FREE

THURSDAY, JANUARY 29, 2004 Volume 3, Issue 67

Santa Monica Daily Press

A newspaper with issues

LOTTO

SUPER LOTTO PLUS
47-20-26-11-14
Meganumber: 26
Jackpot: $7 million

FANTASY 5
26, 8, 20, 13, 39

DAILY 3
Afternoon picks: **9, 5, 0**
Evening picks: **7, 5, 1**

DAILY DERBY
1st Place: 9, Winning Spirit
2nd Place: 12, Lucky Charms
3rd Place: 8, Gorgeous George
Race Time: 1:43.79

NEWS OF THE WEIRD
by Chuck Shepard

■ A woman was summonsed for dangerous driving after she tied the child's seat carrying her 20-month-old infant to a backseat door to keep it from swinging open (Perth, Australia).

■ About 50 inmates at a Portuguese prison refused to eat special Christmas lunches because the bread, usually freshly baked, was not, due to bakeries having closed early the day before (Belas, Portugal).

■ Police said a 29-year-old woman ordered her 11-year-old daughter to help her shoplift clothing, including some items the woman later returned to the girl as Christmas presents (Fort Myers, Fla.).

QUOTE OF THE DAY

"If women didn't exist, all the money in the world would have no meaning."

– Aristotle Onassis

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Crunch time for City Hall, public programs

BY CAROLYN SACKARIASON
Daily Press Staff Writer

City Hall's economic forecast is not as bleak as it was a year ago, but dark clouds are still on the horizon.

While last year's $16 million budget shortfall may appear to dwarf this year's $4 million deficit, economic uncertainty will remain a lingering problem for city officials in the foreseeable future.

"We are still not out of the woods," said Steve Stark, the city's finance director, during the City Council's mid-term budget review on Tuesday. "We continue to have challenges with state funding for local communities."

"We continue to have challenges with state funding for local communities."

— STEVE STARK
Finance director,
City of Santa Monica

The City Council succeeded in closing its deficit last year by cutting $8 million in expenditures and finding another $8 million worth of revenue, which came in the form of increased parking fines and business license fees, among others.

"Those were hard decisions to make, but it created a much improved picture," Stark told the council. "That picture would have been much more bleak had you not made those policy decisions."

But because of the state's ongoing budget problems, Santa Monica will be forced to deal with a loss of revenue stemming from sources like the Vehicle License Fee. Stark predicts Santa Monica's budget deficit for 2005-2006 will swell to $5.6 million if no corrective measures are taken.

While current estimates indicate that the gap is narrowing, it is believed that the shortfall will extend several years beyond the original estimate of three years.

See CITY BUDGET, page 7

Council displays a fear of commitment

BY CAROLYN SACKARIASON
Daily Press Staff Writer

Facing its own economic uncertainties, the City Council on Tuesday decided against committing extra funding to the school district.

The consequences of the council's inaction could be felt soon, as a large, powerful group of school supporters intend to move forward with its plans to force a measure onto November's ballot that, if passed, would require City Hall to pay a minimum of $6 million a year to the school district.

School supporters waited anxiously in Council Chambers at City Hall on Tuesday to hear elected officials' response to their plan. When it was finally discussed around midnight, City Council members agreed they can't commit to anything more than the $3 million City Hall currently contributes. They said they hoped they could give another $2.25 million in one-time funds, as they've done in the past, but given an anticipated $4 million budget shortfall this year, council members are hesitant to commit.

"The $2.25 million doesn't exist in the real world right now," said Councilman Mike Feinstein. "We've been there for the school district because we have managed our money well and we have gone over and above that stability unlike any other city has done, with the exception of Beverly Hills."

The goal of school supporters is to provide a stable and predictable source of funding to the district. And while the City Council agrees education is a top priority in Santa Monica, it's too soon to predict whether City Hall will have enough cash to hand over without

See SCHOOLS, page 5

School activists ready to tackle homework

BY MICHAEL TITTINGER
Daily Press Staff Writer

Frustrated with City Hall's reluctance to substantially increase funding to its schools on a permanent basis, a group of school supporters are taking their case to the people.

Residents of Santa Monica will be hearing a lot about the "Community for Excellent Public Schools" in the weeks and months to come, as volunteers of the school-funding activist group

See ACTIVISTS, page 7

A scholarly site



Del Pastrana/Daily Press

Workers make progress on the new multi-million dollar library on Sixth Street, which will take at least three years to complete. The library will have an underground parking garage and plenty of new amenities.

Ante up: Living wage activists deal new hand

BY CAROLYN SACKARIASON
Daily Press Staff Writer

Despite several failed attempts in the past, the movement to pass a living wage in Santa Monica is once again underway.

Under a proposal unveiled on Tuesday, all city workers and employees employed by private companies on contracts with City Hall of $25,000 or more would get paid a minimum of $11.51 an hour and receive upgraded health benefits.

The proposal was one of the last issues discussed by the City Council at its marathon meeting on Tuesday. The plan was introduced at 12:50 a.m. by Vivian Rothstein,

"Workers who work full-time shouldn't have to rely on public assistance."

— VIVIAN ROTHSTEIN
Santa Monicans Allied for Responsible Tourism

director Santa Monicans Allied for Responsible Tourism, who has been a key player in several other living wage proposals.

For nearly five years, SMART has pushed for a "living wage" —

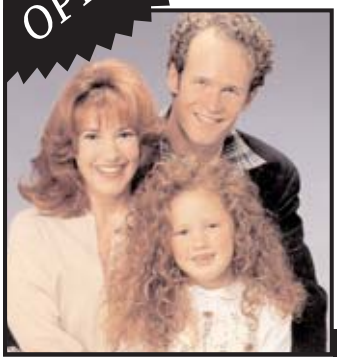
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Focus on work first today, Leo



JACQUELINE BIGAR'S STARS

The stars show the kind of day you'll have:

★★★★★-Dynamic ★★★★-Positive ★★★-Average
★★-So-so ★-Difficult

ARIES (March 21-April 19)
★★★ Expenses could be out of control, but you have the wherewithal to make up the difference. Your work and naturally industrious ways might even add up to a pay raise if you just ask. You will find out just how much you are appreciated. Tonight: Balance your budget.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20)
★★★★ With the Moon in your sign, you are able to see the difference between what is reasonable and what is not. Think in terms of creativity and working with some of the ideas that are tossed at you. Schedule extra time with a special loved one. Tonight: Ask for what you want.

GEMINI (May 21-June 20)
★★★ Focus on how you might be deceiving yourself and what you need to do to ground yourself. Fortunately, you do anchor with ease. A family member helps in this process. You feel as if you have a lot of strength and support. Tonight: Vanish with or without your best friend.

CANCER (June 21-July 22)
★★★★★ Right now, you gain through a meeting rather than listening to an individual. Your words easily make an impact. Others answer honestly and openly. Return calls. Good news will head your way. Tonight: Call someone at a distance.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)
★★★★ Deal with a boss, even though you feel as if he or she is disrupting your life. This person also could be involved with your personal life. Focus on work first. You will feel good about what you manifest. A bonus or pay raise might be heading your way. Tonight: A must show.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)
★★★★★ Keep reaching out for an expert. You might want to think through a decision that involves your daily life. A change could be in the offing. Use your strong ability to detach and see more. Others will pitch in once you know what you want. Tonight: Think "alternatives."

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 22)
★★★★★ Be with a partner who might need you, but realize that someone close could become quite jealous of you. Think in terms of growth and positive vibes. Dote on this individual, as he or she needs your care. Tonight: Be with your sweetie.

SCORPIO (Oct. 23-Nov. 21)
★★★★★ Others do care a lot about you. All you have to do is nothing, and watch what happens. Others seek you out in a big way. Zoom in on what you want. Romance could knock on your door if you are single. Tonight: Express your feelings; don't hold back anymore.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21)
★★★ You could feel entrenched by all the work that drops on you. This might only be happening because you are so good at what you do. You might need to screen your calls and return them in the evening. Tonight: On the phone at home.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19)
★★★★★ News from a distance or from an expert could make a big difference in what you do. Think carefully about what you want to do, exploring ideas with those around you. You don't need to make an immediate decision. Tonight: Let your hair down.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)
★★★★ You might want to have a discussion with a partner who will allow you to air out some ideas. You could find that an idea is unworkable after a conversation with a trusted adviser. Express your feelings openly. Tonight: Order in.

PISCES (Feb. 19-March 20)
★★★★★ You mean well, which is clear to others. If you're confused, do ask questions. You find out how much your support and caring means to others. Air out ideas - yours and others' - in a meeting. Brainstorm away. Tonight: Visit with friends.

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1427 Third Street Promenade, Ste. #202 • Santa Monica, CA 90401 • www.smdp.com

PUBLISHER
Ross Furukawa . . . . . .ross@smdp.com
EDITOR
Carolyn Sackariason . . . . . .sack@smdp.com
STAFF WRITER
John Wood . . . . . .wood@smdp.com
CHILD DEVELOPMENT COLUMNIST
Margie Altman . . . . . .margiealtman@yahoo.com
ADVERTISING SALES MANAGER
Rob Piubeni . . . . . .rob@smdp.com
ADVERTISING ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE
Steve Averill . . . . . .steve@smdp.com
ADVERTISING ACCOUNT EXECUTIVE
Rob Schwenker . . . . . .schwenker@smdp.com
PRODUCTION MANAGER
Del Pastrana . . . . . .del@smdp.com
PRODUCTION ASSISTANT
Alejandro Cesar Cantarero II . . . . . .alex@smdp.com
ADMINISTRATIVE TRAFFIC MANAGER
Heather Rich . . . . . .heather@smdp.com
CLASSIFIED REPRESENTATIVE
Mitch Troy . . . . . .mitch@smdp.com
CIRCULATION MANAGER
Robert DeAmicis . . . . . .robert@smdp.com
CIRCULATION
Keith Wyatt . . . . . .keith@smdp.com
CIRCULATION
Glenn Bolan . . . . . .glenn@smdp.com
SPECIAL PROJECTS
Dave Danforth . . . . . .dave@smdp.com
MASCOT
Maya Furukawa . . . . . .maya@smdp.com

LOCAL

COMMUNITY BRIEFS

Bad boys, what'cha gonna do?

By Daily Press staff

After having stymied a gang of burglars last September who had been terrorizing Santa Monica, West Los Angeles and Beverly Hills, Officer Skystone-Eagle Lambert of the Santa Monica Police Department was tapped by the Elks as their "Officer of the Year" earlier this month.

Lambert, who has been with the SMPD since relocating from Denver, Co., more than 17 years ago, currently works with the Day Watch patrol after stints with both the Homeless Liaison Patrol and the Mounted Patrol Unit.

In addition to Lambert, the Santa Monica Elks Lodge presented Community Service Awards to officers from four other agencies at its annual Law Enforcement Appreciation Dinner. The Elks established the annual event in an attempt to bring special community recognition to those members who exemplify the famed police motto "To Protect and To Serve."

The five award winners were nominated by their respective departments, before a panel of Elks selected Lambert as "Top Cop." Chief James Butts said Lambert exemplified all of the characteristics of a great police officer.

During the course of Lambert's 20-year career he has rescued five people from a burning building, and assisted in the arrest of a bank robber, not to mention last year's bust of three serial robber suspects, after which a significant amount of stolen property was subsequently recovered.

The remaining four "Top Cop" finalists were LAPD Officer Brian Grajek, FBI Assistant Special Agent Ralph Boelter, Deputy David Huelson of the Los Angeles Sheriff Department-Malibu Lost Hills Station and CHP Trooper Rodney Richards.

After announcing Lambert was the winner, Exalted Ruler Raedean Kiesz presented him with a perpetual plaque. Lambert was also awarded a letter of commendation from Santa Monica Mayor Richard Bloom.

Fun with glucose meters

By Daily Press staff

Senior citizens living with diabetes are invited to take part in an informative support group Thursday at 10:30 a.m. at the Senior Recreation Center, 1450 Ocean Ave. Participants are urged to bring along their glucose meters if they need assistance using them, as well as their medications for review and concerns for discussion.

The group is spearheaded by Sharon Higgins, a registered dietitian, and is free for all participants.

Next month's support group meetings will be held on Feb. 3 and 19. Program funding is provided by the Los Angeles County Community and Senior Services, and the Area Agency on Aging.

surf report

Today will start off with mostly leftovers so expect small surf through the morning. New WNW swell (290-300+) will be arriving slowly through the afternoon so a slight increase in surf will show by the end of the day … possibly setting up some shoulder high sets for the more northerly counties before sundown.

The WNW'er will continue to build into Friday, showing the biggest waves in the afternoon.

Today expect, 2-3', knee- to waist-high occasionally and fair conditions.

Write us at wood@smdp.com and tell us what the surf is doing today at your local break. Epic.

Today the water is: 58°

	LOW TIDES		HIGH TIDES	
	LOW ONE	LOW TWO	HIGH ONE	HIGH TWO
SATURDAY	4:21 AM	5:19 PM	10:22 AM	11:54 PM
SUNDAY	5:09 AM	5:51 PM	11:04 AM	N/A
MONDAY	6:09 AM	6:26 PM	12:36 AM	11:49 AM
TUESDAY	7:24 AM	7:00 PM	1:16 AM	12:48 PM
WEDNESDAY	9:04 AM	7:39 PM	2:04 AM	2:20 PM
THURSDAY	**10:39 AM**	**8:35 PM**	**3:00 AM**	**4:49 PM**
FRIDAY	11:56 AM	9:51 PM	3:54 AM	6:50 PM

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The Q Line

A Santa Monica jury last week decided that a landlord wasn't liable for tenants' injuries and pain and suffering when they were attacked in their apartment by four gunmen.

The tenants claimed that the landlord should have provided better security at their apartment, which can't be accessed without a key or a code.

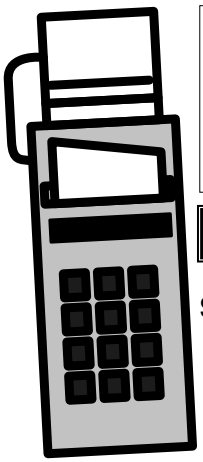
It raised a legal question of how much landlords should be held responsible for their tenants' safety.

"How far should landlords go in protecting their properties and their tenants? Do you agree with the jury's decision? Why?"

Call (310) 285-8106 with your response before Thursday at 5 p.m. We'll print them in Friday's paper. Please limit your comments to a minute or less. It might help to think first about the wording of your response.

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LETTERS

'The system' gets a bad rap

Editor:

"The system" does work.

I recently had the experience of sitting with my 17-year-old daughter in front of Santa Monica Juvenile Traffic Court Judge Pamela Davis. We had originally appeared before Judge Davis approximately two months prior to resolve a curfew violation. My daughter had been given 40 hours of community service to complete. At that time, Judge Davis was very thorough in detailing to my daughter why the curfew existed, how vulnerable she was to be where she was at the time she was, and what her options were to take care of the citation.

Unfortunately, my daughter did not complete the community service in time, and while she obtained a "request" for an extension, she neglected to present it back before the Court within the allotted time. In essence, she "failed to appear" on the violation, which results in the automatic suspension of her driving privileges until her 18th birthday and the payment of a steep fine. Needless to say, for a 17-year-old Californian, that is tantamount to being sentenced to "life without the possibility of parole!"

This would have been the easy penalty for Judge Davis to impose, especially after her initial judgment had been disregarded. Instead, Judge Davis took the time to speak with my daughter at length in order to get a handle on who she is, why this type of behavior would happen, and what we and she can do to prevent it from occurring again. She spoke to my daughter in a way that helped her to understand and accept that actions or inactions in this case have consequences, and that above all else, it is essential that the lines of communication remain open between parents and teenagers.

While my daughter ultimately received a one-month suspension, 15 hours of community service and the applicable fines, she learned valuable lessons in communication, respect, responsibility and accountability. After the fine is paid, the hours worked and the driving privileges returned, the overall lesson learned, and respectful manor in which it was imparted, will hopefully remain with my daughter for her lifetime.

While it is often easy to attack "The system," this time it worked, and that is because we are fortunate enough to have justices like Pamela Davis seated behind the bench. Being a Santa Monica police officer, I have had many occasions to appear before the bench. Thank you, Judge Davis, for not just passing judgment, but for taking the time and effort to explain it as well.

Sgt. Steve Heineman
Santa Monica Police Department

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It's the same old song — 516 down and counting

NEWS on the EDGE
By Ron Scott Smith



■ I was sitting in front of a TV Tuesday night, gleaning the results of the New Hampshire primary, looking for an opportunity to add fuel to the fire — the one that would burn the current regime out of Washington in November. I was all set to do a thing about how this Carolina vs. New England super-clash is brewing — not the one Sunday between the Patriots and the Panthers — but the one between Sens. Kerry of Massachusetts and Edwards of North Carolina to see who wins the right to formally challenge Bushamerica. That's when I made the mistake of turning on the radio for a musical interlude — a break from the monotony of victory speech after victory speech by the guy who won, and oddly enough, by the guys that lost, too. And damn if my old buddy Toby Keith wasn't there on that dial with his new hit tune, "American Soldier," and there went the Democrat story and here we go again.

■ If this sounds like a broken record sometimes, forgive me, but no record of the times we live in can be an honest record without some kind of emotional response to the pervasive war madness that continues to take its toll on all of us. If it hasn't taken its toll on you, I'd say, "See ya," but you're already gone.

■ Any part of any conversation on this thing must begin with the 516. That's the number, upped by six, even as I type tonight, of American troops killed in action. Anyone reading this who has come to the conclusion — be you right or wrong — that the war in Iraq is justified and necessary must first deal with the 516. And we won't mention — because we're Americans — the thousands of innocent Iraqis who have taken the premature trip to the other side. As a matter of fact, right now, this news just broke across the same radio that just got done playing the Toby Keith song: "A car bomb has exploded, and torn off the front of a hotel in central Baghdad. Many casualties are feared. Additional American troops are on the way to the scene."

■ Toby Keith is collecting royalties, singing in the voice of an "American Soldier" on lines like this: "I will always do my duty, no matter what the price. I've counted up the cost, I know the sacrifice." Yes, if anyone knows the sacrifice it's the 516, most of whom — from the lowest economic strata — enlisted because they just needed a decent job. I've heard what you're saying out there: "They volunteered for this thing, man. They're the Volunteers of America, and nobody forced them to do this. God bless them, but that's the way it goes."

You're saying that, aren't you?

• Toby Keith's soldier says this, in the heart-wrenching second verse: "Oh and I don't want to die for you, but if dyin's asked of me, I'll bear that cross with honor, because freedom don't come free." So even TK agrees — the 516 didn't want to die for you or me or anybody. And did they have to? Our freedom seemed to be doing just fine, except for a few slashes at it by a guy named Ashcroft. Who among you were so petrified of Saddam Hussein taking our freedom away? He's rotting in jail now, but every one of the 125,000 still engaged has to wonder if they're soon to be added to the 516.

■ "When liberty's in jeopardy I will always do what's right. I'm out here on the front lines, sleep in peace tonight." So goes the reassuring ending, and Toby Keith and you and I will sleep in peace tonight, won't we? If he looks at his royalty statement before calling it a night, with a bottom line multiplied by a factor of 516, TK will sleep in peace enhanced.

■ When I turned the dial to take a breather from the lucrative neo-patriotism, I heard these words coming through the same radio (and you want to talk about a Super-Bowl-like clash of ideas?):

"Come you masters of war, you that build all the guns
you that build the death planes you that build all the bombs ...
You that never done nothing but build to destroy
you play with my world like it's your little toy."

■ It was a singer named Bob Dylan from the '60s, and listen up, hip-hop nation — this is the way music once spoke to war:

"You fasten all the triggers for the others to fire
then you sit back and watch as the death count gets higher
You hide in your mansion as young people's blood
flows out of their bodies and is buried in the mud."

■ All I wanted to do was go off a little on the primaries … how Dean got blasted out of the water by the right radio gang … how they might be sorry they got Kerry instead … how they're already bashing him for the way he earned his Silver and Bronze Stars while saving fellow GI's in the Vietnam War … how this young Carolina guy is stepping up and making waves. But then along comes Toby. Dylan seals the deal, and this is what I'm left with. For Toby Keith, Bob Dylan, you, me — any conversation about any of this must start with the 516, which by the time you read this, will probably no longer be the operative number.

(Ron Scott Smith is tired of counting. E-mail him at EdgeoftheWest@aol.com).

Opinions expressed are those of the writer and do not necessarily reflect those of the Santa Monica Daily Press staff. Guest editorials from residents are encouraged, as are letters to the editor. Letters will be published on a space-available basis. It is our intention to publish all letters we receive, except those that are libelous or are unsigned. Preference will be given to those that are e-mailed to sack@smdp.com. All letters must include the author's name and telephone number for purposes of verification. Letters also may be mailed to our offices located at 1427 Third Street Promenade, Suite 202, Santa Monica, 90401, or faxed to (310) 576-9913. All letters and guest editorials are subject to editing for space and content.

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City Council considers hotel bed tax increase

SCHOOLS, from page 1

making serious cuts to staff and community services.

"It's not that easy to find more money," said Councilwoman Pam O'Connor, adding she predicted last year that the council's extra "one-time contribution" of $2.25 million would become expected every year. "It's digging a hole and that's what the state is doing."

FIND THE MONEY

Elected officials said it would be irresponsible to fund the district indefinitely without a new revenue source, which could possibly be an increase to the local hotel bed tax — a 12-percent assessment on room rates throughout Santa Monica. The city has strategically kept its bed tax lower than that of Los Angeles (14 percent) and other surrounding cities as an incentive for tourists to come here.

The City Council is now considering putting a measure on November's ballot asking voters to increase the tax, but by how much remains unclear.

While city staff researches the bed tax possibilities, "Community for Excellent Public Schools," a grassroots organization with several hundred members, is moving forward with its own plans to save what they believe is a financially faltering school district.

IT'S THE STATE'S FAULT

Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District Superintendent John Deasy told the council that he expects the district will have to close a $3.5 million budget shortfall for the next school year. The shortfall is caused by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposed state budget, as well as the district's own increased costs such as a growing student population and salary increases for teachers and staff.

Deasy's analysis indicates that the district's projected shortfall is calculated with City Hall's $5.25 million contribution and $385,000 from Malibu remaining intact. Should either city lower their contributions to the schools next year, the projected shortfall and ensuing cuts facing SMMUSD would increase accordingly.

"Every year it's the same thing, school budgets get slashed, expenses rise, programs are cut and children suffer," said PTA Council President Maria Rodriguez. "Our district has been smart with its money so far — and determined not to let any child slip through the cracks — but we just can't absorb more cuts. These cuts and the next round and the rounds after that will take years to be felt by our city. By the time residents start wondering why drop-out rates and youth crime rates are on the rise, or why property values are starting to erode, it will probably be too late to fix education.

"The time to do that is now, and the only option we see is a partnership with the cities we serve."

GOING LOCAL

Earlier this month, CEPS filed a proposal in City Hall to amend the Santa Monica charter. The amendment would pump a dedicated portion of City Hall's general fund into the district indefinitely, creating a stable and predictable funding source to ensure excellent education in Santa Monica and Malibu.

School supporters would rather see the City Council come up with a long-term plan that will provide the school district with an ongoing source of funding every year. It was an ultimatum of sorts — either establish a permanent funding source for the school district, or let voters decide how taxpayers' money should be spent.

"Every year it's the same thing, school budgets get slashed, expenses rise, programs are cut and children suffer."

— MARIA RODRIGUEZ
SMMUSD PTA Council President

But after CEPS members listened to the council for more than five hours, keeping themselves awake with chocolate and pizza, it became clear shortly after midnight that the group would have to press on with the ballot measure, despite their pleas to the council.

Rick Gates, former PTA president, told the council that, despite California being one of the largest economies in the world, it ranks at the bottom in literacy and the state government continues to ignore the problem.

"I don't envy you. There is always a big pull between the short-term and the big picture," Gates said. "I spent 10 years trying to get the state to move on this issue. The needs of our classrooms are only going to get met locally."

The City Council feels like the group is trying to force government's hand. Feinstein called CEPS' initiative a "bad budget amendment and it undermines city finances."

"It's something for nothing," he said. "It's an unrealistic mandate."

Councilman Bob Holbrook asked City Manager Susan McCarthy if giving an extra $2.5 million this year would create a high anxiety level for staff to balance City Hall's budget.

"There is a fair level of apprehension already," she replied. "But if you say 'go find it,' we'll go find it."

That would probably mean cutting staff and service levels to the community, a notion that worries Lauralee Asch, president of a coalition of nine employee associations that represents all non-sworn city employees.

"Members of the coalition support excellent public schools, but we also support excellent city services and the preservation of community health and safety," she told the council. "School supporters should be working with the council and staff to establish new revenues that can be used to educate our children, not proposing to eviscerate city services in order to funnel more money to the school district."

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Living wage costs to City Hall are not yet known

LIVING WAGE, from page 1

most recently $12.25 an hour without benefits — targeted largely toward workers in the tourism industry. The current proposal isn't designed to meet that goal, but many feel it's just the beginning of a larger effort.

Santa Monica Chamber of Commerce officials — who successfully fought against the contentious living wage ballot initiative last year— said they want a commission created that would comprise business, labor, non-profit and other community members to discuss the newest proposal's financial impacts.

"It would be shortsighted to think there won't be a proposal by SMART to take this further," said Tom Larmore, a local attorney who fought against the last proposal. Larmore spoke on behalf of the Chamber of Commerce in front of the City Council on Tuesday, urging that a commission be formed.

"Creation of such a committee, as has been done in other contexts in the past, would provide an opportunity to develop a consensus approach rather than rekindle the divisive environment which resulted from the manner in which the council approached the issue in the past," chamber officials wrote to the City Council.

Rothstein contends the proposal is long overdue.

Most of the members of the City Council, which spent about five minutes discussing it, appeared receptive to it.

"I agree it's a shame to be taking this up so late and I don't mean at 12:50 a.m., I mean in 2004," said Councilman Kevin McKeown.

Council members directed city staff to study the financial implications the proposal would have on the city budget and create a draft ordinance by the spring. Councilman Mike Feinstein asked that other cities' living wages, like that in Los Angeles, be analyzed to determine where Santa Monica would compare.

Speaking in favor of the proposal were several workers, most of whom work full-time, make less than $10 an hour and still rely on government subsidies.

"Workers who work full-time shouldn't have to rely on public assistance," Rothstein told the council.

Each year, the income cap grows, housing costs increase and the public health care system worsens, according to SMART, which labels Southern California as being the capital of poverty of the United States. The organization blames low wages, not mass unemployment, for the area's widespread poverty.

More than 120 cities in the United States have enacted local living wages, including nearly 25 in California alone, according to SMART. Another 70 cities are currently considering living wage ordinances, including six in California. Now, Rothstein says, it's Santa Monica's turn.

Under the proposal, non-profit organizations would be exempt. The $11.51 an hour is the level at which a family of four is no longer eligible for public assistance like food stamps, Rothstein said. The wage level also is in line with recent living wage ordinances throughout the nation, says SMART.

"I agree it's a shame to be taking this up so late and I don't mean at 12:50 a.m., I mean in 2004."

— KEVIN MCKEOWN
City Councilman

The proposal also includes the health care benefits of State Senate Bill 2, which will mandate health care for most employees in the state beginning in 2006. As a result of SB 2, the current proposal doesn't include a second wage for employees who don't receive health care benefits. But the ordinance must include a provision indicating that if SB 2 is repealed, then the council will amend the ordinance to include a second wage level, SMART officials said.

The battle over the living wage began in 1999, when SMART first recommended to the City Council that tourism workers be paid a higher wage. Hoping to find a different solution, hotel and tourism groups in 2000 put Proposition KK on the ballot. But many argued that measure did too little to promote wages and more to protect businesses against future wage increases. KK was overwhelmingly defeated at the polls, 79 percent to 21 percent.

Half a year later, the City Council approved SMART's living wage, but the issue was forced to the ballot by opponents, who gathered thousands of signatures against it. In November of 2002, Proposition JJ failed at the polls by a mere 1.7 percent. It would have guaranteed workers at businesses near the beach that gross more than $5 million a year a wage of $12.25 an hour without health benefits or $10.50 with benefits. The law didn't apply to unionized businesses, giving the large companies an incentive to organize their labor.

While Rothstein characterized Tuesday as an historic night — because the chamber and SMART, for the first time, are urging the council to pass a living wage — chamber officials have reservations about the proposal.

"The council should also recognize that Santa Monica is part of a regional economy, and mandating a minimum wage higher than the city of Los Angeles may lead to disincentives and increased costs to the city," chamber officials wrote to the City Council. "The economic study to be performed needs to include the pressure that will be put on the city budget as contractors seek to pass through the increasing costs."

FIND OUT YOUR FORECAST IN TODAY'S HOROSCOPES ... PAGE 2

LOCAL

School group focuses on its next strategic move

ACTIVISTS, from page 1

gear up and try to rally support in attempts to amend the city charter, and force the City Council to cough up more money for schools.

"We've heard them say some very negative things about the proposed amendment," noted CEPS co-chair Shari Davis on Wednesday, "which is hard to understand."

The proposed amendment would force City Hall to forward no less than $6 million of its annual revenues to the school district — twice the regular $3 million contribution — or about 4 percent of designated general funds, whichever is greater.

Also, funding to the district would be modestly increased each year — but only when the city's revenues grow by at least 3.5 percent.

However, in order to place the proposed amendment on the November ballot, the group must first collect 9,000 signatures over the next three months.

"It looks like we'll be hitting the streets in the next week or so," said CEPS spokesperson Rebecca Soladay Kennerly. "We'll have a good discussion when we meet again on Friday."

Kennerly indicated that wording on the petition was still being finalized and that a strategy for gathering the 9,000 necessary names — which amounts to approximately 100 a day — will be agreed upon by week's end.

Still, CEPS members had been holding out hope that the amendment and all the mass signature-collecting would have been rendered unnecessary, preferring to see the City Council adopt a long-term plan that would provide the school district with an ongoing source of funding every year.

However, those hopes were dashed during Tuesday's exhaustive council meeting, where members expressed hope in matching last year's $5.25 million contribution to schools, but made no promises. CEPS has had a hard time convincing a wary council, many of whose members took umbrage with the proposal when it was filed earlier this month, that the amendment is not intended to be a public rebuke of their competence.

"This is a carefully constructed policy that will benefit the community, the city and its schools," Davis said. "There's no need on the part of the city to be pitting one another against each other.

"This can be a very unifying policy, as schools are the foundation for a strong public policy."

The mission to cull additional funding for schools on a permanent basis has proven to be a unifying experience for the members of CEPS, a broad-based coalition that counts as members such disparate personalities as Santa Monicans For Renters Rights party co-founder Denny Zane and Chris Harding, a land use attorney who often battles SMRR on behalf of the business community.

The group consists primarily of parents — those with children currently enrolled in Santa Monica schools and those whose children have already emerged from the system.

The exact tactics CEPS plans to employ to collect some 3,000 signatures a month for the next three months have yet to be agreed upon, but residents can expect to hear from the lobbying group soon. CEPS has been hard to ignore over the course of the past two years since its inception. Speaking at Tuesday's council meeting on behalf of the organization and its goal of increased funding were superintendent of schools John Deasy and Jose Escarce, president of the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District's Board of Education.

CEPS has reportedly conducted extensive research, including public opinion polls via phone to gauge whether the community would support such a measure.

"We had some really good speakers (Tuesday) night," said Davis, who admitted she was heartened by the number of non-member city residents who spoke to the council in support of increased school funding.

With more than a $350 million annual budget, school supporters believe City Hall can afford to continue its financial commitment to the district. But they don't want to have to ask every year, hence the charter amendment.

"CEPS is focusing on the positive," Davis said. "We're doing this for the schools, as well as the benefits it will provide to everyone."

City cuts will have to be made

CITY BUDGET, from page 1

Santa Monica is currently bracing for Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's proposed budget, which is expected to take away local revenues. The state budget, as proposed, will divert local property tax revenue away in order to meet California's Prop. 98 responsibility to fund public education. At a minimum, Santa Monica will lose $775,000 in property taxes to the general fund and $1.6 million to the Redevelopment Agency, which was created to rebuild the city following the 1994 Northridge earthquake.

Ironically, as the state shifts revenue from the city to benefit schools, there is a local attempt to mandate City Hall to give a minimum of $6 million every year to the district.

In true City Hall fashion, the finance department has suggested that it can actually lower the deficit by spending more money. Stark said City Hall saved $5.7 in one-time funds in its capital improvement budget last year. He suggested to the council that it spend that money on improvements to the Santa Monica Pier, a project that is estimated to cost $6 million. Stark suggests this would eliminate the need for ongoing revenues to pay for the multi-year expense and enable City Hall to shave $2 million off the budget shortfall.

As City Council began brainstorming for ways to close the deficit, it found itself in a familiar position this time of year — listening for hours to members of the public who pleaded to keep funding in place for their pet programs.

More than 60 people spoke to the council, asking for money from everything to the historical society to the symphony to playgrounds to more school funding to the arts.

Afterward, each council member laid out his or her priorities for the upcoming year, making it clear that not everything is going to get funded.

"We have to think about what we can do with what we have," said Councilman Kevin McKeown. "The state isn't there to help us so we have to do it ourselves."

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STATE

NASA rover discovers layered rocks on Mars

BY ANDREW BRIDGES
AP Science Writer

PASADENA — A NASA rover has discovered layering in rocks just yards from where it landed on Mars, and scientists said they were eager for the spacecraft to determine whether the outcropping could have been formed in water.

The Opportunity rover spied the fine-scaled layering just days after it landed in a small crater on the far side of the planet from its twin, Spirit. The horizontally striped and fractured slabs of bedrock rim a portion of the shallow depression and lie just a short drive from where the six-wheeled robot sits atop its lander.

"Look at the wonderful layer cake-structure in there," said Steve Squyres, the mission's main scientist, as he excitedly narrated for reporters a slow pan of a high-resolution black-and-white image showing the rocks. "It's going to be fascinating beyond words to get up close and personal with this thing."

The find is a significant one: Each roughly half-inch thick layer represents an event in the geologic history of the Red Planet that Opportunity should be able to reconstruct with its complement of cameras and scientific instruments.

Scientists believe the layers were laid down over a relatively brief period of time — anywhere from a single day to several millennia — but billions of years ago. They piled up either as ash spewed by successive volcanic eruptions or as sediments borne by wind or water.

"By stringing them together, we develop a sense of history," said Andrew Knoll, of Harvard University, a member of the mission science team. "We have a familiar type of document lying in front of Opportunity."

Some scientists believe the 18-inch-high band of layered rocks is cross-bedded in part, suggesting a sedimentary origin that would require the presence of water.

If so, the rocks could provide the tangible evidence NASA seeks that Mars once was a wetter place capable of sustaining life. Images taken from orbit already suggest vast amounts of water once flowed across the surface of the planet.

The Opportunity rover was in good shape after its weekend landing but had developed a small, 15-watt power loss that worried NASA. It also began unfolding and successfully deployed and tested its high-gain antenna, used to communicate directly with Earth.

Engineers believe a heater in the shoulder of its robotic arm has been turning on unnecessarily when temperatures drop. Typically, the heater is needed only when the arm is in use, mission manager Jim Erickson said.

"We don't normally want it on. Right now we believe it's going to be continuously on whenever it's cold enough," Erickson said.

Engineers continued to monitor the situation, unsure if it could harm the rover.

"We're very paranoid people," Erickson said.

Opportunity's twin, Spirit, continued to convalesce, 6,600 miles around the planet. Engineers received additional data from the ailing rover that is furthering their quest to understand computer problems that last week brought its science work to a grinding halt.

Engineers believe Spirit does not have sufficient random-access memory to manage all the files in its flash memory. To prevent similar problems on Opportunity, engineers deleted recently created but unneeded computer files from its flash memory, which is similar to the memory that digital cameras use to store photographs.

"It's going to be fascinating beyond words to get up close and personal with this thing."

— STEVE SQUYRES
NASA scientist

Opportunity should roll off its lander sometime in the next two weeks. This week it is scheduled to put to use its mini-thermal emissions spectrometer, an instrument that measures infrared radiation emitted by objects.

By aiming the instrument at the layered outcropping, scientists said it should reveal what minerals its rocks contain — information that should clear up their origin. Subsequent close-up measurements by all of Opportunity's instruments, including its combination microscope-camera, can then confirm those early hypotheses, said Squyres, a Cornell University astronomer.

"We're going to drive close and beat up on them with everything we got," Squyres said of the rocks.

Scientists believe Opportunity came to a rest inside either of two, 20-yard-diameter craters, said Rob Manning, manager of the entry, descent and landing portion of the mission. They expected to identify which of the two adjacent craters in coming days.

Both bowls lie just a half-mile from a larger crater that scientists hope Opportunity can explore later in its three-month mission.

"We all are going to get to go on the coolest geologic field trip in history," Squyres told reporters.

Together, the two 384-pound rovers make up a single $820 million mission. NASA launched Spirit on June 10 and Opportunity on July 7. Spirit landed Jan. 3, followed by Opportunity three weeks later.

Spirit landed in Gusev Crater and Opportunity in Meridiani Planum. Measurements made from orbit by other NASA spacecraft suggest both sites once abounded in water.

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BUSINESS

Give to charity and give to yourself



IT'S YOUR BUSINESS

By John Kim

Do you own highly appreciated assets, such as stocks, real estate or a closely held business? If you do, a Charitable Remainder Trust (CRT) could play a crucial role in your estate plan, enabling you to achieve any or all of the following objectives:

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When the payment stream terminates, the remainder of the trust assets passes to charity.

Because a CRT is a tax-exempt entity, assets sold within the trust are not subject to capital gains tax at the time they are sold. While capital gains tax may be imposed at a later date on distributions from the trust, the ability to defer these taxes allows the full value of the assets to be reinvested to immediately work for your benefit. Thus, you may be able to convert the full value of assets that may formerly have provided you with little or no income into a significant payment stream.

When you contribute assets to a CRT during your lifetime you may be entitled to a charitable income tax deduction based on the present value of the remainder interest that passes to charity after the non-charitable payment stream terminates. This deduction cannot exceed a certain percentage of your adjusted gross income, but may be carried forward five years after the initial year of your contribution. Therefore, you may receive the benefit of an income tax deduction for up to six years.

Because of the gift tax charitable deduction, the amount remaining in the trust transferred to charity is not subject to federal gift taxes.

Contributing highly appreciated assets to a CRT also reduces your estate by removing both the asset and all future appreciation on that asset (exclusive of any payments you receive from the trust). This may save you considerable estate taxes.

PROVIDING FOR YOUR HEIRS:

Suppose you are concerned about providing for your heirs, as well as your favorite charity. You can replace all or part of the value of the property transferred to the CRT with an asset replacement strategy like the following:

■ Establish an irrevocable life insurance trust (ILIT). The trust would purchase a life insurance policy on the life of the donor. Upon the donor's death, the life insurance proceeds could be distributed to the trust's beneficiaries — presumably family members.

■ Make annual gifts to the ILIT. You can use some of the payment stream from the CRT and the income tax savings from the charitable income tax deduction for this purpose. If the trust is drafted with particular provisions, the gifts may qualify for the annual gift tax exclusion or they may count toward one's $1 million lifetime gift tax exclusion amount.

■ The trustee of the ILIT may then use the gifts to purchase life insurance on your life, or a second-to-die policy on you and your spouse. The trustee is both policy owner and beneficiary.

■ Life insurance proceeds received by the beneficiaries of the ILIT generally are not subject to income taxes and are not included in your gross estate at death. Thus using the CRT and the ILIT, you may be able to contribute significantly greater assets to charity and actually pass on more of your wealth to your beneficiaries!

Estate planning can help you preserve the assets you have carefully accumulated. Bear in mind that these strategies are subject to the complex laws and regulations governing estate and gift tax, income tax and private foundations. To be effective, an estate plan should be designed and implemented by specialists. As with all such matters, you should consult with your attorney and tax advisors to help devise a plan appropriate for you.

Selecting a trustee for your CRT is an equally important decision. The trustee may be responsible for investing and reinvesting trust assets, making periodic accountings and filings to trust beneficiaries and appropriate tax authorities, and numerous other administrative functions. You should consider using a professional trustee to receive the benefits of ongoing relationship management, and ensure objectivity and proper trust administrative services.

John S. Kim is a Financial Consultant for Smith Barney in Beverly Hills. To understand how a CRT can benefit your family, call 310-205-4939, or visit his webpage at www.fc.smithbarney.com/jkim.

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Metro Briefs

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Crenshaw Boulevard Gets Rapid

Making fewer stops and running up to 25% faster than local lines, the efficient red Metro Rapid buses begin service on Crenshaw Boulevard February 2. New Metro Rapid Line 710 will run on Crenshaw between Hollywood and the South Bay.

Metro Service Meeting Set For Feb. 5

Want to find out what's going on with bus service in Metro Westside/Central? Attend their governance council meeting Thursday, February 5, starting at 2 p.m. at the La Cienega Tennis Center, 325 S. La Cienega Boulevard, Los Angeles.

Metro Job Fair On February 7

Get a job as a Metro Bus operator or mechanic. Metro is holding a bus operator recruitment job fair on Saturday, February 7, from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. at its headquarters at the intersection of Vignes Street and Cesar E. Chavez Avenue in downtown Los Angeles. Call 213-922-DRIVE.

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NATIONAL

Judge orders Exxon to pay $6.75 billion for Valdez spill

BY RACHEL D'ORO
Associated Press Writer

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — A federal judge in Anchorage ordered Exxon Mobil Corp. on Wednesday to pay $6.75 billion in punitive damages and interest to thousands of fishermen and others affected by the 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill.

"We have now closed the trial court doors for the last time in this litigation after 15 years," said David Oesting, lead attorney for the plaintiffs. "We're definitely on track to the end of the entire dispute."

In Wednesday's ruling, U.S. District Judge Russel Holland ordered Exxon Mobil to pay $4.5 billion in punitive damages and about $2.25 billion in interest.

The money is to go to 32,000 fishermen, Alaska Natives, landowners, small businessmen and municipalities affected by the nearly 11 million gallon spill in Prince William Sound.

> **"This ruling flies in the face of the guidelines set by the appeals court."**
>
> **— TOM CIRIGLIANO**
> Exxon spokesman

An Exxon Mobil official said the Irving, Texas-based company plans to appeal the 81-page ruling, the latest of several issued by Holland.

The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals has twice vacated Holland's decisions in the case, said Exxon spokesman Tom Cirigliano. Holland had been ordered by the appellate court to reconsider his findings of damages.

"This ruling flies in the face of the guidelines set by the appeals court," Cirigliano said of Wednesday's order.

In 2002, Holland reduced the Exxon punitive damages award to $4 billion after a three-judge panel sent the original $5 billion verdict back, saying it was excessive.

In his latest ruling, the judge was to consider a U.S. Supreme Court decision last year involving a Utah traffic accident and damages awarded in that case.

Attorneys from both sides argued that the Supreme Court case, State Farm Mutual Automobile Insurance Co. v. Campbell, supported their damages claims. In that case, the Supreme Court ruled that a state court jury's award of $145 million to punish the insurance company was grossly excessive when actual damages were $1 million.

The high court held that the ratio of punitive to actual damages should not exceed single digits, or 9-to-1.

Exxon attorneys argued that injury to plaintiffs was only economic and damages should be based on a lower ratio, such as 1-to-1 or less. That would produce punitive damages of about $25 million. Exxon has already paid $3.2 billion on cleanup, settlements and other fees and penalties, attorneys said.

But lawyers for the plaintiffs argued that the key issue is conduct, and that Exxon's was among the worst. They said Exxon knew that tanker Capt. Joe Hazelwood had a drinking problem but still allowed him to take charge of the Exxon Valdez. They calculated actual damages at more than $500 million and punitive damages at roughly $5 billion based on a 9-1 ratio.

Cirigliano said that when the matter was sent back to Holland, Exxon Mobil lawyers predicted this would be the result — "serious further delays" — from having to appeal rulings from a court "that has already made numerous mistakes."

The spill occurred March 24, 1989, less than three hours after the 987-foot ship left the Alyeska Pipeline terminal in Valdez.

The ship grounded at Bligh Reef, rupturing eight of its 11 cargo tanks and spewing some 10.8 million gallons of crude oil into the sound.

An estimated 250,000 seabirds and thousands of marine mammals died as a result of the spill, which contaminated more than 1,200 miles of shoreline.

Lingering effects of the spill include declines and stunted growth in various marine populations and indirect mortality increases in pink salmon populations.

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DID YOU KNOW?: Winston Churchill was born in a ladies room during a dance.

WORLD BRIEFLY

Taliban strikes British, German bases

By The Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — A pair of nearly simultaneous attacks, one suicide, on British and German bases near the Afghan capital Wednesday left one British soldier dead and as many as nine other foreigners wounded, police and peacekeepers said.

A spokesman for the Taliban claimed it had carried out the bombings.

The attacks came during a memorial ceremony for a Canadian soldier killed in a Taliban suicide attack in Kabul just the day before. An Afghan civilian was also killed in that attack.

The British soldier was killed near their base in Kabul, said Canadian Maj. Gen. Andrew Leslie, deputy commander of the security force, speaking at the end of the memorial service at the Canadian base.

"Initial reports indicate that one of our British comrades lost his life and there have been several injuries," he said, adding that another explosive device was detonated outside the main German base.

U.N. team welcomed with bombing

By The Associated Press

BAGHDAD, Iraq — A car bomb exploded Wednesday in front of a hotel frequented by Westerners, killing at least four people, witnesses and coalition officials said. The blast occurred one day after six U.S. soldiers were killed in a pair of roadside bombings.

A South African man was among the dead at the Shaheen hotel in Baghdad, according to employees of the three-story building in the city's Karadah district.

The attack occurred as a two-member U.N. team arrived in Baghdad to assess security for an electoral team. U.N. Secretary-General Kofi Annan said Tuesday he would send the electoral team if the United States can guarantee its safety.

If it comes, the team will try to determine whether Iraq is safe enough and adequately equipped to hold early elections, an issue at the core of a dispute between the U.S.-led coalition administration and Iraq's majority Shiites over forming a new government.

Visits to Cuba go up in smoke

By The Associated Press

CAMBRIDGE, Mass. — Dreary January is usually a busy month for Americans visiting sunny Cuba as part of a cultural exchange program. But this year is different, as a chill continues between the communist island and the White House.

The Bush administration has eliminated cultural exchange licenses that allowed just about any American to travel to Cuba, which has been subject to a U.S. trade embargo for more than four decades since Fidel Castro seized power.

These so-called "people-to-people" licenses, introduced in 1999 by the Clinton administration, were intended to let Cubans and Americans learn about each other through educational trips.

But federal officials now say the exchanges had become little more than thinly veiled tourism and eliminated the program. The last licenses expired Dec. 31 and some travel agencies are scrambling to find a legal alternative.

Senators call on weapons inspector

By The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Senators want to speak with the former top U.S. weapons inspector who said he couldn't find evidence that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction, a primary justification by President Bush for the war in Iraq.

David Kay is one of a number of U.S. officials who have recently adjusted their position on Saddam's weapons capabilities.

As special adviser to CIA Director George Tenet, Kay was chosen last year as the Iraq Survey Group leader in part because he was convinced weapons would be found. "My suspicions are that we'll find in the chemical and biological areas, in fact, I think there may be some surprises coming rather quickly in that area," he said on CNN in June.

Now, Kay, who was scheduled to testify before a Senate committee Wednesday, says he believes large stocks of weapons are unlikely to be found and blamed faulty intelligence for the misguided assessments.

'Rings' could make fantasy a reality

By The Associated Press

BEVERLY HILLS — E.T. could not do it. Neither could Luke Skywalker or Dorothy Gale. Yet Frodo Baggins and his hobbit, elf and wizard pals are on the verge of claiming Academy Awards respectability for the land of make-believe.

Fantastical tales have a long and dismal Oscar history, but "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of The King" looks ready to change that, taking front-runner status for best picture with a leading 11 nominations Tuesday.

Such sci-fi and fantasy films as "The Wizard of Oz," "Star Wars" and "E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial" are among the rare otherworldly movies to earn best-picture nominations. None has won, though, with academy voters tending toward weighty dramas over fanciful tales regarded more as kid flicks than serious cinema.

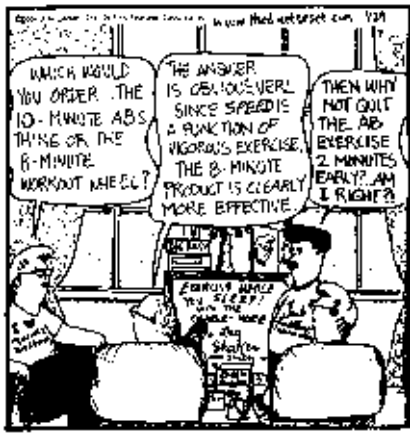
With "The Lord of the Rings" trilogy, adapted from J.R.R. Tolkien's epic Middle-earth adventure, director Peter Jackson has altered the face of fantasy. He crafted a world not only of dazzling visuals but also of heart, humor, three-dimensional characters and Shakespearean drama.





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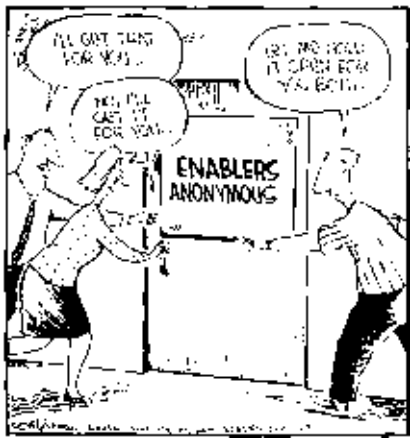
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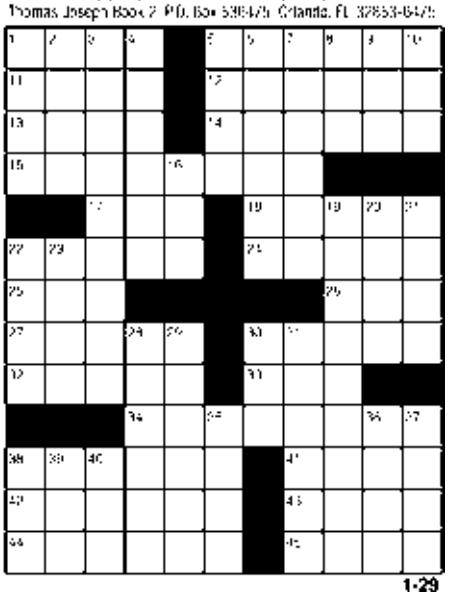
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Bomb Ambition: Madonna sued over 'Swept Away'

By The Associated Press

■ **LOS ANGELES** — A lawsuit alleging that Madonna and her husband, director Guy Ritchie, stole the idea for the 2002 film remake of "Swept Away" will go to court May 4.

In the lawsuit, self-described singer, songwriter, director and actor Vincent D'Onofrio alleges Madonna and Ritchie took his idea for a remake of the 1975 Italian comedy and then cut him out of the credits and compensation.

The movie, which Ritchie directed, stars Madonna as a wealthy woman stranded on a desert island with a sailor. It bombed at the box office and was panned by critics.

D'Onofrio sued Madonna, Ritchie and Sony Pictures in Superior Court in October 2002, claiming he pitched the idea to Madonna in April 1997 and had several meetings with her and Ritchie.

Attorneys for the couple have said D'Onofrio has no proof of a contract with the female singer or Sony.

D'Onofrio's attorney said he would seek $10 million in damages.

D'Onofrio is not the actor of the same name who portrays Detective Bobby Goren on NBC's "Law & Order: Criminal Intent."

■ **BEVERLY HILLS**— A court hearing for Courtney Love, who faces two felony counts of possession of a controlled substance, was postponed after the judge said "additional investigation" was needed before the case could proceed.

Love met privately with Superior Court Judge Elden S. Fox for eight minutes Tuesday before her brief court appearance. Fox said her hearing would be delayed until Feb. 11 because of "certain issues as it relates to an investigation on this matter."

It was the second time the hearing was delayed.

The 39-year-old singer-actress has pleaded innocent to charges of illegal possession of two painkillers, hydrocodone and oxycodone. Authorities say the painkillers were discovered after she was taken to a hospital on Oct. 2.

Police said they found Love outside an ex-boyfriend's house, where she'd allegedly broken the windows that day. She's charged separately with a misdemeanor for allegedly being under the influence of a narcotic.

After the hearing, paparazzi followed her out of the courtroom and into the street, where one person tripped but was apparently uninjured.

Before leaving, she told reporters she's planning a tour in support of her solo album "America's Sweetheart," scheduled for release in February.

The widow of Nirvana lead singer Kurt Cobain, Love was the lead singer for the rock group Hole and has appeared in such movies as "The People vs. Larry Flynt" and "Man on the Moon."

■ **SARASOTA, Fla.** — A month before returning as host of the Academy Awards, Billy Crystal said he was thrilled that his friend Bill Murray earned a best actor nomination.

"I'm so happy for him," Crystal said. "He's really stretched himself in the last three or four years."

Murray was nominated for playing a washed-up actor in Tokyo in "Lost in Translation." The role earned him a Golden Globe Award on Sunday.

Crystal was in Sarasota for a screening of his daughter Lindsay's documentary "My Uncle Berns," about his charismatic uncle, Bernhardt Crystal. The film is scheduled to air on HBO this summer.

The 55-year-old comedian said he's eager to host the show again after a three-year break, but said he still gets nervous.

"It's a tough room," he said with a grin.

Crystal also smiled when asked whether he'll be dressed as a hobbit, a jockey or a sea captain in the style of some of the best-picture nominees, "The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King," "Seabiscuit" and "Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World."

"We've been working on possible ideas since November," he told the Sarasota Herald-Tribune. "It's tough, because the Oscars are a month earlier this year."

■ **GREENWICH, Conn.** — Britton Keeshan is using inspiration from Captain Kangaroo in his bid to become the youngest person to climb the tallest mountain on each continent.

Keeshan is the grandson of Bob Keeshan, who died Friday at 76 after a career in which he entertained millions of children as the walrus-mustachioed television captain.

Britton Keeshan, a 22-year-old college student, is on a quest to climb the "Seven Summits," the tallest peaks on each continent. He's reached the top of six so far, starting at age 15, and will leave in March to attempt Mount Everest by May.

A Japanese climber holds the record: He accomplished the feat days after he turned 23. But Keeshan believes lessons learned from his grandfather will help him set a new record.

"His memory will be pushing me to strive even harder than I've ever strived before," he said in an interview Tuesday at his home in Greenwich. "He really just pushed me to push the boundaries and seek the outer limits of whatever I was doing."

DID YOU KNOW?: Canada is a Native American word for "Big Village."

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