSIDE

DECEMBER 19, 2007

www.TheAlmanacOnline.com

| VOL. 43 NO. 16

The sights & sounds of the Holidays

—Page 10



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Inside

This week's news, features and community events.

FIRST SHOT



Photo by Barbara Wood

Woodside sets the stage

These six Clydesdales, owned by Jeanne Williams of the Williams Ranch between Woodside and La Honda, led a procession of carriages Sunday as part of the Peninsula Carriage Driving Club's annual Christmas ride through Woodside. Driving is Keith Andrade, left, assisted by David Benninghoven.

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Family Almanac

- Barbara Wood on the holiday newsletter you'll never receive. **Cover, Section 2**

On the cover

A drive through Menlo Park to admire the many homes festively decorated for the holidays is a treat these December nights. This sparkling doorway reflects a Nutcracker theme. Almanac photo by Veronica Weber. For more photos, see **Page 10**.

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THE ALMANAC (ISSN 1097-3095 and USPS 459370) is published every Wednesday by Embarcadero Publishing Co., 3525 Alameda de las Pulgas, Menlo Park, CA 94025-4455. Periodicals Postage Paid at Menlo Park, CA and at additional mailing offices. Adjudicated a newspaper of general circulation for San Mateo County, the Almanac is delivered free to homes in Menlo Park, Atherton, Portola Valley and Woodside. Voluntary subscriptions for \$30 per year or \$50 per 2 years are welcome from residents of the above circulation area. Subscription rates for businesses and for residents of other communities is \$50 per year and \$80 for two years. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to the Almanac, P.O. Box 7008, Menlo Park, CA 94026-7008. Copyright ©2006 by Embarcadero Publishing Co., All rights reserved. Reproduction without permission is strictly prohibited.

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	~ Serves 12 to 16 people \$29.00	Pint \$5.25 Quart \$10.50
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Pint \$5.75 Quart \$11.50	Pint \$6.00 Quart \$12.00	
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Pint \$5.25 Quart \$10.50	Pint \$6.00 Quart \$12.00	
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Local News

MENLO PARK | ATHERTON | WOODSIDE | PORTOLA VALLEY

Atherton releases reports on former officials

Report: Former finance director was disrespectful, frequently absent

By **Andrea Gemmet**
Almanac Staff Writer

There isn't a lot of positive news about Atherton's ex-finance director in the investigator's report about him. The only silver lining might be the fact that investigator Mary Topliff, a San Francisco-based attorney, didn't find that John Johns discriminated

against colleagues for racist or sexist reasons.

The rest of the report, released Dec. 11 in response to the Almanac's state Public Records Act request, paints a damaging picture of a man described as disrespectful and frequently absent.

"Most of the employees I interviewed

See **JOHNS**, page 8

Report probes allegations, but makes no findings against ex-building chief

By **Andrea Gemmet**
Almanac Staff Writer

An investigator probed allegations that Mike Hood, Atherton's former building official, undermined town rules, accepted gifts and didn't properly supervise his fractious employees, but failed to make findings because Mr. Hood decided to retire.

Investigator Lance Bayer was hired last year by the town to explore allegations against Mr. Hood and accusations against two of his employees, whose names were withheld. Mr. Bayer is a San Jose-based attorney.

The allegations against the employees held up — one employee for making

See **HOOD**, page 8

Portola Valley sets new limits on basements

■ Basements over 20 percent of above-ground floor area will shrink house size.

By **David Boyce**
Almanac Staff Writer

The basement — long an amenity under homes in Eastern states — is relatively new to Portola Valley and its tradition of single-story ranch-style houses without below-ground facilities.

That tradition is changing. Of the 71 new homes built in town between 1998 and 2005, 31 have had basements, Town Planner George Mader said in a Dec. 3 memo summarizing the trend for the Town Council.

Many of the basements are the size of a

small house. The average is listed at 1,650 square feet. The largest, at 3,450 square feet, is 54 percent as big as the house it sits under, while the smallest is 200 square feet, about 11 percent as large as the house above.

The basement trend may well continue, but the days of building something half as big as the house above are numbered. Under new regulations introduced Dec. 12 by a 4-0 vote (with Councilman Richard Merk absent), such a basement would mandate a smaller house. A council vote to enact the ordinance is set for Jan. 9.

The new rules generally give

a pass to basements less than or equal to 20 percent of the house's above-ground floor area. Basements larger than that trigger a formula that trades 2 square feet of basement for 1 square foot of the house above it.

Thus, if a homeowner insisted on a 3,000-square-foot basement under a planned 5,000-square-foot home, the ordinance would ratchet back the size of the house to 3,500 square feet.

One exception to the 20 percent rule concerns high ceilings. A basement area with a ceiling higher than 12 feet would double its square footage calculation. For example, a 100-square-foot section of basement with a 15-foot ceiling would be counted as 200 square feet of floor space.

The new ordinance reflects much deliberation within town government about basements, including 11 discussions by the Planning Commission since 2003, three by the Architecture & Site Control Commission, and 12 staff reports, Mr. Mader said.

Among the main concerns: the impact on vegetation from the extra grading and on traffic from off-hauling of dirt, the higher intensity of use of homes that

See **BASEMENTS**, page 8

'It almost seems like it's a religion that members of the Planning Commission belong to, but not everyone in town belongs to that religion.'

PORTOLA VALLEY RESIDENT SALLYANN REISS



The Almanac/David Boyce

Nancy Lund, Portola Valley town historian, holds a brass plaque level while her husband Tor prepares to attach it to the wall at the Alpine Inn on Dec 10. The plaque commemorates the Aug. 27, 1976, transmission of an electronic message via radio and computer networks, the first successful implementation of a process known as internetworking.

Plaque marks birth of 'internetworking'

By **David Boyce**
Almanac Staff Writer

Simplicity is a fine goal, but complexity tends to be the uncomfortable reality. The stroke of elegance is in making the complex simple, as occurred 31 years ago in Portola Valley when scientists transmitted a radio message from an Alpine Inn picnic table to SRI in Menlo Park and then to a computer in Boston via the ARPANET, the forerunner of the Internet.

That successful mixing of radio and computer networks — a process known as internetworking — is akin to having a carrier

pigeon fly the message from the Alpine Inn to SRI and hand it off to a stork for the trip to Boston. The pigeon and the stork are both birds, but markedly different ones.


Getting differently configured networks to interact with each other on that day in August 1976 confirmed the effectiveness of the transmission control protocol — the TCP of TCP/IP. A new brass plaque inside the Alpine Inn at 3915 Alpine Road recalls the event.

David Laws, a resident of Portola Valley and a volunteer at the Computer History Museum in Mountain View, informed town

historian Nancy Lund of the Alpine Inn's role in the internetworking event.

Ms. Lund said in an interview that she suggested a plaque to Alpine Inn owner Molly Alexander. Ms. Alexander initially resisted due to the cost, Ms. Lund said, but was persuaded by resident Patrick Yam, founder of Sensei Partners, an early-stage venture capital firm in Menlo Park.

Authentic brass plaques don't grow on trees. Inventor and Portola Valley resident Bob Zider, founder of the product development firm Beta Group in Menlo Park, agreed to put up the \$200 to pay for it, Ms. Lund said. ■



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AT STANFORD



Menlo Park trustees say *si* to Spanish immersion kindergarten

■ They will decide its location at a Jan. 9 meeting.

By Marjorie Mader
Almanac Staff Writer

■ SCHOOLS

Young parents passionate about launching a Spanish immersion program for kindergartners at a Menlo Park school next August finally received the answer they have wanted for a long time.

Trustees of the Menlo Park City School District last week said *si*. They voted 3-2 to launch one kindergarten Spanish immersion class next August.

The decision at the Dec. 12 board meeting followed a two-and-a-half-hour discussion, which included a presentation by parent Tricia Barr in support of starting the program next year.

The immersion program will follow the school district's basic curriculum, but will be taught in Spanish.

At a special board session on Wednesday, Jan. 9, the board plans to choose the school where the Spanish immersion class will be taught. During the session, scheduled to start at 7 p.m., the superintendent will present options.

The meeting, which will also address proposed attendance boundary changes, is scheduled to be held at the district office, 181 Encinal Ave. in Atherton, but may be moved to the Encinal multi-use room.

The board's decision on Spanish immersion went against Superintendent Ken Ranella's recommendation. He suggested waiting a year before launching an immersion program because the district has "so much on its plate now."

He cited the challenges of reconfiguring the grades at Laurel (from K-2 to K-3) and Encinal (from grades 3-5 to K-5

in three years); shifting school attendance boundaries; continuing the district's \$91.1 million facilities bond construction project; and implementing a newly approved non-immersion Spanish language program for grades 3-5 next year.

Trustees Terry Thygesen, Jeff Child and Bruce Ives voted for beginning the immersion program next year. By waiting, they said, the district could miss an opportunity to develop a program that has strong support from involved parents.

Trustees Laura Rich and Deborah Fitz voted no. They acknowledged that there is interest and sufficient parent demand to fill a kindergarten class, but they were against starting the program in August.

In a written statement to the Almanac, parents Tricia Barr, Elizabeth Ouren and Loren Gruner praised the decision to begin the immersion program next year, saying it will "develop crucial bilingualism and cultural literacy in our children."

"Such skills will be important to later success in the growing global economy, which increasingly relies upon an understanding of language and culture other than our own."

The parents noted that the program has significant support: "A recent survey conducted by the (school district) of district families showed that of those currently enrolled and who will have children in kindergarten or first grade in fall 2008, nearly 40 percent would enroll their children in a Spanish immersion

program and make a multiyear commitment."

Superintendent Ranella suggested an alternative to beginning the program next year: Extend the grades 3-5 Spanish program approved last month to kindergartners. "There are multiple ways of offering foreign language [instruction]," he said.

Other action

The Spanish immersion debate emerged as part of the discussion of general guidelines for the new kindergarten program that starts at Encinal in August. It's up to Encinal Principal Allison Liner and the school's kindergarten teachers to develop the specifics of the kindergarten program.

Trustees unanimously agreed to two of the superintendent's recommendations: Provide a full-day instructional program at Encinal for kindergartners who can benefit from the extended day and offer that option for parents who believe their child can benefit from the program.

Currently, there are three kindergarten options in the district: a full-day at Oak Knoll; an extended day, also at Oak Knoll, when some students stay longer with the teacher for small group activities; and Laurel's staggered-schedule program, in which all students meet in small groups part of the day and group instruction in the middle of the day, when all kindergartners are on campus.

Kindergarten classes have 20 students and receive state funding under the class size reduction program.

Registration of the next school year's kindergartners begins in February at Encinal, Laurel and Oak Knoll schools. ■

Trustees deadlock; call special election

By Marjorie Mader
Almanac Staff Writer

■ PORTOLA VALLEY

Trustees of the Portola Valley School District unanimously agreed last week to call a special election May 6 to fill a vacancy on the five-member board after deadlocking 2-2 on appointing one of two applicants for the job.

The election will cost the district an estimated \$10,000. The seat is vacant because of the Oct. 18 resignation of trustee Donna Carano, who had two years remaining on her term.

The deadlock over the appointment came down to two votes

for Karen Jordan, whose four-year term on the board expired this month; and two votes for Brad Turner, who came in third in an election for two board seats in November.

Neither side would budge after three meetings and lengthy discussions.

Mr. Turner said Monday he plans to file as a candidate in the election. Ms. Jordan said: "I have no idea if I'm running or not. It's a little early. I don't even know the dates for filing. I'm going to enjoy my holidays

and come back after the new year and think about it."

No budging

New board President Ray Villareal and recently elected trustee Judith Mendelsohn steadfastly supported appointing Ms. Jordan, who has a long history of involvement with the district as a parent volunteer, PTA president, and liaison with other school districts.

Trustee Don Collat and recently elected trustee Steve Humphreys also did not budge on their choice: Mr. Turner, an entrepreneur who

See TRUSTEES, page 16

REAL ESTATE Q&A

by Gloria Darke



How the right emotional appeal will help sell your home

Q: Can you offer any insights that will help us sell our house quickly?

Buying a home is one of the biggest decisions most people will ever make. Therefore, sellers deal with more than the many features and benefits of their property. Sellers must also deal with, or at least be aware of, the buyers' emotions. People can get very emotional when making a major decision, especially when it comes to their home. Sellers should be sensitive to what appeals to the buyers' emotional needs.

The best way to accomplish this is to set the stage for prospective buyers to literally fall in love with your home. A warm appeal and atmosphere give the seller the best opportunity to achieve this goal. Be aware, however, that the buyer doesn't want to see too much of you

in the house; rather, they want to picture themselves there. Do some depersonalizing by taking all the old photographs off the wall, organizing bookshelves and cleaning out the closets. Many sellers object to this and like their home to have a lived-in look, which is understandable. But it's YOUR lived-in look, not theirs. So a key strategy is for the seller to consider everything from the buyers' point of view, not your own.

Sellers should put themselves in the buyers' shoes by taking a fresh look at the property with "buyers' eyes". It is helpful to get a third party point of view as well, and your realtor should be able to provide guidance. It is also great to hire a stager for either a consultation or to help you prepare the house for the market. Remember, it's the buyers' emotions that rule the buying process.

For answers to any questions you may have on real estate, you may e-mail me at gdarke@apr.com or call 462-1111, Alain Pinel Realtors. I also offer a freemarket analysis of your property.

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Report: Ex-finance director was 'bully,' often absent

JOHNS

continued from page 5

described him as a bully, intimidating, threatening and the like toward men and women in the workplace," Ms. Topliff wrote in her report.

Mr. Johns was fired Oct. 29, following a two-month paid suspension after complaints that he created a hostile work environment were lodged by police Chief Bob Brennan and another, unnamed Atherton employee. While the hostile workplace complaint appears to have no merit, according to Ms. Topliff, town official clearly found grounds for Mr. Johns' dismissal in the report.

Mr. Johns is contending that the report is inaccurate, and is part of the retaliation he faced for turning up apparent fiscal misdeeds in the building, police and other town departments.

He filed a \$500,000 wrongful termination claim against the town, and is claiming that Atherton officials violated the town's whistleblower protection policy.

"I am confident that, when this matter is litigated, a court of competent jurisdiction will find that the report has no basis in fact and that the investigation will be seen for what it is — a sham conducted for the purpose of promoting the personal and political objectives of certain appointed and elected officials within the Atherton Town Government," Mr. Johns said in a written statement to the Almanac.

But while Mr. Johns has turned up expense policy violations in other departments, the report accuses him of making dubious purchases of his own with a town credit card.

The most serious findings in the report

involve Mr. Johns' allegedly using town computers and town time to pursue his outside consulting jobs, viewing pornographic images on his computer, and violating the town's code of conduct with disrespectful and intimidating behavior toward colleagues and town consultants. Ms. Topliff's report also contends that Mr. Johns undermined the authority of former city manager Jim Robinson.

Mr. Johns denied viewing the pornographic images.

"Since I was away from the office on that day, and since the town of Atherton's Internet account can only be accessed via the town's local area network, it is a physical impossibility for me to have violated the town's e-mail and Internet access policy," he said in his statement.

While allegedly alienating his fellow town employees, Mr. Johns has enjoyed the support of the Atherton Audit Committee, a panel of council-appointed residents who oversee the annual outside audit of the town's books. They point to the series of unblemished, "unqualified" audits the town has received since Mr. Johns became finance director in late 2001.

Councilman Charles Marsala, who has been an outspoken detractor of Mr. Johns, said the Topliff report mirrors his own research, conducted via numerous public records act requests for Mr. Johns' e-mails, phone records and expenses.

"John Johns' shenanigans with abusing his town credit card and position as financial

director cast a cloud over the unqualified audits Atherton has received over the past several years," Mr. Marsala said. "He has hired a neighbor as an (administrative) assistant at \$50 per hour without approval, (and) on his Town credit card we noticed an iPod, a camera, and photo printer for personal use."

Mr. Johns said he never concealed the purpose of the iPod he bought.

"The iPod was displayed in full view of staff and of the city manager and ... no attempt was made to conceal the nature of the item's use. In fact the city manager commented (to) me on my choice of music on more than one occasion," Mr. Johns said in his statement.

Outside work

The issue of whether Mr. Johns was actually working full time for the town rose this summer, when Atherton resident Randy Lamb presented the City Council with a

copy of Mr. Johns' contract with Sutter County and his bid on another, out-of-state consulting job.

Mr. Johns has said that he took on outside work with the knowledge of City Manager Robinson, who understood that Mr. Johns was taking a pay cut when he came to work for the town. However, Mr. Robinson told Ms. Topliff he was unaware of Mr. Johns' outside work, with the exception of a teaching job Mr. Johns held when he was hired.

Ms. Topliff said she believes Mr. Johns violated Atherton's fraud policy by spending time on outside jobs that appeared on his timesheet as hours spent working for the town. Using town assets for personal gain is

prohibited under Atherton policy.

"I do not have sufficient information to conclude that Mr. Johns did not perform at least eight hours of work for the town on the days he reported as time worked, but I do note that in April 2007 he reported 128 hours worked for HRA (Harvey Rose & Associates consulting firm) — equivalent to 16 eight-hour work days, or over three weeks — while working for the town every day that month — 21 work days — according to the town's time records," Ms. Topliff's report said.

Many employees told her they noticed that Mr. Johns arrived late, left early, and was frequently absent, Ms. Topliff's report said.

Mr. Johns said he used his desktop computer in the finance department for backup data storage, which is why Ms. Topliff's investigation found two documents relating to his outside consulting. He said Ms. Topliff never questioned him about it. "Incidental and minimal use" of government property is not prohibited, Mr. Johns said.

"Ms. Topliff acknowledges that only two documents during my six-year tenure were identified to have been created during normal business hours," Mr. Johns said in his statement. "Hence, the information acquired by Ms. Topliff supports, rather than contradicts, my assertion that the use of the town's computer systems was incidental and minimal."

In the report, Mr. Johns said he believes he's been targeted because he raised concerns with expenses in the Atherton Police Department and because Interim City Manager Wende Protzman's husband is a retired police officer. "Mr. Johns believes that he is being retaliated against because Ms. Protzman perceives him to be a competitor of hers for the city manager job," Ms. Topliff wrote in her report. ■

REPORTS ONLINE

The investigative reports on former Atherton Finance Director John Johns and former Building Official Mike Hood are available online at www.TheAlmanacOnline.com.

HOOD

continued from page 5

threats against then-Finance Director John Johns and another employee for being rude to coworkers and the public, and working against the town's interests, according to Mr. Bayer's report.

However, while Mr. Bayer's report documents his investigation into the allegations against Mr. Hood, he said he made "no findings" due to Mr. Hood's retirement on June 30, 2006.

The 65-page report details allegations that Mr. Hood:

■ Undermined the initiation of the town's excavation fees.

■ Had false dealings with Mr. Johns and City Manager Jim Robinson regarding the excavation fees.

■ Improperly accepted gifts.

■ Failed to adequately and effectively supervise his employees.

A redacted version of Mr. Bayer's report, dated June 6, 2006, was released on Monday, Dec. 17, in response to a state Public Records Act request by the Almanac. Only the names

of department heads and two town residents are included in the report, while about 30 other names were withheld.

The short-lived excavation fee was meant to reimburse the town for wear-and-tear on its roads by heavily laden trucks hauling dirt from basement projects. Enacted in May 2006, the fee proved wildly unpopular and in September of that year, amid threats of lawsuits, it was dumped by the City Council. The town refunded the approximately \$350,000 in excavation fees, plus interest, that had been collected.

However, that summer questions arose about whether the building department improperly issued excavation permits just before the fee went into effect, allowing some builders to avoid it. The issue helped trigger a series of internal audits led by Mr. Johns.

Mr. Hood departed amidst the ensuing tumult, which saw a number of changes to the building department's procedures, the hiring of additional staff, purchase of new permit-tracking software, and the reassignment

of Lois English, the department's permit technician.

The council also took action against several construction projects that apparently had zoning and permit problems, resulting in legal action against the town.

Mr. Bayer's interviews show that Mr. Hood was aware that one of his employees threatened Mr. Johns after being questioned about how excavation fees were calculated. Mr. Hood said he didn't think the threats were serious, the report said.

Mr. Hood also said he had received about "half a dozen" complaints about the other employee's rudeness, and that he was aware there were some coworkers whom the employee refused to talk to, but that he took no disciplinary action.

"As long as business gets conducted, that's my concern. What a person does as far as their personal choices, that's their own business," Mr. Hood reportedly told Mr. Bayer.

Mr. Hood characterized his own management style as "pretty hands-off," the report said. ■

BASEMENTS

continued from page 5

have basements, and excavation outside the basement's footprint to allow light to enter during the day but also leak out at night. Portola Valley safeguards its darkness for activities such as stargazing.

"There ought to be some limit," Councilman Ted Driscoll said. "The question is, what is the right limit? I believe this permits a very substantial basement to be built on every lot in town."

Crossing the line?

As it deliberated on where to set the basement size limit, the Planning Commission was guided by the idea that "a person ought to be able to have a reasonable-sized basement with no penalty," Mr. Mader told the council.

Resident SallyAnn Reiss was not convinced. The commission has departed from its focus on minimizing a homeowner's impact on neighbors, she told the council. "I feel like this ordinance is starting to cross the line into personal property rights," she said.

"All I'm hearing is the need to decrease the size of houses. Below

ground, at the cost of all these walls and various things, who cares? It's their property. ... It almost seems like it's a religion that members of the Planning Commission belong to, but not everyone in town belongs to that religion."

Resident Paul Wick sounded a similar note. "The proposal from the Planning Commission strikes me as regulation run amok," he said. "So what if Portola Valley had lots of ranch-style houses. We're not living in 1960 anymore."

Deputy Town Planner Tom Vlastic noted, with agreement from council members, that Portola Valley is acting in anticipation of tough new building codes coming from the state.

Former mayor Bill Lane linked the issue to global warming. "I think people are going to find out that dealing with this problem is going to complicate our lives," he said. "We've got to think differently. ... I support what the town is trying to achieve."

"The rest of the county and the world should be so lucky as to be governed the way Portola Valley is," added former mayor Jon Silver. ■

Parties to Derry settlement say they won't reveal all the details

■ Councilman John Boyle says he's disappointed in the process that led to compromise.

By Rory Brown
Almanac Staff Writer

As the new, smaller Derry condo-commercial project makes its way through the Menlo Park planning process, it's clear that some aspects of the closed-door negotiations that led to the new project will remain a secret to the public.

Derry project developer San Mateo-based O'Brien Group and members of Menlo Park Tomorrow, the residents' group that led a successful referendum against the 135-condo project last fall, have opted to not reveal all of the details of their settlement — a move that has raised questions about what the two groups are hiding regarding the deal they struck in May.

That deal calls for a 108-condo project at a 3.4-acre site that borders Oak Grove Avenue and Derry Lane, between El Camino Real and the Caltrain tracks. In addition to having fewer units than the original project, the new proposal would lower building heights from four stories to three, add a 3,500-square-foot public plaza, and include an extra \$2 million payment to the city.

Morris Brown, spokesperson for the residents' group, said that contrary to rumors floating around town, he wasn't paid off by the developer to strike a

deal — a stance confirmed by O'Brien Group spokesperson Jim Pollart at a recent City Council meeting.

"No money exchanged hands, I promise you that," Mr. Brown told the Almanac, noting that

'I'm also bothered by the fact that this proposal was negotiated behind closed doors by private individuals and is now being presented to the city largely as a take-it-or-leave-it proposal.'

COUNCILMAN JOHN BOYLE

none of the \$10,000 he spent to support the referendum was reimbursed. "This stuff we're not releasing is legal mumbo jumbo. ... We can't release it at this point because we don't want to compromise our position if this thing still ends up going to a vote."

The Derry project is expected to be considered by the Planning Commission and council members in the first half of 2008. If the council signs off on the new, smaller project agreed upon by

the two parties, the referendum against the original project would be annulled, voiding the need for the original project to go to a vote.

Mr. Pollart could not be reached for further comment.

E-mail wars

Councilman John Boyle has been the lone council member to criticize the nature of the Derry negotiations and settlement, and knocked the new project in a recent newsletter e-mailed to supporters and the press.

"This may be the best compromise we can get, but I'm disappointed in the process that got us here," says Mr. Boyle, a supporter of the original Derry project, in the e-mail. "I'm also bothered by the fact that this proposal was negotiated behind closed doors by private individuals and is now being presented to the city largely as a 'take-it-or-leave-it' proposal."

Mr. Brown sent an e-mail of his own to the council, which appeared on the council's e-mail log, disputing several of Mr. Boyle's arguments against the latest Derry proposal, prompting Mr. Boyle to reply with another message.

"Each has his point of view, and I'm not interested in taking sides," said Mayor Andy Cohen of the e-mail spat. "I'm more interested in letting us get on with the El Camino Real process so we don't have any more problems like this." ■

Upgraded bike bridge considered over U.S. 101

By Rory Brown
Almanac Staff Writer

If Menlo Park bicycle commissioners and Caltrans officials have their way, the Menlo Park City Council will approve a new bicycle and pedestrian bridge over U.S. 101 that connects the east and west parts of the city.

The new bridge would replace the existing pedestrian and bicycle overpass that connects Ringwood Avenue to east Menlo Park — the easiest way for students who walk and bike to Menlo-Atherton High School to cross the freeway.

Caltrans is adding auxiliary lanes — additional lanes for traffic to merge on and off the freeway — to U.S. 101 between Embarcadero Road in Palo Alto and Marsh Road in Menlo Park,

and a new, slightly higher bridge is needed to clear the freeway, according to city staff.

Council members will con-

'There's no reason the freeway should be this boundary for people who walk and ride their bicycles.'

BICYCLE COMMISSIONER BOB STEELE

sider the issue at their meeting on Tuesday, Dec. 18. The meeting is scheduled to start at 7 p.m. in the council chambers at the Civic Center, between Laurel and Alma streets.

The Bicycle Commission

voted unanimously Nov. 5 to recommend that the council approve the construction of a new bridge, but keep the existing bridge open so it can be used until a new one is built — a plan Caltrans officials support. The new bridge would be located near the existing overpass, according to Caltrans' plans.

"We consider the bike and pedestrian bridge really valuable," said Bob Steele, the commission chair. "There's no reason the freeway should be this boundary for people who walk and ride their bicycles."

The commission also recommended that the council make the existing bridge — and the new bridge, if built — safer, Mr. Steele said.

Ringwood Avenue neighbors say the overpass is a hot spot for crime, and the commission suggested that the city improve lighting, install emergency call boxes, and increase police patrol on the bridge. ■

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The sights of sounds

of the



In photos, clockwise from above:

- Rob Gentry and other Nativity School volunteers help haul customers' Christmas trees;
- Margaret Sullivan Durando conducts the choirs of Nativity and St. Raymond churches and St. Francis High School at a St. Patrick's Seminary concert;
- from left, Patrick Wilkinson, Oliver Weiss, Lucy Weiss and Max Weiss run around a decorated Woodside Fire Station flagpole;
- Rajit Ghosh prefers his mom, Jennifer Ghosh, to Santa;
- Warren Cook waits to talk to Santa at Woodside Fire Station;
- this Menlo Park home sparkles with a Snoopy theme.

Story by JANE KNOERLE *Almanac Staff Writer* ■ Photos by VER



holidays

The holiday season is a time for tradition. It's heading out to Webb Ranch to find the perfect tree, visiting Santa Claus, rehearsing with the choir for Midnight Mass or hosting a Hanukkah party. Tradition means making Aunt June's sugar cookies or Grandma Rose's latkes. Christmas Eve wouldn't be the same without a cup of Uncle Bill's eggnog. Making these holiday treats is a way of remembering those we have known and loved.

Now children are opening advent calendars each morning to count the days until Christmas. There's still so much to do, even Santa's making a list. We brave the mall for last-minute gifts, wrap packages until midnight, run to the hardware store for another string of lights, and remember to order the turkey.

Somehow each year it all comes together. All the hard work and preparation fade as we bask in the warm glow of a Christmas tree or Hanukkah menorah on these cold winter nights. Another year is almost past and a New Year awaits. **A**



CONICA WEBER *Almanac Staff Photographer*

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Dr. Sangani has a strong background in preventive medicine and promoting **wellness** and education among her patients. In addition, she has extensive experience in **women's health** and chronic disease management.

With her years of practice, Dr. Sangani has cultivated strong relationships among the physician and patient community in the Bay Area. She was also named one of "**America's Top Physicians**" in 2006 by the Consumers Research Council of America. Please give The Village Doctor a call to schedule your introductory meeting: 650.851.4747.



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Sheriff's Office investigates graffiti vandalism at school

By Marjorie Mader
Almanac Staff Writer

The San Mateo County Sheriff's Office is investigating extensive vandalism that took place Nov. 30 at Corte Madera School in Portola Valley.

"Graffiti was spray-painted everywhere — on walls, classroom doors, lockers, eaves, artwork, walkways, windows, and courtyard tables," Superintendent Anne Campbell said in a letter to school parents.

"Some of the graffiti was directed at staff members, some was targeted at the school as a whole, some was of a sexual nature, and some was drug-related," she said. "There was a definite homophobic component to several of the comments."

The extensive tagging appears to be the work of older youth and not students currently at Corte Madera, the district's grade 4-8 school, said Ms. Campbell.

"It was hideous," said Portola Valley Mayor Maryann Derwin when the topic came up at the Town Council meeting Dec. 12.

Teachers who returned to Corte Madera on Saturday morning, Dec. 1, were shocked to discover the extent of the spray-painted graffiti on the exteriors of the buildings on campus.

The Sheriff's Office was contacted immediately and worked throughout that the weekend on the investigation that is continuing.

District maintenance staff scraped spray paint from the buildings and then repainted the exterior walls throughout the weekend.

The cost of the cleanup — mainly time and materials costs — was estimated at \$1,302, but the impact on staff and students was devastating.

Principal Joel Willen and Ms. Campbell spoke with the sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders the next school day after the vandalism and asked for their help in identifying the people responsible. They also asked parents and other community members to contact them at school if they have any information about the incident.

The source of the information will be kept in strict confidence, but the school needs anyone who knows something about what happened that Friday evening to come forward, said Ms. Campbell.

"The graffiti showed an absolute lack of respect for our teachers, our students, and our school," wrote Ms. Campbell and Mr. Willen in the district's weekly newsletter, the Tuesday Post. "This is one of those very difficult situations where the actions of a few people have a negative impact on everyone else."

They called on parents and students to stand up against the disrespect that was expressed by sharing information that will help lead to the people responsible. ■

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Death of cyclist who fell on Sand Hill Road ruled 'accidental'

■ Lower speed limits coming soon for two unincorporated arterials.

By David Boyce
Almanac Staff Writer

Deborah Johnson, the 51-year-old Palo Alto bicyclist who died July 24 in Stanford Hospital after falling off her bike in Menlo Park two days earlier, died accidentally, according to a spokeswoman for the Santa Clara County coroner's office.

The cause of death was blunt force injuries to the head and trunk, the spokeswoman said. Ms. Johnson, who was wearing a helmet and riding with friends, hit her head in the fall, Menlo Park police said.

The incident occurred on Sand Hill Road west of Branner Drive in Menlo Park while the group of cyclists was heading east.

About a mile west of that spot on Sand Hill Road and on Alpine Road, lower speed limits will be going into effect in January following a recent decision by the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors.

New speed limits

Ms. Johnson's accident is one of five major accidents involving bicyclists on the Sand Hill/Portola/Alpine Road cycling loop over the past 12 months.

The current 55 mph limit on Sand Hill between Whiskey Hill Road and Interstate 280 will drop to 50 mph in January, in part because of the high volume of cyclists in that area, said Lisa Ekers, the county's road operations manager.

The county supervisors on Dec. 4 also approved a 40 mph limit, down from 45 mph, on Alpine Road between La Cuesta Drive in Ladera and Junipero Serra Boulevard in Menlo Park.

Several accidents

In December 2006, Menlo Park resident and bicycle racer MaryAnn Levenson, 48, suffered severe injuries to her head, neck, spine, ribs, airway, pelvis, arms, legs and feet when

an allegedly drunken driver in a pickup truck struck her and dragged her about 35 feet.

In May, Portola Valley resident and former Altera Corp. chief executive Rodney Smith, 67, died at the side of the road after his bicycle was struck by a car near the crest of the hill between Interstate 280 and Whiskey Hill Road.

A few days later in May, cyclist Debra Weil, 51, of Menlo Park survived a severe collision with a car at the intersection of Sand Hill

and Portola roads, but with major injuries to her face and arms.

On June 30 on Alpine Road near Golden Oak Drive, a 50-year-old cyclist from Pacifica suffered a fractured skull and facial trauma after colliding with the passenger-side rear view mirror of a Cadillac driven by a 91-year-old resident of Portola Valley. The cyclist had moved out into the traffic lane in a passing maneuver, a San Mateo County deputy sheriff said. ■

Roberts market gets green light

The unsettled matters surrounding early morning noise at the planned Roberts market in Portola Valley seemed to settle Thursday evening, Dec. 13, in the Historic Schoolhouse.

The Planning Commission voted unanimously to issue a conditional use permit to store owner George Roberts to continue remodeling the former John's Valley Foods near the corner of Alpine and Portola roads, Planning Manager Leslie Lambert told the Almanac.

To address neighbors' concerns, garbage won't be picked up before 8 a.m., delivery trucks will be encouraged to delay their arrival until after 8 a.m., and immediate neighbors will have the store manager's name and in-store phone number should they want to lodge a complaint, Ms. Lambert said.

The Planning Commission also moved up its first review of the neighborhood impact to four months after opening — and annually thereafter, Ms. Lambert said. Mr. Roberts said he is agreeable to relocating the bike rack to near the outdoor benches at the

southwest corner of the store, and to weighing the use of solar panels on the roof to offset the market's energy needs, she added.

"There was lots of good discussion," Ms. Lambert said. "After all was said and done, I think the neighbors really appreciated (Mr. Roberts') thoughtfulness and they hope that he can get these

(delivery) guys to cooperate."

The store is expected to open for business in the spring.

Clarification: In the Roberts market story in the Dec. 12 issue of the Almanac, Planning Commissioner Ann Wengert said that neighbors presuming the market would be disruptive to early morning routines should wait and see, but she did not say that their complaints were at all unseemly, as was reported in the story.

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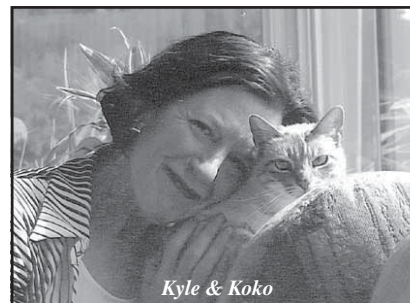
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Man suspected in 17 bank robberies

A 64-year-old Napa man — suspected in 17 bank robberies in California and Utah, including the robbery of a Menlo Park credit union on Dec.



Arthur Cheney

10 — was arrested Dec. 12 just north of Sacramento, a FBI spokesman said.

Arthur Eli Cheney was arrested by a California Highway Patrol officer at around 4:18 p.m. when the officer spotted a 2002 silver Mercedes CL500 traveling north on state Route 70 just south of Marysville.

CHP officer Rick Barnett said the vehicle matched the description the FBI had released on the so-called Highway 101 bank robber, who was given that name because many of the robberies took place in towns along U.S. 101.

The officer pulled the Mercedes over and took Mr. Cheney into custody.

The Menlo Park robbery occurred at the Provident Credit Union branch on downtown Santa Cruz Avenue around 1:35 p.m. Monday, Dec. 10, when a man handed a bank teller a note demanding money, and escaped with an undisclosed sum of cash, said Nicole Acker, spokesperson for the Menlo Park Police Department.

The suspect was described as a white man with gray hair and a moustache, wearing aviator glasses and a black leather jacket. His description matches that of a suspect in other bank robberies across California, Ms. Acker said.

The most recent robbery he is thought to be responsible for occurred the day he was arrested — Dec. 12 — in Fairfield. Other Bay Area robberies where he is the suspect were in Palo Alto, Belmont, Burlingame, San Jose and Corte Madera.

The FBI field office in San Francisco will be in charge of prosecuting the suspect, said FBI Spokesman Joseph Schadler.

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In a first, Portola Valley has two women at top of government

By David Boyce
Almanac Staff Writer

In an unprecedented concentration of women at the top of Portola Valley government, the town's new mayor for 2008 is Councilwoman MaryAnn Moise Derwin and its new vice mayor is Councilwoman Ann Wengert.

"It's the first time in Portola Valley history that the mayor and vice mayor have not had a Y chromosome," Ms. Derwin said.

Ms. Derwin was vice-mayor in 2007 and is beginning her third year on the council. Ms. Wengert, a planning commissioner since early 2004, is taking over for Councilman Ed Davis, who retired after eight years on the council and volunteer service in other capacities in the years before that.

The council appointed Ms. Wengert and incumbent Councilman Steve Toben in August rather than conduct an election in which two candidates ran for two seats.

Ms. Derwin is the fifth female mayor of the town and the first since 1989, she said in her open-

ing remarks. "I bring this point up," she added, "because I think that, by giving women visibility in the upper tier of town government, we begin to reflect the nuanced diversity within our community and in this way, our government becomes a bit more representative of the people we serve."

"We are not all the same here," she said. "While some of us do indeed meet the cultural stereotype — you know what I'm talking about: two parent households with incomes equivalent to the GNP of a small emerging nation on the other side of the world — others are single mothers or stay at home dads just trying to patch together enough savings, loans and scholarships to send the kids to college."

Ms. Derwin outlined an agenda that included finishing the new library, Town Hall and community hall; creating a green-construction point system for new and remodeled homes; opening up part of Sausal Creek at Town Center; possibly bringing back a post office and improving the town's Web site; and setting an example for other cities and towns "so they can improve the quality of life in their communities, too." ■

Romines chosen for Woodside mayor post

Ron Romines took up the gavel as mayor of Woodside at the Dec. 11 meeting after his colleagues on the Town Council unanimously chose him for the ceremonial post.

Newly elected councilman Peter Mason was tapped for the second-in-command post of mayor pro tem, also on a unanimous vote. He previously served as the chair of the Woodside Architectural and Site Review Board.

Both appointments are for one year.

Mr. Romines is a Palo Alto-based attorney specializing in mediation. He has lived in

the Woodside Glens neighborhood since 1972, and has a long history of civic involvement.

He was appointed to the council in September 2005 and was elected in November after running unopposed for the District 1 seat.

Mr. Romines served as 2007's mayor pro tem. Typically, the council taps the current mayor pro



Ron Romines

tem to serve as the next mayor.

Mr. Romines first act as mayor was to read a commendation for Sue Boynton, who graciously — and perhaps gratefully — handed over the gavel after serving as mayor in 2007. He praised Ms. Boynton's eight years of service on the council and her warm and caring personality.

Town Manager Susan George presented Ms. Boynton with a vibrantly colored wall-hanging of a sun, a gift from town staff, and thanked her for bringing sunshine into their lives during her year as mayor.

City offices closed for the holidays

Menlo Park city business offices, including the police department, City Hall administration building, library and the Onetta Harris Commu-

nity Center, will be closed for several days for the Christmas and New Year's Day holidays.

City Hall, the Onetta Harris Community Center and

the police department will be closed Dec. 21-25 and Jan. 1; the library will be closed Dec. 24-25 and Jan. 1.

The City Council will not meet Dec. 25 and Jan. 1. Meetings are scheduled to resume Jan. 8.

DR. JAMES HICKS INGLIS

Dr. James Hicks Inglis, long-time Palo Alto resident, died peacefully in his home on December 11 at the age of 91.

Jim was born and raised on the family farm near Redwood Falls City, Minnesota. He graduated from the University of Minnesota School of Dentistry in 1940, joined the U.S. Navy Dental Corp in 1942, and served in the Pacific through WW II. He continued service in the Naval Reserves until 1976, retiring with the rank of Captain.

Dr. Inglis practiced children's dentistry in Palo Alto until retirement in 1981. He was a dedicated volunteer with the Boy Scouts, Palo Alto Friends of the Library and as docent and gardener at Filoli for 24 years. Jim

was one of the original volunteers at Gamble Garden, and enjoyed his work there until his recent illness. He was an avid golfer, traveler and reader, and will be fondly remembered by all for his unceasing good nature.

Jim's first wife, Ruby Mansfield, died in 1978. He is survived by his wife of 22 years, Ann Eubanks Inglis; stepdaughter, Sue Sartor, stepson, Mark Eubanks; and five nephews and four nieces from the Inglis family.

A celebration of Jim's life will be held December 21 at 4:00 at St. Bede's Episcopal Church in Menlo Park. In lieu of flowers, the family prefers that donations be sent to your favorite charity.

PAID OBITUARY

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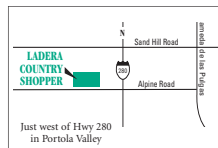


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Atherton councilmen to discuss allegations of preferential treatment

By Andrea Gemmet

Almanac Staff Writer

Atherton Vice Mayor Jim Janz said he wants to give the City Council an opportunity to publicly respond to allegations that three council members got preferential treatment from the town's building department.

Mr. Janz said the letter to the editor by Audit Committee chairman Sam Goodman, which ran in last week's Almanac, led him to add an item to the Wednesday, Dec. 19, council meeting agenda.

In the letter, Mr. Goodman defends ex-finance director John Johns, who was fired Oct. 29, and criticizes a private investigator's report on Mr. Johns' conduct. His letter also said, "The fact remains that three members of the City Council had their hands in the cookie jar of favorable treatment by the building department, didn't want the news disseminated and therefore shot the messenger."

"There were allegations of

permit irregularities and an inference that we were responsible for having (finance director John) Johns terminated," Mr. Janz said. "There were no permit irregularities, and we had nothing to do with his termination."

Mr. Janz said he preferred to discuss the allegation against his building project at the meeting, but said it involved a permit extension and a permit that was not closed out. He also said it involved work that was done before he was on the City Council.

Councilman Charles Marsala said questions were also raised about permit extensions for minor remodeling he did to his home shortly after moving to Atherton. He asked for an extension on his permit to replace cabinets because he couldn't get the work done in time. With the extension, he did not have to re-file his application, he said.

"For lack of a \$100 new permit fee, I'd bribe somebody? Come on," Mr. Marsala said, adding that he didn't get preferential treatment for being an elected

official. "I'm not a council member at that time, I'm new resident — I have no standing in town."

Former Councilman Alan Carlson, who resigned this month after selling his 7-year-old home in Atherton, announced in July that questions had arisen about the height of a portion of his roof.

Mr. Carlson said he had no idea that an 8-foot length of his roof peak was 7 inches too tall until the previous month, when an anonymous letter was sent to a Planning Commission member.

City Attorney Marc Hynes said he looked into the matter and determined it was "de minimis," a legal term signifying something that is so minor as to be insignificant. ▀

INFORMATION

The councilmen's response to Mr. Goodman's letter is the last item on the agenda for the Wednesday, Dec. 19, council meeting that starts at 7 p.m. in the Town Council Chambers, 94 Ashfield Road.

OBITUARY

Robert McKee

Former Woodside resident

Robert "Bob" McKee of Red Bluff, who grew up in Woodside, died unexpectedly on Nov. 25.



Robert McKee

He was 52.

Mr. McKee attended Portola Valley schools, and graduated from Woodside High School and San Jose State Uni-

versity. For the past seven years he had lived in Red Bluff with his wife, Diane.

Mr. McKee is survived by his wife of 28 years, Diane; his mother, Barbara McKee of Woodside; brother John McKee of Redwood City; and sister Paula Aerts of Flagstaff, Arizona.

TRUSTEES

continued from page 7

would be the only board member to have children at the district's K-3 school, Ormondale, after June 2008. He has been a classroom volunteer and served on the board of the Portola Valley Schools Foundation.

All four trustees agreed that both candidates are well-qualified to sit on the board, but none of the four was willing to switch her or his vote.

At one point, Ms. Mendelsohn proposed flipping a coin, but she didn't receive support for that idea. Mr. Collat suggested having each candidate serve a portion of the two-year term, but the board couldn't enforce this.

Unable to muster the required three votes for an appointment, the board decided on Dec. 13 to call the special election and let the voters decide. Time was

running out: The election had to be called by Dec. 17.

The state Education Code requires the governing board either to make a "provisional" appointment or order an election to fill the vacancy within 60 days after the vacancy occurs. (The appointment is called "provisional" because voters could petition to overturn the appointment and call a special election.) The code also requires that the election be held on the next election date and not less than 130 days after the election is ordered.

Superintendent Anne Campbell said the first election date after the 130-day period — Tuesday, April 22 — was not possible due to a technical conflict between the Election Code and the Education Code. There was not sufficient time to iron out the differences.

Therefore, trustees decided the next appropriate date for the elec-

tion is Tuesday, May 6. It will be an all-mail ballot election, conducted by the San Mateo County Elections Office. The county will mail ballots to all registered voters in the district. ▀



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MP boy, 10, wins squash championship

This information is from Frank Schmidt, squash coach at the Pacific Athletic Club and The Olympic Club.

Gabriel Morgan, 10, one of the top ranked under-11 junior squash players in the U.S., traveled to the Washington, D.C., area Nov. 16-18 and won the National Capitol Grand Prix Squash Championships.

Morgan, a Menlo Park resident and a fourth-grader at St. Raymond School, won the Boys Under 11/13 age division in convincing fashion, winning four straight matches 3-0, and was never seriously challenged in any games despite being one of the youngest participants in the Under 11/13 draw.

The three-day squash tournament, which featured some of the nation's best junior squash players, was held at the Episcopal High School in Alexandria, Virginia, a preparatory boarding school founded in 1839.

Morgan also did very well in the Boys U15 division. After losing his first-ever U15 tournament match, Morgan rolled off three straight victories to win the consolation final match and take home third place honors out of 12 participants.

Morgan is ranked sixth nationally in the U.S. squash rankings for Boys U11, and is ranked 35th in the Boys U13. He is a member of the Pacific Athletic Club, San Francisco Bay Club, and Stanford Squash Club.

U.S. Squash has announced that Morgan has qualified to play in the U.S. Junior Open Squash Championships, to be held Dec. 15-18 in Hartford, Connecticut. The four-day tournament will feature the top U.S.



Gabriel Morgan

and international junior squash players from around the world.

Matches will be played at Trinity College, Loomis Chafee School, and Westminster School. U.S. Squash is the official national governing body for squash.

Morgan is coached by Mark Allen, a former top-ranked world player from England, the U.S. National Team coach, and Morgan's squash coach at the San Francisco Bay Club.

Morgan is also coached by Frank Schmidt of the Olympic Club in San Francisco, and Gareth Webber, associate head squash coach of Yale University.

"Despite his relatively young age, he already has a keen perspective that squash is first and foremost about having fun and doing your best on the court," said Allen. "That it's not just about the wins or the losses. This great attitude allows him to take chances, and to be creative in his play and shot selection."

WEDDING

Xie-Fletcher

The Riverside Church in New York City was the setting Sept. 2 for the marriage of Agnes Xiaohong Xie and Mark Alan Fletcher. A reception followed at The Tavern on the Green in Central Park.

The bride is the daughter of Kaihui Xie of Beijing, China, and the late Yujie Li. She graduated from Central-South University of Technology, Changsha, China,

and received her master's degree and doctorate from Fordham University, New York City. She is a vice president in credit risk management for HSBC Bank in New York City.

The bridegroom is the son of Alma Fletcher of Kings Mountain and the late Jim Fletcher. A graduate of Wood-



Agnes Xie and Mark Fletcher

side High School, he received his bachelor's degree from California Polytechnic University, Pomona, and his doctorate from Texas A&M. He is co-owner of Turner Designs Hydrocarbon Instruments in Fresno.

Yuan Yuan of Jersey City, New Jersey, served as maid of honor at the wedding. Dr. Joshua Niclas was best man.

A local reception was held Nov. 24 at Kings Mountain Community Center for the couple, who are making their home in Jersey City.

POLICE CALLS

This information is from the Atherton and Menlo Park police departments and the San Mateo County Sheriff's Office. Under the law, people charged with offenses are considered innocent until convicted.

ATHERTON

Fraud reports:

- Person receiving police citation gave someone else's personal information, first block of Ashfield Road, Dec. 4.
- Unauthorized use of credit card, first block of Santiago Ave., Dec. 6.
- \$3,300 taken from account via fraudulent checks, first block of Parkwood Drive, Dec. 11.

MENLO PARK

Burglary reports:

- Vehicle burglarized, 800 block of El Camino Real, Dec. 1.
- Three chain saws, one hedge trimmer and tree-climbing gear taken from storage yard, 100 block of Independence Drive, Dec. 5.
- Specialized Allez bicycle stolen from storage locker, 1100 block of Merrill St., Dec. 10.
- Trek 7000 mountain bike stolen from carport, 800 block of Roble Ave., Dec. 11.
- Someone entered through window, stole video camera and cash, 200 block of Linfield Drive, Dec. 12.

Robbery reports:

- Money stolen from cash register, 300

block of Sharon Park Drive, Dec. 2.

- Attempted armed robbery and hold-up, 1200 block of Willow Road, Dec. 13.

Stolen vehicle report: Bus stolen from Menlo Park Senior Center and found later in Menlo Park, 1300 Carlton Ave., Dec. 10.

Fraud reports:

- Identity thefts, 500 block of Laurel Ave., 1000 block of Middle Ave. and 1100 block of Merrill St., Nov. 30 and Dec. 1 and Dec. 2.
 - Checks stolen and used, 300 block of Waverley St., Dec. 1.
 - Unauthorized uses of credit card, 1100 block of Madera Ave., 1000 block of Windermere Ave., 600 block of Middle Ave., 1000 block of Ringwood Ave. Dec. 3, 4, 10 and 11.
 - Fraud in the workplace, 1600 block of El Camino Real, Dec. 5.
 - Fraudulent use of PayPal via eBay, 1400 block of San Antonio St., Dec. 6.
- Accident report:** Semi-truck vs. motorcycle, one injured party taken to Stanford hospital, Marsh Road and Bayfront Expressway, Dec. 10.

Theft report: Bicycle stolen, 400 block of El Camino Real, Dec. 12.

Spousal abuse report: Arrest made, 1100 block Willow Road, Dec. 4.

Assault and battery reports:

- Physical altercation, 1100 block of Carlton Ave., Dec. 9.
- Patient abused and arrest made, 1300 block of University Drive, Dec. 11.

WEST MENLO PARK

Theft report: ATM card used fraudulently to extract \$460 from bank account, 2000 block of Santa Cruz Ave., Nov. 29.

PORTOLA VALLEY

Burglary reports:

- Vehicle rear window broken and IBM computer stolen, Alpine Road and Willowbrook Drive, Nov. 30.
- Vehicle broken into, purse and wallet stolen and credit cards used, Alpine Road and Westridge Drive, Dec. 9.
- Vehicle's window smashed and property stolen, Sand Hill Road at Lawler Ranch Road, Dec. 7.

Theft report: Copper plumbing worth \$6,000 stolen from construction site, 3000 block of Alpine Road, Dec. 10.

WOODSIDE

Theft report: Cell phone and jacket stolen from unlocked car, 3000 block of Woodside Road, Dec. 6.

Assault and battery report: Victim taken to San Mateo General Hospital for treatment, Woodside High School at 199 Churchill Ave., Dec. 6.

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Circulation, Classified,

& Legal Advertising Bill Rayburn

Published every Wednesday at

3525 Alameda de las Pulgas,

Menlo Park, CA 94025

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The Almanac, established in September, 1965, is

delivered each week to residents of Menlo Park,

Atherton, Portola Valley and Woodside and adjacent

unincorporated areas of southern San Mateo County.

The Almanac is qualified by decree of the Superior

Court of San Mateo County to publish public notices

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Decree No. 147530, issued November 9, 1969.

Voluntary subscriptions are available for delivery

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All views must include a home address and contact phone number. Published letters will also appear on the web site, www.TheAlmanacOnline.com, and occasionally on the Town Square forum.

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Help wanted in Atherton

Atherton, home to many of Silicon Valley's best and brightest, is once again embroiled in controversy over management of its local government.

This time it is the well-publicized case of former finance director John Johns, who was suspended in August after the police chief claimed he created a hostile work environment at town hall. After an investigation by an outside attorney, Mr. Johns was fired in October, not on the hostility charge, but for allegedly viewing pornography on a city computer, bullying fellow employees and submitting dubious expense reports.

It was an ignoble end for a man asked to clean up an accounting mess and to get to the bottom of a scandal in the town's building department. Mr. Johns, whose accounting skills were never questioned, managed to find some skeletons in Atherton's

closet. And though some claimed he wasn't easy to work with, he was the darling of the town's independent audit committee, in part because he produced the first "clean" audits the city had received in many years.

Mr. Johns is not going away quietly. After his dismissal, he filed a \$500,000 wrongful termination suit against the town, and strongly disputes many of the conclusions in the 35-page report prepared by San Francisco attorney Mary Topliff. His attempt to stop Atherton's effort to release the report was turned down by Superior Court Judge John Runde, who sided with the town and media representatives, including the Almanac, who argued that the report was a public document.

A similar investigative report, which is expected to shine light on operations of the building department under former manager Mike Hood, has been bottled up by the town and although it was scheduled to be released with the report on Mr. Johns, it has now been delayed four times, frustrating the Almanac's efforts to

publicize it last week. Mr. Hood resigned in June 2006 and left the state before the investigation of the department was complete.

In reading the report on Mr. Johns, it is clear that he was free to come and go as he pleased, and rarely, if ever, was disciplined by City Manager Jim Robinson, who announced his retirement one day after the hostile workplace charge was filed. According to his fellow workers, whose names were blacked out of the report, Mr. Johns allegedly:

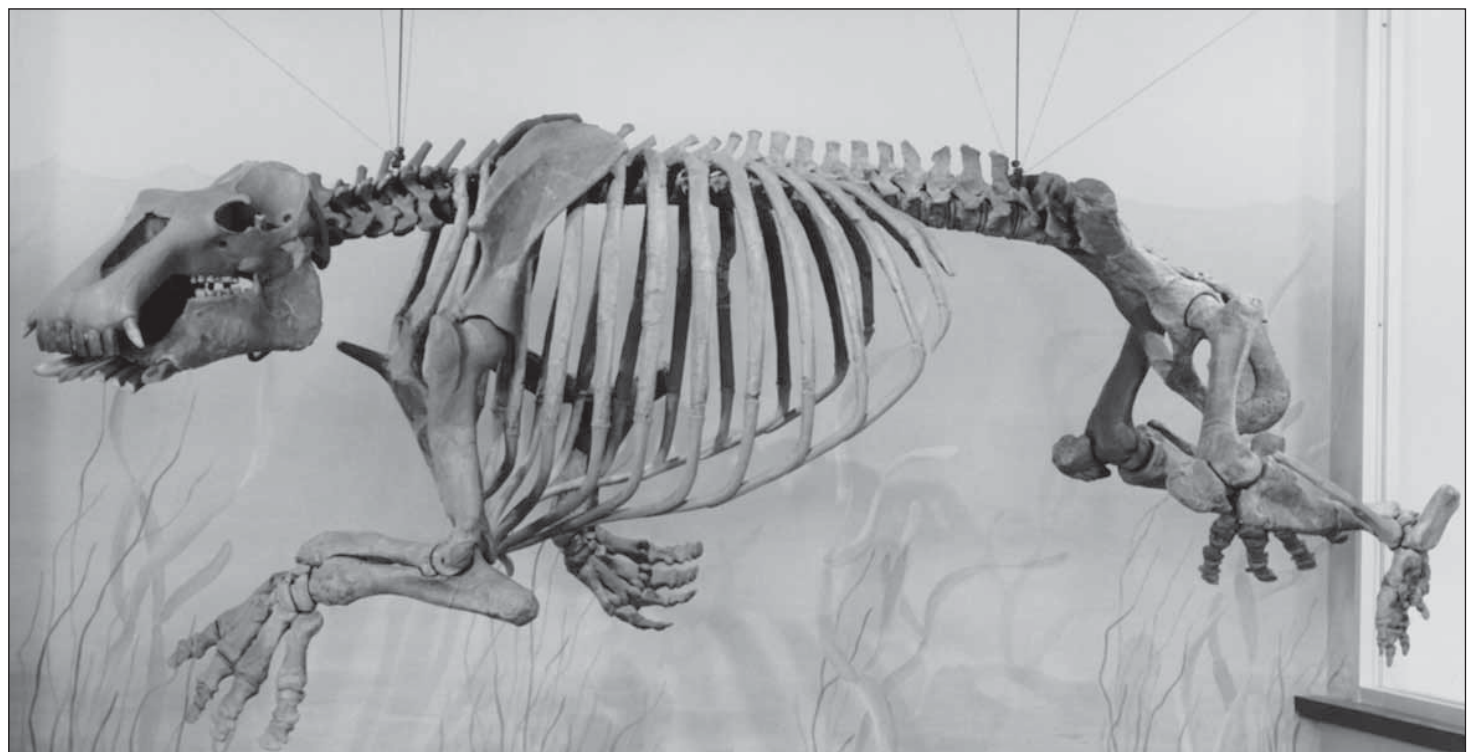
- was frequently belligerent to fellow workers;
- worked irregular hours, and often took a one-and-a-half-hour break at noon to swim;
- was reimbursed after he purchased an iPod and other electronic equipment for his own use (some of this equipment is still missing from his office);
- refused direct orders from the city manager to sit down with the police chief and work out differences between them; and
- was logging on and viewing pornography on a laptop computer owned by the town.

All of these behavior issues should have been addressed by the city manager. It is difficult to understand how one employee could so wildly interrupt the decorum of city offices without immediately being disciplined by his supervisor. If we are to believe the report, Mr. Johns should have been let go long before this incident arose.

Now the question is: Will the next city manager be a "take-charge" person or someone who is unwilling to rock the boat, even if an employee is out of line? For reasons that are still a mystery, Mr. Robinson was unwilling to confront Mr. Johns.

The new manager cannot let this happen again. A good leader does not need to be a tyrant, but neither can he or she allow any employee to operate beyond the bounds of cordiality and workplace rules. Although a skilled accountant, Mr. Johns lost his job for failing to respect his office and his fellow employees. He may be missed, but the town is far better off without him.

EDITORIAL
The opinion of The Almanac



Portola Valley Archives

Our Regional Heritage

Workers constructing the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center in 1964 discovered a nearly perfect skeleton of a prehistoric mammal called Paleoparadoxia. This plaster cast of the find is on display at the SLAC Visitors Center on Sand Hill Road. Photo by Peter Nuding.

LETTERS

School boundary change unfair

Editor:

We believe that the board of the Menlo Park City School District is not being responsive to the communities which it serves.

The board is currently making critical decisions on new school boundaries which will affect the children who attend Laurel, Encinal and Oak Knoll schools.

In October 2006, over 100 residents from Atherton's Lindenwood neighborhood signed individual letters or petitions, requesting that Lindenwood be kept intact and that there not be a school boundary division within our neighborhood. Despite our effort to proactively alert the school board and Superintendent Ken Ranella, the school boundary committee chose to disregard these requests and presented no visual option of an undivided Lindenwood at the Nov. 26 board meeting.

School board member Laura Rich spoke up at the meeting and said that she gave "no weight" to the petition and letters from over 100 Lindenwood residents because her polling of three of her friends who did not, in her opinion, know what they had signed. Has she spoken to the other 106 people to see how they feel and the fact that they did comprehend the issues of the petition?

How does a community work with a school district when the board members are not willing to work with their constituencies and do not respond to letters and petitions? Aren't these elected officials supposed to listen and respond to community input? No rational argument has been made by the board that supports dividing Lindenwood and it is offensive that an outside organization would patronize the neighborhood by saying it's not a neighborhood and attempt to divide it.

One of the main reasons cited for sending certain Lindenwood families to Laurel School is the proximity to the school and the ability to reduce traffic due to walking or bicycling. However, the board is not considering the fact that many families who live very near Laurel School will also be commuting to Encinal School, thereby actually negatively impacting traffic when these families drive to two schools.

The number of impacted families is tiny, well within the error rate of forecasted potential student attendance in 2012, which has been identified as the anticipated peak. The

A call for civil disagreement

By Kathy McKeithen

In my years on the Atherton City Council I have had many successes and helped to bring about substantial positive changes throughout the town. I have also made mistakes — but I have tried to learn from them and I have been my harshest critic.

It has been said that "politics makes strange bedfellows." If it does, I have not really noticed. Rather, what concerns me most throughout this journey of love for my town (certainly it is not the high pay or the resulting sound sleep) is the change I have lately observed in the Atherton attitude. Citizens' comments are not merely those expressing a different point of view to enlighten and enable each of us to make a more informed decision. Comments, written and spoken, have become threatening, mean-spirited and, in the case of those stated at the last regular council meeting, untrue and designed to malign a reputation — in this case, mine.

Last month a resident referred to a certain town employee's (former finance director John Johns) cell phone bills as indicating potential nefarious activity on my part. The resident failed to note that the hundreds of minutes referred to averaged out to a little over an hour a month in conversation on the primary phone for someone with whom I had substantial committee obligations.

The resident failed to note that the other council member referred to as having approximately one minute of conversation was on none of those committees at the time. The resident, in referring to more than 100 minutes of conversation that had allegedly taken place after Aug. 29 and through October 2007 after the employee (Mr. Johns) had been placed on leave, failed to note that **all bills were for the year 2006, not 2007!**

Our council recently has chosen to spend thousands and thousands of our citizens' tax dollars impugning the reputation of a man (John Johns) who, if he did wrong, was an at-will employee and could have been terminated for no cause at all, at any time. As someone who gave us the first and believed to be only unqualified audit in the town (and five successive additional unqualified audits) this person's employment might have been considered worthy of a quiet, discreet end.

Certainly, I believe the reputation of the town was owed that. Has the town benefited as a consequence of this liberal application of legal and investigative funds? Does anyone wonder about the logic, the motivation, which has relentlessly and unthinkingly continued to drive this issue? Does anyone wonder why no action was taken regarding the exact same initiating complaint last May after consideration by the former city manager

and the same law firm which ultimately chose to pursue this matter in August?

In this holiday season, as I see people all around me stressed and fatigued, I give thanks for all I have. The other day my husband asked me what I wanted for Christmas. "Absolutely nothing tangible," I said. What I really, really want is a return to civility.

I want a town that can be proud of itself and its reputation, a town that can think of itself as a whole — not one part on the east side allegedly protecting artifacts for themselves alone and one part on the west side spending all of the Atherton channel drainage funds for its own undeniably most pressing needs. I want us to stop thinking about who might be getting more and recognize the benefit to the whole.

We are **one** town. What is good for our neighbor in the west is good for our neighbor in the east, not simply because there might be some personal benefit, but because what makes part of us stronger can make us all stronger. Civility can make us feel good about ourselves. Let us not simply talk to, talk about or talk down. Let us instead talk **with**. Let us talk with all who wish to participate. It's not just what this season is about — it is what we must attempt to foster throughout the year — good will towards men (and women and children and pets and trees).

Kathy McKeithen is a member of the Atherton City Council.



school boundary committee has projected that dividing Lindenwood would result in only five kindergarteners attending Laurel School in 2008. In the year 2012, the committee has projected a possible peak of 17 students in four grade levels. Of those projected five incoming kindergarteners, five families have written to the board and asked to attend whichever school the rest of Lindenwood will attend.

Why does the board insist on dividing our neighborhood against our will? Aren't they supposed to be representing the voters who elected them?

**Lindenwood homeowners
Veronica Kogler, Edge Road
and Ying Chang,
Lupin Lane, Atherton**

Revised calculations on the Derry project

Editor:

In a recent city-wide e-mail, Menlo Park City Council member John Boyle writes of the newly proposed Derry project: "...our city actually loses more than \$2 million worth of fees and subsidies that the old project would have generated..."

Fortunately, this is not true.

In the negotiated deal, Menlo Park gets more for less. The city collects a larger net cash reimbursement from a smaller project that generates fewer negative impacts and less demand for city services.

Mr. Boyle is right when he says that the mandated "impact fees" are reduced (because the project and its negative impacts are reduced), but the additional \$2 million "public benefit" payment loudly exceeds the impact fee reduction, and, unlike impact fees, there are no restrictions on how it can be spent.

To make it seem otherwise, John's e-mail "analysis" borrows a page from Mickie Winkler's playbook. It obscures the city impact fee calculation and makes several mistakes trying to value and count lost developer profits as lost city revenue.

There is an honest public debate to be had about the costs and benefits of higher-density housing. The proposed project does contain fewer housing units and below market rate (BMR) units. If John Boyle values denser private housing over more public revenue he should say so plainly, and he should

vote to place the Derry project on the ballot. The referendum is still in force.

But misstating financials is not the right way to debate housing.

**Paul Collacchi
Redwood City**

Paul Collacchi is a former member of the Menlo Park City Council.

Hazards of sharing the road with cyclists

Editor:

The Dec. 5 article concerning the death of a cyclist caused me to think of the many times I almost had a heart attack (because of) unexpected moves by cyclists.

Portola Valley seems to have more cyclists than residents. I notice too that cyclists dislike stopping and frequently ignore stop signs. Left turns are especially hazardous at Old La Honda Road and Whiskey Hill Road. Speed doesn't seem to be the problem as many in our area are residents of the Sequoias and they drive very cautiously.

I think our Town Council might consider some rules or signs for cyclists so that in the

future such accidents could be avoided. This was certainly a tragedy for both parties involved. However, but for the grace of God, it could happen to any one of us.

**John Bell
Hayfield Road, Portola Valley**

Adopt from Pets in Need this holiday season

Editor:

We adopted a beautiful five-year-old cat from Pets in Need a few weeks ago and she is a real treasure.

If you want to give a gift of joy to someone this Christmas visit Pets in Need on Fifth Avenue in Redwood City. Many sweet dogs and cats would love a kind, loving home of their own this Christmas.

**Joyce Brandle
Oak Avenue, Menlo Park**

TownSquare

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