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Look what Caltrans hatched ...

It's never been easy to see a California condor up close, but that can change if you take a look below your feet next time you pull into a turnout on Highway 1. Meanwhile, the endangered bird will have company. See story on page 13A.



Dallas campaign materials stapled to some absentee ballots

■ DA finds no wrongdoing

By MARY SCHLEY

IN 2008, it was an allegation that improper ballot instructions — “Vote for two,” vs. “Vote for no more than two” — cost council candidate Michael LePage the election, and in 2014, it was Lucas Austin’s using a fake address after claiming he needed privacy because his wife worked in military intelligence.

The token scandal for this year’s election, which has two men running for mayor and five people vying for two city council seats, involves campaign materials for mayoral candidate Steve Dallas being stapled to the envelopes of absentee ballots delivered to some residents by a courier service.

D.A. decides, ‘The integrity of the election process has not been compromised’

“I was notified on Friday by the registrar of voters that there was campaign material attached to a couple of the ballots,” said city clerk Ashlee Wright. “We determined they were ballots that had been delivered by Peninsula Messenger Service.”

All told, two envelopes with “Vote for Steve Dallas” post cards stapled to them were turned over to the Monterey County Registrar of Voters,

according to registrar Claudio Valenzuela. The recipient was city councilwoman Victoria Beach.

Immediately after he heard about the issue Saturday, Dallas dashed off a letter to Valenzuela and Monterey County District Attorney Dean Flippo.

“This action was taken without my knowledge, authorization or approval,” he said, before explaining that he had asked a delivery-service driver at the post office if he could include the mailers, which had prepaid postage and were addressed, in his delivery that day.

“He assured me that there would be no difficulty in doing so. I saw him the very next day and offered him a bottle of wine as a thank-you for his assistance,” Dallas wrote. “I have subsequently discovered that this messenger apparently took it upon himself to staple my flyer to some of the ballot envelopes.”

He called the messenger’s actions “shocking.”

A man who answered the phone at Peninsula Messenger Service Tuesday said he didn’t know anything about the incident, or “why all these newspapers keep calling.” He said the owner was on vacation and would return next week.

Because the elections department doesn’t conduct investigations, the Monterey County District Attorney’s Office opened an

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PHOTO/ANNE MURASKI

Longtime SPCA CEO Gary Tiscornia announced this week he’s leaving after 15 years at the nonprofit.

PACKED CANDIDATES FORUM SHOWS INTEREST IN CONGRESSIONAL, SUPERVISOR RACES

By KELLY NIX

WHAT DO an attorney, a city councilwoman, and three Bernie Sanders fans have in common? They’re all vying for the seat that will be vacant when Congressman Sam Farr retires early next year.

The five candidates for the 20th Congressional District — Republican Casey Lucius, Democrat Jimmy Panetta, Peace and Freedom Party activist Joe Williams, and independents Jack Digby and Barbara Honegger — convened in Pacific Grove Wednesday night for a candidates forum moderated by the League of Women Voters.

The two candidates running for 5th District Supervisor, incumbent Dave Potter and former United Way Monterey County CEO Mary Adams also had a chance to answer questions from the audience, though a noticeable number of attendees left after the congressional candidates had their say.

■ Congressional candidates

The audience-submitted questions for the candidates ranged from the lighthearted to the no-nonsense, including this: “What can the federal government do to reduce homelessness in Monterey County?”

While Lucius called homelessness a “real problem,” she said the issue is best addressed at the local, not federal, level. She pointed to the churches in Pacific Grove that have taken in homeless men — and recently women — as part of the I-Help program, and the adoption of the P.G. City Council’s safe parking program, which allows homeless people to sleep in their cars parked in city lots.

“Obviously, it’s not an ideal situation,” Lucius said of the parking program, “but we wanted to make accommodations.”

Monterey County deputy district attorney Jimmy Panetta, who said in December he handed out blankets to homeless people in Chinatown in Salinas, said there has been a dramatic increase in the past two years in the number of shelters and tents there. Unlike Lucius, he feels the federal government should help with the problem.

“I think it takes not only the feds or the state, but the locals as well,” explained Panetta, of Carmel Valley.

Williams — a hospital worker and a fan of Democratic presidential candidate Bernie Sanders — said Washington needs to provide housing for the homeless. And the system that requires homeless people to first get mental health and drug and alcohol treatment before they are provided shelter,

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Woman makes plea to save tree, but law is no help

By CHRIS COUNTS

A CARMEL Valley woman wants to save a eucalyptus tree that she said has been used by nesting red-tailed hawks for at least two decades. But a neighbor wants to cut down the tree because he said it poses a threat to his house.

Weighing in on the issue, a state game official said there is nothing illegal about removing the tree — as long as a hawk isn’t nesting in it when it comes down.

Conceding that her neighbor probably isn’t breaking the law by cutting down the tree, Wendy Geiger said she isn’t happy about it. She said at least two of her neighbors feel the same way.

“My family and I have lived on this quiet cul de sac in Carmel Valley Village for 20 years,” Geiger said. “Every year, the hawks come back to have their chicks in this eucalyptus tree at the end of the block.”

Discovering a nest

According to Geiger, the tree was set to come down two weeks ago. Removal work was halted when workers noticed the nest, but not before a significant part of the tree had been taken out.

“The tree company cut it halfway and discovered an early nest with eggs in it,” Geiger explained.

A warden for California Fish and Wildlife, Max Schad, confirmed that it’s OK to take down the tree “once nesting season is over.” Until then, it’s illegal to “take or damage” the tree, the nest or the eggs.

Schad said it simply isn’t practical to have a law affording a tree year-round protection because a particular bird nests in it for part of the year.

“If we created a blanket law, we wouldn’t be able to take

down any tree,” he explained.

When a nesting hawk loses its nest, it will simply establish another somewhere else.

“They are not tied to one specific tree,” Schad added. “They would just find another place to build a nest.”

Other than saying that the tree poses a threat to his home, the man who wants to cut it down declined to be interviewed.

Tiscornia retiring from SPCA

■ Successor to be named next month

By KELLY NIX

GARY TISCORNIA — the CEO and executive director of the SPCA for Monterey County credited with leading the organization to financial solvency and paving its successful path — is retiring at the end of June after more than 15 years.

Tiscornia told The Pine Cone this week that while he loves his job and the people he works with, it’s time for him to hang up his hat.

“I will miss it terribly,” Tiscornia, 69, said of the job. “I have been doing this work for about 40 years. It’s not something you easily leave behind.”

While Tiscornia’s successor has already been hired, he won’t be identified until the SPCA’s annual breakfast at the Embassy Suites in Seaside on April 12.

When Tiscornia took over as executive director and CEO of the SPCA for Monterey County in November 2000 — after having been in that position at the Michigan Humane Society — the financial state of the nonprofit, he said, was “touch and go.”

“When I came in, we had about 11 months’ worth of reserves at the then-current burn rate,” he said. “The turnaround success is really a testament to our community, our leadership and our staff.”

According to 2013 tax records, the

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