

FREE

SATURDAY, MARCH 2, 2002

Volume 1, Issue 95

Santa Monica Daily Press

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Gas line explosion destroys one building at beach



Firefighters put out a fire at a beachfront apartment Friday morning. Nobody was injured in the explosion and by noon, firefighters had the blaze under control.

Andrew H. Fixmer/ Daily Press

'It's a miracle we're still alive,' resident says

BY ANDREW H. FIXMER
Daily Press Staff Writer

Three beachfront Santa Monica apartments were destroyed when a severed main gas line exploded Friday morning, but no one was injured.

A demolition crew working at 1317 Pacific Coast Highway accidentally cut a gas line, triggering an explosion at 9:41 a.m. that incinerated a one-story apartment and ruined a pair of two-story adjoining units, a Santa Monica Fire Department official said.

Several cars in the parking lot next to the scene caught fire and had to be extinguished.

Though officials couldn't estimate the damage, a fire official said buildings along the beach typically go for about \$1 million.

At noon, fire officials were still waiting for the gas company to turn off the gas main.

"The fire has been mostly extinguished," said Jill Barnes, spokeswoman for the Santa Monica Fire Department, "except for around the exposed gas main."

In less than two minutes the explosion had reduced the luxury apartment — whose occupants were not home — to nothing more than ash and rubble, witnesses said.

One resident said his wife — pregnant with twins — and their young child were just settling down for a nap when the explosion rocked their

apartment, sending the couple running for their lives.

"My wife ran to the window and the building was completely engulfed in flames," said Jim Devarennnes. "There were people in there but they got out real quickly."

The south bound lanes of the PCH were

"My wife ran to the window and the building was completely engulfed in flames. There were people in there but they got out real quickly."

— JIM DEVARENNES
Apartment resident

closed by the California Highway Patrol so fire-fighters could access the buildings. Los Angeles Police officers re-routed traffic headed from Pacific Palisades.

The Red Cross was on scene to help the displaced residents and to give aid to firefighters as they battled the blaze.

Neighbors said their building shook violently

See FIRE, page 3

Watchdog group urges people to sue fax advertisers

BY CAROLYN SACKARIASON
Daily Press Staff Writer

A local consumer watchdog group is advocating that anyone who receives a faxed advertisement should take the self promoting business to small claims court.

Arguing that the practice violates federal law, people can win up to \$1,500 for receiving an advertisement via fax, said Pam Pressley, an attorney for the Foundation for Taxpayer and Consumer Rights, located on Ocean Park Boulevard in Santa Monica.

"The idea here is that people can take this to small claims and win," she said.

The foundation claims that federal law gives people who receive junk faxes the right to sue for at least \$500 per fax.

The foundation recently sued and settled with four local businesses who contracted with a fax advertising agency which sent out thousands of ads to Santa Monica fax machines. None of the business owners knew the practice is illegal. Peter Pollard, who owns the agency, FAXertise, contends that the state's business code allows it.

In many cases, federal law supersedes state law. Pressley said the likelihood of a small claims judge rul-

"The idea here is that people can take this to small claims and win."

— PAM PRESSLEY
Foundation for Taxpayer and Consumer Rights attorney

ing on the side of the federal law is very good.

The foundation's Web site, consumerwatchdog.org, takes consumers step by step through the process of

collecting money from businesses who faxed the ads.

According to the foundation, a person can sue for up to four years from the date he or she receives the "junk fax." The site suggests that on the back of each fax, a person should write or stamp the date of when it was received and then initial it.

In order to use the federal law, you must learn the name and address of the fax advertiser. Some faxes only give a phone number. One way to identify the business behind the fax is to call the number and inquire about what the business does, what its address

See WATCHDOG, page 3

Teacher tries feeding puppies to boa

By The Associated Press

LEON, Kan. — A teacher's plan to feed three unwanted puppies to boa constrictors during a high school biology class was stymied after complaints from parents and tears from some students.

Matthew Patton, a teacher at Bluestem High School

in this southeast Kansas town, keeps two of the snakes in his classroom and sometimes feeds them during class so students can see how they eat.

Three puppies were donated Tuesday by Davy Harkins, a school board member who operates a shelter

See BOA, page 5

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♈ ARIES (March 21-April 19)

★★★★ Share your excitement and enthusiasm with a partner. Before you know it, you're off on an adventure together. Don't let someone's frivolity get to you. Allow someone to give you more feedback by opening yourself up. Tonight: Get nice and close.

♉ TAURUS (April 20-May 20)

★★★★ Complete an important project or errand before you join a friend or loved one. You could have an unusually short fuse when dealing with someone. Relax and talk through a problem. Fun happens when just hanging out together. Tonight: Where the fun is.

♊ GEMINI (May 21-June 20)

★★★★ Your amorous ways draw others. Be more concerned with feelings, as you could get someone's ire up while not anticipating a reaction. Be generous with others, not only financially, but also, and more importantly, emotionally. Tonight: Relax with a loved one.

♋ CANCER (June 21-July 22)

★★★★ Take it easy in the morning. You deserve a lazy day or two. You enjoy yourself wherever you are. A friend declares what he or she wants, and it involves you. Why not go along? Remain upbeat about whatever life offers you. Tonight: Whatever you want.

♌ LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)

★★★★ Reach out for someone in the morning. If you stand on ceremonies, it will only brew trouble. Be careful with an older relative or boss who might be out of sorts and a bit uptight. Take your time sorting through a personal and/or domestic matter. Tonight: Order in.

♍ VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)

★★★★ Balance your checkbook and handle a problem directly. Make plans to take off ASAP — for the day or for the remainder of the weekend. Wherever you decide to chill out or hang out, playing it low-key proves to be enough for you. Tonight: At a favorite spot.

♎ LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 22)

★★★★ A child or loved one enjoys you, more than you can imagine. This person surprises you with his or her reactions and spontaneity. You have a good reason to celebrate. Be careful with a touchy partner or associate. Don't let a fight erupt. Tonight: Make a must appearance.

♏ SCORPIO (Oct. 23-Nov. 21)

★★★ Clear out a problem in the morning. Someone might be unusually touchy, especially in the afternoon. Duck! Remember, words can't hurt you. An understanding and compassionate attitude chills out this person. Consider seeing a movie, where no one can talk. Tonight: Go where you like the music.

♐ SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21)

★★★ Make the most of the early day, when you feel more upbeat and energized. Be careful with a day-to-day friend later on. This person might not intend to hurt your feelings but does so anyway. Chill out in the afternoon, indulging yourself. Tonight: Play it low-key.

♑ CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19)

★★★★ Drop in on or call an older friend or relative. This person has a surprise for you. Be especially gracious with this person. Someone who might be more than a friend could throw a mini-tantrum. Understand. Read between the lines and smile. Tonight: Where the fun is.

♒ AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)

★★★★ Make calls to someone at a distance. Share your caring with someone. Review news. Examine what is important to you. Go out and join friends, though you also might want to make an appearance at work. Plan on making your presence known. Tonight: Out.

♓ PISCES (Feb. 19-March 20)

★★★★ Don't answer your phone; instead focus on a loved one or family member you live with. One-on-one time helps you both relate in a more positive and upbeat manner. Use the afternoon to touch base with friends. Do only what you want. Tonight: Stoke the fires of romance.



QUOTE of the DAY

"Husbands are like fires. They go out if unattended."

— Zsa Zsa Gabor

Santa Monica Daily Press

Published Monday through Saturday

Phone: 310.458.PRESS(7737) • Fax: 310.576.9913

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LOCAL



Beverly Hills man guilty of sinking yacht to collect \$3.5 million

By The Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A Beverly Hills attorney was convicted of fraud Friday for buying a luxury yacht, inflating its value, then deliberately sinking it to collect \$3.5 million in insurance money.

Rex K. DeGeorge was convicted of three counts of mail fraud, seven counts of wire fraud and five counts of lying to a court hearing. He faces up to 80 years in prison when he is sentenced May 13.

U.S. Attorney John S. Gordon said DeGeorge, 65, took part in an elaborate scheme involving two other men that began with DeGeorge paying \$1.9 million for the yacht. He then engaged in a series of sham transactions, authorities said, in which the yacht was supposedly

sold again and again, at increasingly higher prices, to drive up its insurance value. Finally, on Nov. 7, 1992, the three sunk the boat off the coast of Naples, Italy, by using power tools to cut holes in its hull.

The men, found floating in lifeboats, told the Italian Coast Guard the vessel had been commandeered by drug runners.

The other two, Paul A. Ebeling, 62, of St. Louis, and Gabriel Falco, 36, of Amangansell, N.Y., previously pleaded guilty and are awaiting sentencing, Gordon said.

According to court documents, DeGeorge bought the 76-foot-long Principe di Pictor from Italy's Azimut S.p.A for \$1.9 million in 1992. He and

Ebeling then conducted a series of sham transactions to "sell" the boat for ever-increasing prices.

The vessel's final owner was Polaris Pictures Corp., a film company controlled by DeGeorge and Ebeling. DeGeorge then had the boat insured for \$3.5 million by the Cigna Property and Casualty Insurance Company.

Prosecutors said DeGeorge set up the elaborate plan because he had already collected on three other boat policies, making it unlikely a company would insure him again.

In 1970, DeGeorge collected \$43,000

on a yacht he reported stolen by Peruvian coffee merchants. Authorities said he used the insurance money to buy a 57-foot racing yacht that sunk off the coast of Italy in 1976 with him and Ebeling aboard.

When that vessel's insurer, Lloyd's of London, refused to pay the claim DeGeorge filed a \$5 million lawsuit that Lloyd's settled for \$194,000.

The third vessel, a 43-foot yacht, sunk off the coast of Los Angeles in 1983. Authorities said DeGeorge's insurer paid him \$255,000 after he threatened to sue.

Tile is part of CA's heritage

BY MAXINE HALLEF

Special to the Daily Press

Santa Monica's California Heritage Museum is focusing on a California tile-maker.

It launched its first exhibition devoted to "Albert Solon: Clayworker Extraordinaire" Feb. 13.

"No other museums are doing ongoing exhibitions on California tiles," said the museum's director Tobi Smith. Two other exhibits on tile makers are planned for 2002.

The new exhibition is a result of the monumental "California Tile — The Golden Era 1910-1940," which featured more than 1,200 pieces.

A two-volume, 400-page book is being published about this exhibit, which includes sections devoted to major tile sources such as Solon.

Solon, who comes from a long line of

ceramists, founded S & S pottery of San Jose with Frank Schemmel in 1920. It was responsible for such installations as the Steinhart Aquarium in Golden Gate Park, San Francisco, Hearst's San Simeon and the Loews, State and Orpheum Theatres in Los Angeles, as well as private homes. Later the name of the company was changed to Solon and Larkin, which decorated a number of sites, including the Yehudi Menuhin home in Los Gatos.

A lecture on the work of Albert Solon will be given by tile collector and historian Riley Doty on May 7.

A special area on the first floor of the museum is being set up to display the new series of tile exhibitions. The California Heritage Museum is located in an historic 1889 house located at Main Street and Ocean Park Boulevard in Santa Monica. It is open Wednesday through Sunday from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.



Andrew H. Fixmer/ Daily Press

To access the scene of the explosion, California Highway Patrol had to close the southbound lanes of the Pacific Coast Highway Friday. The road was closed from Pacific Palisades to the Santa Monica Freeway.

Northbound traffic on PCH diverted after explosion

FIRE, from page 1

from the blast and the roaring of the fire. The heat was so intense they said they were forced to flee to the beach until fire-fighters were able to secure the area.

"I didn't know if it was an earthquake or a car from the highway had hit the house, but there was this intense shaking," said one neighbor who declined to give his name. "The fire company came really quick and without them we would have lost a lot more I'm sure."

Another resident whose home is less than 20 feet from where the gas main

erupted said the fire incinerated a wall that used to divide the two properties.

"There used to be a wall right here," said Mindy Lymperis. "When the gas main went the wall just disintegrated. It's gone, it's all gone."

Lymperis said though her backyard tree caught fire, her home largely was unscathed. She said her guardian angel must have been watching over her when the gas main went up in flames.

"It's a miracle we're still alive," she said. "It's a miracle because we all could have been killed."

Federal law says you can sue over faxed advertisements

WATCHDOG, from page 1

is and who owns it.

Some businesses will pay the person to avoid a lawsuit. If you write a letter telling a business it violated the law and asking for up to \$1,500, you may receive a settlement.

If not, the next step is to take your case to small claims court, which handles cases up to \$5,000. Santa Monica's small claims court is located in the courthouse on Main Street, next to City

Hall. There are several phone advisors that help take people through the process. No person can bring more than two claims for more than \$2,500 in one year.

"Small claims court cases can have an impact," the foundation's site says. "Think about what will happen if a lot of individual consumers win in small claims court and tell their friends. The effect of all the small claims could be huge."

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OPINION

Editor's note: On Tuesday, residents will vote on Measure U, which asks taxpayers to pass a \$160 million bond for Santa Monica College. College officials say the money would be used to renovate buildings at the aging

campus on Pico Boulevard. It also would partially fund the purchase of a 10-acre parcel near the airport that would be transformed into a satellite campus and more parking. The bond's average cost to taxpayers would be

\$1.12 per month for renters and \$77 per year for the average homeowner in Santa Monica and Malibu.

The following view points on the measure will be the last printed in the Daily Press before election day.

Why I am voting 'no' on Measure U

Voting against an education bond is not something to take lightly. Measure U has been endorsed by many education supporters, people and organizations with which I typically agree. But is this an education bond, or a development bond? The funds may be used only for buildings or property acquisition, both of which will have an impact on our crowded community.

My reasons for voting no are:

- SMC is a valuable resource for our community. Fortunately for all of us, it is a very successful college. But how much more do we want it to grow? If you live, work, or visit near one of the SMC campuses, you already know first-hand that SMC has not been accountable for the effects of its growth and commuter traffic. Not only has the original campus expanded to multiple sites in Santa Monica, now a new campus is proposed to be located in Los Angeles. SMC already has over 30,000 students. How can the surrounding community

possibly sustain more growth?

Guest Commentary By Jennifer Polhemus

- Taxes work best when there is a nexus between the tax and the economic activity at issue. This is not the case with Measure U. It will increase taxes for Santa Monica/Malibu property only, in order to provide funds for expansion of a regional college. This has been likened to the folly of taxing Westwood residents to build a new science building at UCLA. SMC's authority to raise funds through a local bond measure is a remnant of the "city" colleges of many years ago, when only

students in a community college's own district attended that college. Given current open enrollment policies, is taxing its neighbors an appropriate way to fund SMC?

- The community has many needs — directly related to its residents — particularly K-12 education and parks. The city council and school board are already talking about bonds to bring before the voters in the near future. Given that the voters have a limit in terms of the property taxes they will approve, should we be using it up for this \$160 million bond measure?

- SMC is a great institution. But sometimes such institutions have bad ideas. For more information, please visit <http://home.adelphia.net/~tigler/No-U/pages/others.html>.

(Jennifer Polhemus is an economist and education researcher. She is a former Santa Monica planning commissioner).

Why I am voting 'yes' on Measure U

What is a community college anyway? To my mind, it is a truly great and unique American institution. Community colleges exist to allow people to continue their education. Whether you are rich or poor, need to work or don't need to work, no matter your age, and even if you have not been particularly successful in school so far, the doors at a community college are open to you: "Sure, come on in, we can help you learn to do what you want to do."

I think that's a wonderful thing; something I think is really important to us as a country and a community and something that I really value personally.

So, I'm all for community colleges in principle and our community college has gone even further. SMC has set its sights on becoming a first class learning institution, offering first class opportunities to all. And yes, it requires first class facilities. SMC is a place that folks are proud and excited to attend. In my opinion, SMC has set an example and standard for all public schools, an example that our pre-Kindergarten through 12th grade system would do well to follow: Excellence and access really are not mutually exclusive!

At the recent SMMUSD Strategic Plan Common Goals Conference, the most popular goal identified was "Variety of Curriculum." Santa Monica College offers our entire community a wonderful

variety of curriculum. You can take Spanish or Chinese, study Western Art History or remedial English, attend An Evening of Cuban Song or the Night Sky show. SMC offers us breadth and depth of learning opportunities! Wow. Many, many people that I know, children attending SMC theatre events, high school students in dual enrollment classes, senior citizens participating in Emeritus College, friends and neighbors and acquaintances have from time to time availed themselves of some of SMC's many opportunities, as do I. That's a very good thing, good for us as individuals and good for us as a community.

So I strongly support measure U and what it will do to provide, preserve, and enhance high quality education at SMC.

Is parking a problem? Of course it is. Parking is a problem throughout our city and it is especially a problem for SMC students. I live two blocks from SMC and we nearby residents have preferential parking. But students need parking too and traffic and safety issues around the college are exacerbated by the current lack of parking. The SMM Council of PTAs resolution states: "Santa Monica

Malibu PTA Council strongly supports Measure U. In addition, we urge consideration of traffic safety and parking issues around the campus." Passage of Measure U will enable the college to provide additional parking and improve traffic circulation and safety concerns. That's important for all of us.

I believe that improving SMC improves our entire learning community.

It improves prospects and opportunities for all of our students. It does not compete with our pre-K-12 priorities; it complements and continues them.

Both the SMMUSD Board of Education and the SMM Council of PTAs passed unanimous resolutions supporting SMC.

Is Santa Monica College a developer? You bet. A developer of minds. A developer of opportunities. I'm all for this kind of development! In my opinion, voting yes on Measure U is not only the right thing to do, it's a wonderful thing to do — for all of us, our children, our friends, our parents, our neighbors, our colleagues and ourselves.

Since September 11, there's been a lot of flag-waving and a lot of talk about things Americans can be proud of. For me,

Santa Monica College definitely makes the list: an institution of first class higher learning that invites, welcomes, and supports the full community — regardless of race, ethnicity, economic status, gender, age, or achievement — in pursuing their personal interests, goals, and dreams through learning. I'm voting Yes on Measure U. I hope you will join me.

Thanks, cheers, and onward,

PS. Supporters of Measure U will be precinct walking this weekend. If you would like to help, here are the details:

WHAT: Weekend Walk for YES on Measure U

WHEN: March 2-3 (this Saturday and Sunday) from 9 a.m.-3p .m.

WHERE: Clover Park — 2600 Ocean Park Blvd., Santa Monica (25th and Ocean Park)

Campaign volunteers will be walking precincts one last time before the Tuesday, March 5 election this Saturday and Sunday from 10 a.m.-3 p.m. There will be a briefing at 9 a.m. at Clover Park, as well as plenty of refreshments both before and after the walk.

Please contact Annie Bird at the Yes on Measure U campaign at (310) 899-6767 or directly at (310) 612-8799.

Election day is next Tuesday, March 5. Please VOTE.

(Louise Jaffe is the past president of the Santa Monica-Malibu PTA).

Guest Commentary By Louise Jaffe

LETTERS

SMC is a good neighbor

Editor:

Santa Monica Daily Press readers should know that Santa Monica College is as deeply committed to the safety and welfare of our community's children as any institution or individual in Santa Monica.

The community should also know that we take seriously suggestions on how we may improve. For example, through preferential parking and the closure of cer-

tain parking-related facilities on Pearl Street, we have reduced student travel to the campus from streets on the south side of the campus to only 7 percent of the total, according to an audit recently certified by the Santa Monica City Council.

We have also received a commendation from the Santa Monica-Malibu School Council of PTAs for new traffic controls we have put in place to assist with elementary and middle school student drop-off.

We will study all suggestions on additional improvements by including them in an environmental assess-

ment study and seek additional comments through a community outreach program before any of the projects funded by Measure U are begun.

Today, the college serves the largest number of Santa Monica and Malibu residents at any time in our history. Measure U will provide us the resources to balance the need of the community for a broad, professional, and success-oriented program with an equal sensitivity to neighborhood quality of life.

Don Girard

Director of marketing, Santa Monica College

STATE



Oracle warns profits and sales are below expectations

BY MICHAEL LIEDTKE

AP Business Writer

SAN FRANCISCO — Technology bellwether Oracle Corp. warned Friday its profit and sales during its latest quarter were weaker than anticipated — an indication that recession-weary businesses remain reluctant to invest in computer software and other equipment.

The Redwood Shores-based company estimated its earnings for the three-month period ending in February will be 9 cents per share, a penny below the consensus estimate of analysts polled by Thomson Financial/First Call. The projection also represents penny decrease from the company's profit at the same time last year.

Oracle, the world's second largest software maker

behind Microsoft, is scheduled to announce the results of its fiscal third quarter March 14.

The shortfall reflected sluggish sales of Oracle's database and business software, particularly in Asia, said CEO Larry Ellison.

Without providing specific numbers, Oracle said the year-to-year change in the software sales for its third quarter will be similar to the second quarter. Oracle's second-quarter sales of new software licenses fell 27 percent from the previous year.

In a conference call with analysts in December, Oracle executives had forecast a decline "in the high teens" during the just-completed quarter.

Oracle's warning probably will dash hopes for a revival in the depressed high-tech. "This casts a pall over

everything," said industry analyst George Gilbert of Credit Suisse First Boston.

Oracle's shares fell 63 cents to close at \$15.99 on the Nasdaq Stock Market. After the company issued its warning, Oracle's shares plunged \$1.27, or nearly 8 percent, in after-hours trading.

Many other tech stocks also dropped during after-hours trading.

Like other tech companies, Oracle is finding it tougher to sell products to cautious businesses that have curbed their spending until they are more certain about the economy has recovered.

Some analysts believe Oracle's trouble also stems from concerns about the pricing of its database software and the effectiveness of its applications software.

"It feels like most of the tech industry is still in a rut, but Oracle may be in a little deeper hole than everyone else," Gilbert said.

No sites restrict electric vehicles

BY JESSICA BRICE

Associated Press Writer

SAN FRANCISCO — When Mike Slominski goes to work, he jumps into a Volkswagen Rabbit with an electrically powered engine he built himself. With only about 15 miles from home to work, Slominski says it's the "perfect commuter car."

But when he's going on a longer trip, Slominski has to take a regular car like everyone else.

"They just aren't practical for long trips," said Slominski, who owns Mike's Auto Care in San Mateo, which specializes in electric vehicles.

That's because there are only about 800 public EV recharge sites in the state, mostly concentrated in California's big cities, according to California Energy Commission spokesman Dave Ashuckian.

So if Slominski or any of the other 40 members of the Electric Auto Association in San Francisco stray too far from the Bay Area, they are likely to get stranded with no place to recharge.

There are about 10 recharge sites — each have multiple outlets — in San Francisco County.

Most EVs will travel up to 60 miles before recharging,

but association spokesman Bill Carroll said he knows of an EV that traveled more than 200 miles on one charge. The only catch: it was carrying about 500 pounds of batteries.

"First we couldn't figure out how he did it," Carroll said. "And then we couldn't figure out how he had room left to sit."

Recharge sites slowly are popping up around California and the rest of the country. Sacramento, which has the largest concentration of stations at 200, has plans to add half a dozen more. Santa Cruz recently installed four stations downtown and Bay Area Rapid Transit has EV parking spaces at the Ashby station in Berkeley and the Lake Merritt station in Oakland.

"Right now there are probably more public stations than vehicles to use them," Ashuckian said.

But there's another problem that faces EV owners: With no industry standard established yet, EVs are equipped with either an inductive or conductive plug-in.

Slominski says most EV owners prefer conductive plug-ins — they can be compatible with regular electrical sockets. But most recharge sites in the state use inductive outlets.

Back in the game



The Associated Press

Once-ousted Mayor Eric Perrodin accepts balloons from Arlene McCready after being sworn back in as mayor Thursday in Compton, a city of more than 90,000. The state Supreme Court refused to block an appeals court order that restored Perrodin to office and ousted predecessor Omar Bradley. Perrodin defeated Bradley in June, but a judge had ruled Perrodin had an improper statistical advantage because his name had appeared first on ballots.

Puppies saved from being fed to constrictor

BOA, from page 1

where animals are put to sleep for the local pound. Patton approached the feeding from a scientific perspective, Principal Dale Harper said.

"I'm not sure that he considered the sensitivity of some people when it involved what's considered a pet," said Harper, a former biology teacher. "Very few people have a problem with seeing a rat go."

Harkins said he saw the dogs being fed to the snakes as something productive since they would have been destroyed otherwise. He is now trying to find them homes.

"I see how many puppies go unwanted every week," Harkins said. "I hate to see any life wasted."

Harper said there are campaigns afoot to have Patton fired but there were no violations and the issue was resolved without any puppies being harmed.

"I think he does a good job for us," Harper said. "This just happened to be a very sensitive issue."

Harper said he was told about Patton's plan for the puppies Wednesday morning by a school official who had received a complaint from a parent.

Harper said he asked Patton not to feed the puppies to the snakes and Patton immediately agreed. Harper said he saw a few students crying.

"When you have soft, cuddly puppies ... there are people who get real concerned," he said.

Patton has been a teacher at the school for about five years and there has never been any serious problems with his teaching, Harper said.



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BUSINESS

Ex-Enron chief Skilling criticizes Congress

BY MARCY GORDON
AP Business Writer

WASHINGTON — Former Enron chief executive Jeffrey Skilling, whose testimony to Congress is being challenged, says he couldn't have overseen everything at the company and faults lawmakers for "acting as judge and jury" in an election year.

No one should expect in the aftermath of Enron's collapse that a top executive would have known everything or been the one to "close out the cash drawers" every night, Skilling said in a television interview.

Skilling, saying he believed "we made the right decisions" before Enron collapsed into the biggest bankruptcy in U.S. history in December, defended himself in an interview aired Friday night on CNN's "Larry King Live."

Some lawmakers say Skilling knew more about questionable financial transactions than he told two congressional panels recently and have asked him to clear up what they see as discrepancies between his testimony and accounts of former colleagues.

Leaders of the House Energy and Commerce Committee told Skilling in a letter Thursday that documents obtained by the panel's investigators "appear to raise serious questions about the accuracy of your testimony."

Skilling testified that he could not recall being involved in approving transactions related to the so-called Raptors, fragile financial structures that kept more than \$1 billion in debt off Enron's books and eventually toppled the energy-trading company.

The Raptors' main financial assets improperly consisted of Enron's own

stock, which plummeted last year.

Skilling, who abruptly resigned in August, testified in appearances last month before the House committee and the Senate Commerce Committee that when he left, he believed Enron was in strong financial condition, and its financial reports accurately reflected its condition. He said in the CNN interview he was shocked by Enron's precipitous collapse as well as by the suicide in January of Enron executive Cliff Baxter, whom he called "my best friend."

Skilling said the company had "one of the best control systems in the world," with hundreds of lawyers and accountants vigilant against financial risk.

"It used to be kind of a joke in Enron that you couldn't go to the men's room without the accountants and the lawyers going in with you," he recounted.

Still, despite the controls put in place by company managers, the board of directors and its audit committee, Skilling said, "Can those controls catch everything? Of course not."

"Does a CEO of McDonald's ... go and close out the cash drawers of every store every night? ... You rely on the people within the company," he said.

In a new disclosure, data obtained by Justice Department prosecutors from company computers shows that Enron paid its executives huge one-time bonuses — totaling \$320 million — as rewards for hitting stock-price targets, The New York Times reported Friday. The stock targets, ending in 2000, were reached at the same time investigators say Enron officials were improperly inflating company profits by hundreds of millions of dollars, thereby buoying the stock price.

Judge sets December 2003 trial date for Enron lawsuits

BY KRISTEN HAYS
Associated Press Writer

HOUSTON — Multibillion-dollar lawsuits against Enron Corp. officials and the company's former auditor, Arthur Andersen LLC, will go to trial in December 2003, a federal judge has ruled.

U.S. District Judge Melinda Harmon in Houston told lawyers before filing the trial schedule that she expects the cases to be settled. But they have 18 months to gather millions of documents and prepare their cases if they take their claims to trial.

"It's something real now," said Rod Jordan, 63, a member of the Severed Enron Employees Coalition. Jordan was among 4,500 workers abruptly laid off in December after Enron filed the largest bankruptcy in U.S. history.

He also is among hundreds of former workers, retirees and investors who filed lawsuits over millions of dollars in investments or 401(k) accounts that evaporated when Enron's once-enviable stock price plummeted to less than a dollar.

"Without a date, it was something that maybe would go to trial someday, maybe it won't," Jordan said Friday.

Harmon said in the order filed late Thursday the cases have generated national attention given allegations of accounting abuses and Andersen's role as Enron's former outside auditor. She said

she hoped an efficient resolution of the cases would change "the nation's impression that the justice system grinds slowly in a Dickensian fashion."

Harmon also ordered Enron to provide plaintiffs with all documents the company has given Congress and the Labor Department, both of which are investigating the collapse. The Securities and Exchange Commission and the Justice Department also are investigating.

"We'll continue to cooperate with all investigations and inquiries," Enron spokeswoman Karen Denne said Friday.

Harmon's order addresses class-action lawsuits against current and former Enron officials and Chicago-based Andersen.

Plaintiffs in the consolidated case are large investors, like the University of California regents, the lead plaintiff. They also include several state pension funds, Amalgamated Bank and some individual investors.

Plaintiffs in the other actions are Enron employees and retirees. Those cases will be consolidated April 1.

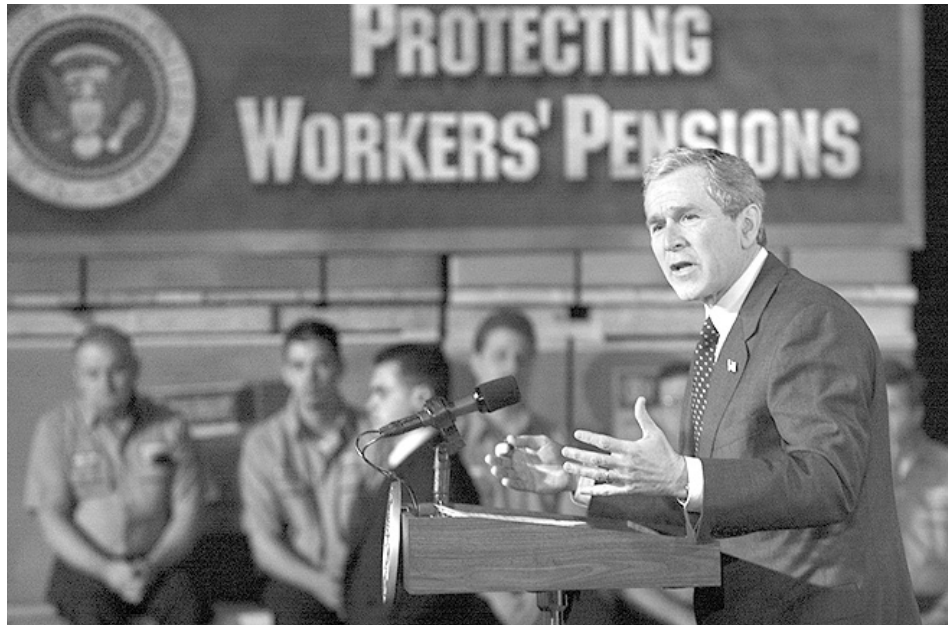
"The order sends a strong message that the judge wants to move quickly," University of California spokesman Trey Davis said Friday.

The plaintiffs are seeking more than \$25 billion from Enron officials, including former chief executives Kenneth Lay and Jeff Skilling, and the auditing firm.

NATIONAL



Making promises



J. Scott Applewhite/ Associated Press

President Bush promotes his retirement savings agenda at a local printing business in Des Moines, Iowa on Friday. Bush tells employees of The Printer Inc. that he is proposing that current-day workers be allowed to divert some of their Social Security taxes into personal retirement accounts.

Consumers buoy economy, but can they continue?

BY HOPE YEN

AP Business Writer

After dodging two rounds of layoffs at his company last fall, Jason Edmonds decided to splurge on a new \$5,700 high-definition television with money saved by refinancing his mortgage. But now, Edmonds and his wife are cutting back.

The Edmonds' spending helps explain the nation's remarkably mild recession despite widespread layoffs and depressed corporate profits.

But their newfound restraint begs the question: How long will the spending last?

It is a question that resonates in consumers' stories across the nation. People are buying electronics, even while acknowledging higher debt and shrunken stock portfolios. They worry about losing their jobs, but not enough to snap up low interest, or in some cases no interest, deals on homes and automobiles.

The results have been striking: The U.S. economy grew by a faster-than-expected 1.4 percent rate in the final quarter of 2001, rebounding sharply from the 1.3 percent third-quarter loss following the Sept. 11 attacks.

Consumers ratcheted up spending on costly manufactured goods, such as cars, at a rate of 39.2 percent in the fourth quarter, the biggest increase since 1986. Total consumer spending rose at a brisk 6 percent rate, the largest gain since 1998.

Economists now say the recession, which officially began a year ago, has probably ended and may be recorded as the mildest in U.S. history.

Low-interest rates in recent months have spurred home-buying, foreboding continued spending as owners seek new furnishings and appliances. Sales of existing homes in January rocketed to a rate of 6.04 million, a 16.2 percent increase from December.

Zero-percent financing spurred auto sales of 17.18 million vehicles last year, making 2001 the second best vehicle sales year in history despite a drop-off immediately after the Sept. 11 attacks.

Mike Lewis of Roseville, Calif., doesn't

need statistics to tell him the economy is improving — he's seen a surge of orders at the wine distributor where he manages the overnight shift. Lewis acknowledges the strong sales may be due to the high concentration of government jobs in the Sacramento suburb, which has insulated it the tech slowdown.

Still, Lewis, 44, remains confident. He's arranged a line of credit secured by his home and is prepared to invest as much as \$350,000 to buy a small business such as a Mailboxes Etc. franchise.

Even so, economists — including Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan — caution that America's buying frenzy can't last. Greenspan predicts a subdued recovery.

"Spending by the household sector held up well and proved to be a major stabilizing force," he said Wednesday in testimony before Congress. "As a consequence, although household spending should continue to trend up, the potential for significant acceleration in activity in this sector is likely to be more limited than in past cycles."

If Greenspan is right, there may already be some warning signs.

After rising two straight months, consumer confidence took a larger-than-expected dip in January, hurt in part by concerns about layoffs and accounting scandals at Enron Corp. and Global Crossing Ltd. Economists believe it's a temporary dip, but acknowledged continued volatility in the months ahead.

Consumers cut spending on big-ticket goods, including cars, by 2.1 percent in January, though their total spending rose by 0.4 percent, reflecting the waning of free financing and other incentives on new cars and trucks and a weak job outlook, analysts say.

Unemployment, currently at 5.6 percent, is expected to rise in coming months as cautious companies delay rehiring laid-off workers until they are convinced of the sustainability of the upturn. U.S. companies cut about 1 million jobs in 2001, according to job placement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

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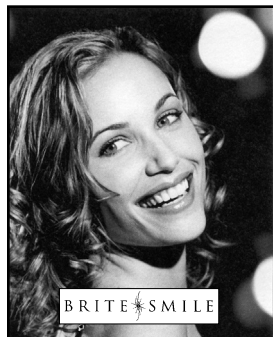
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NATIONAL

Dealer gone, customers want their mini-mice

BY ALEXANDRA R. MOSES
Associated Press Writer

WHITE LAKE TOWNSHIP, Mich. — Green packing popcorn, large boxes and a note saying "closed for inventory" are nearly all that is left of a ceramic-figurine store whose owner went out at lunchtime one day and never returned.

Now, Stewart C. Richardson's wife, the FBI and more than 100 customers who bought items like miniature statues of frolicking mice from him on eBay want to know where he went — and what happened to the money they say he collected for merchandise he never sent.

A warrant was issued Thursday for Richardson's arrest, accusing him of wire fraud. An FBI affidavit says Richardson devised a scheme on eBay to defraud customers, and the agency cites about 75 victims with a loss of about \$163,000. But officials estimate there are more than 100 people who never got their ceramic figurines, for a loss of about \$300,000.

The alleged fraud stems from a Dec. 28-Jan. 4 auction of figurines from an apparently fictitious estate in Phoenix. Though pictures of the items were posted on the online auction site, customers say they came from catalogs.

"We were really bidding on air," said Jan Lebow of Virginia Beach, Va., who bought seven items totaling nearly \$4,000.

Lebow bought Wee Forest Folk figurines, as did many of the auction customers. The figurines — mostly mice in poses of different themes, such as holidays and sports — are a popular collector's item and can go for hundreds of dollars apiece. Richardson also dealt in the more expensive Hummel figurines and

Lladros.

eBay spokesman Kevin Pursglove said fraud on eBay is rare. "We've never had anything like this," Pursglove said.

Two customers say they each paid Richardson more than \$20,000 for Wee Forest Folk figurines during the auction and also had arranged to meet Richardson in Phoenix on Jan. 18 to pick up the items, according to the FBI. Richardson never showed.

Customers also say that after the auction ended, Richardson contacted the second-highest bidders on some items and told them the winner hadn't paid so they could have the items, thus getting twice the money.

Those bidding on eBay had no reason to be suspicious of Richardson — he had high ratings from past buyers, he had the bricks-and-mortar business, Retired Figurine Exchange, and he had been selling on eBay for several years.

Richardson disappeared Jan. 17. On Jan. 22, customers began posting warnings about a possible eBay fraud. But there were still some positive messages from customers who bid on different auctions. One note from Jan. 23 read, "Terrific packaging!!, good communication, will buy from again!"

Friends and associates of Richardson's wife, Arlene Murray, say she was surprised and embarrassed by her husband's disappearance. Murray owned a scrapbooking shop two doors down from her husband's store; it, too, now has a "closed for inventory" sign.

According to the FBI, Richardson, 60, also took \$220,000 from a business account he shared with his wife, and \$101,000 from an account she said she didn't know about.

Judges overturn three NYPD convictions in torture case

BY LARRY NEUMEISTER
Associated Press Writer

NEW YORK — The convictions of three officers who have insisted on their innocence in one of the nation's most shocking police brutality scandals have been overturned by an appeals court.

A three-judge panel of the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled unanimously Thursday that Charles Schwarz's lawyer did not defend him adequately when he was prosecuted for the torture of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima.

The ruling also said the jury was tainted by news reports when it convicted him of violating Louima's civil rights by holding him down during the 1997 assault in a police station bathroom.

The court said there was insufficient evidence to sustain the obstruction-of-justice convictions of Schwarz, 36, and officers Thomas Wiese, 38, and Thomas Bruder, 35. Wiese and Bruder had been accused of lying to cover up Schwarz's role.

Schwarz has denied ever being in the bathroom.

The ruling did not affect the guilty plea of the main attacker, Justin Volpe, 37, who admitted he sodomized the handcuffed Louima with a broken broomstick in a fit of rage. Volpe is serving 30 years.

Civil rights leaders and Louima sup-

porters expressed outrage over the ruling. The Rev. Al Sharpton called the decision "a shocking display of how the judicial system continues to fail to protect citizens from police abuse," and the NAACP urged federal prosecutors to appeal.

"This was clearly one of the worst cases of police brutality in the history of our nation," NAACP President Kweisi Mfume said. "I am alarmed and disappointed by the court's decision. It represents a miscarriage of justice."

Louima, at his home in Miami, had no comment.

The appeals court acquitted all three officers on the obstruction charges, effectively bringing an end to the case against Wiese and Bruder. But the court ordered a new trial on the civil rights charges for Schwarz, who is serving 15 years in prison.

U.S. Attorney Alan Vinegrad said that he was disappointed by the ruling but that his office is prepared to retry Schwarz.

The Police Department had no comment.

Louima had been arrested in a melee outside a nightclub. According to testimony, Volpe was enraged because he believed Louima had punched him from behind. Louima was brutalized in the bathroom and spent two months in the hospital with a ruptured bladder and colon.

INTERNATIONAL



Al-Qaida, Taliban urging 'holy war' against U.S.

BY KATHY GANNON
Associated Press Writer

GARDEZ, Afghanistan

— Al-Qaida and Taliban fighters are regrouping in the mountains of eastern Paktia province and just over the border in Pakistan, urging the faithful to wage holy war against U.S. forces, Afghan officials say.

U.S. officials and Afghan sources estimate 4,000 to 5,000 foreigners who fought for the Taliban and al-Qaida remain inside Afghanistan. Many of them are believed to be in Paktia and other provinces along the Pakistan border.

They are receiving support from a variety of groups, including Kashmiri separatists, Islamic militants in Pakistan and some former officials of Pakistan's intelligence service, according to Afghan sources, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

"We have Chechens, Arabs, Pakistanis in the mountains," Ziarat Gul Mangal, deputy intelligence chief of Paktia province, told The Associated Press as he gestured toward the sun-drenched mountains to the east.

He said at least one pocket of fighters, including Chechens, Arabs and Afghans, were recently discovered in the mountains near Gardez.

"They had just started to reorganize there," Mangal said without giving any numbers. But he added: "We found weapons, a lot of weapons."

U.S. officials in Afghanistan consistently refuse to discuss details of American operations against remnants of al-Qaida and the Taliban, three months after the hard-line militia's nation-

wide rule collapsed.

However, U.S. special forces and other covert troops are known to be operating in Paktia province, a rugged area south of the capital, Kabul.

U.S. officials have noted a significant regrouping of fighters believed to be Taliban or al-Qaida in Paktia province, and Air Force Brig. Gen. John W. Rosa Jr. of the Joint Chiefs of Staff said Friday the regrouping consists of "hundreds" of fighters.

Jalaluddin Haqqani, the former Taliban minister of frontier affairs and a top Taliban figure sought by U.S. authorities, is believed to be a key organizer of the regrouping, said a U.S. official, speaking on condition of anonymity. It doesn't appear he is commanding the group in the field, however, the official said.

Even before the Taliban collapsed under the relentless U.S. air bombardment and attacks by the U.S.-backed northern alliance, Taliban leader Mullah Mohammed Omar had threatened to withdraw to the mountains, regroup and launch a guerrilla war.

"What can you do to us? We are not a national army," Omar said during the bombing campaign. "We are guerrillas. We will go to the mountains. We will fight you from there."

Afghan sources, speaking on condition of anonymity, said Omar is on the move between Maruf in southeastern Afghanistan, Ghazni southwest of Kabul and in the Sharan region of Paktika province, which borders Paktia to the south.

As they regroup, Taliban and al-Qaida remnants are trying to encourage Afghans to join in a new jihad, or "holy war,"

against the Americans and their allies, residents say.

"Our society is illiterate and most people don't understand," Mangal said. "They are telling people that first Russia attacked Islam and once again Western countries are attacking Islam and Islam is at risk."

Several Afghans told of pamphlets being distributed in various provinces of the east and south urging holy war, although local officials said they had none when asked.

Such pamphlets, called "shabnama" or "night letters" because they circulate covertly, were used by U.S.-backed rebels during the war against Soviet occupiers in the 1980s.

"The Taliban ... say 'All mujahedeen, northern alliance and everyone, should unite together against America,'" said Dr. Najib, a physician at Gardez General Hospital. Like many Afghans, he uses one name.

Najib said the provinces of Paktia and adjacent Paktika were "the worst place for all these people, Taliban and al-Qaida, because all of them escaped this way" after the fall of Kabul and other cities last year.

"In the mountains along the border, there are many of them," he said.

One Afghan source, who asked not to be identified, said former Taliban

leaders have made contact with anti-Taliban commanders urging them to turn their weapons on U.S. forces and international peacekeepers.

Mangal claimed the renegades were still receiving help from Pakistan's intelligence service. Pakistan has repeatedly denied the claim.

Pakistan was the principal supporter of the Taliban until President Pervez Musharraf abandoned them following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks and threw his support to the United States.

Mangal and others said the Taliban and al-Qaida

were also receiving help from Pakistani-based Islamic militants of Jaish-e-Mohammed, Lashkar-e-Tayyaba and Sipah-e-Sahaba — all currently outlawed in Pakistan.

A former Taliban official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said former senior officials of Pakistan's intelligence service met recently with Haqqani in northwestern Pakistan where he has taken refuge.

Haqqani, who was backed by the United States during the war against the Soviets, was close to al-Qaida. U.S. bombers pounded his cave

complexes in the Zawar area of Paktia province in January.

Both Mangal and anti-Taliban commander Ismail Khan, whose soldiers are working with U.S. Special Forces, also reported the meeting between Haqqani and the Pakistanis.

"There are many big Taliban in Pakistan, just on the border," Khan said. They send money and equipment to Taliban and al-Qaida fighters, he said.

Khan claimed that the Taliban's former deputy prime minister, Mullah Abdul Qabir, recently sent radios to his loyal followers inside Afghanistan.

War on the West Bank



Pier Paolo Cito/Associated Press

Israeli troops run for cover inside the Balata refugee camp, in the West Bank town of Nablus on Friday. The troops, backed by tanks and helicopter gunships, launched a major assault on this West Bank refugee camp early Thursday, a stronghold of Palestinian gunmen, a first in 17 months of fighting.

Two executed in China for murder

By The Associated Press

BEIJING — Two members of a criminal gang that battered people to death with a hammer and robbed them were executed in Beijing on Friday, state media reported.

Li Jiwen of northeast China's Heilongjiang province and Zhang Yu of central China's Hubei province committed the crimes individually or with others around Beijing in November and December, the official Xinhua News Agency said.

Li and Zhang each murdered one person and injured many others. Their illegal gains totaled \$2,675, Xinhua said.

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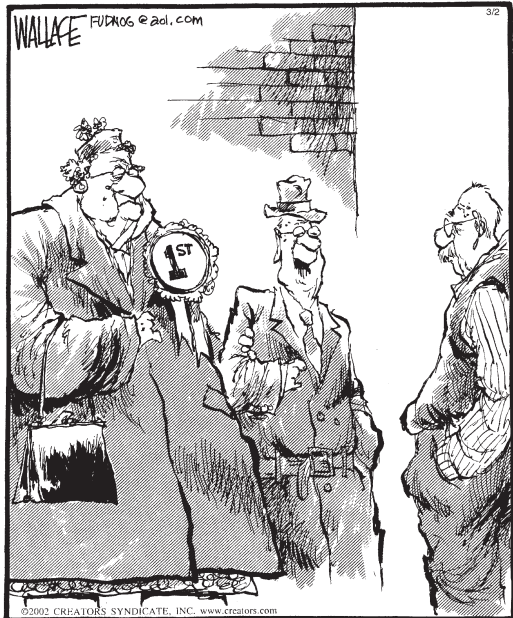
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ACROSS

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6 Bridge feats
11 Chum
12 Candidate of 1996
13 Surprise win
14 Comment to the audience
15 Squelches
17 Mariner's milieu
18 Timetable abbr.
19 Alien landing spot
22 Summer sign
23 Meaning
24 Heston role
25 Nevada native
27 Happy companion
30 Sun block
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32 Circle section
33 Star Fleet weapon
35 Packing box
38 Banish
39 Copier need

DOWN

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41 Take the wheel
42 Fender scars
1 Producing an effect
2 Strike caller
3 Café's cousin
4 Eon's makeup
5 Hitchcock film
6 Relaxing spot
7 Guitar pioneer Paul
8 Out of bed
9 Classic car
10 Lift
16 Unceasing trout
20 Rainbow
21 Director Craven
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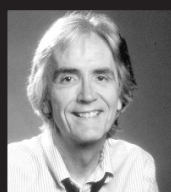
- 26 Secret
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30 Treaties
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36 Golf need
37 Blunder

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NEWS OF THE WEIRD

by Chuck Shepard

Sex crimes and politics

- In December, Colorado Republican Party activist Randal David Ankeney, 30, was charged in another sexual assault incident, following his July arrest for assaulting a 14-year-old girl he had met in an Internet chat room. (The December arrest involved what the Colorado Springs Gazette termed a "girl" but whose age was not disclosed.)
- In February, the National Republican Congressional Committee withdrew the "Republican of the Year" award that had been scheduled to be presented to Virginia party activist Mark A. Grethen, 44; the committee had just learned of his conviction on six counts of sex crimes involving children.

FUNNY PAPERZ

Cartoonist apologises for drawing.
-News Item



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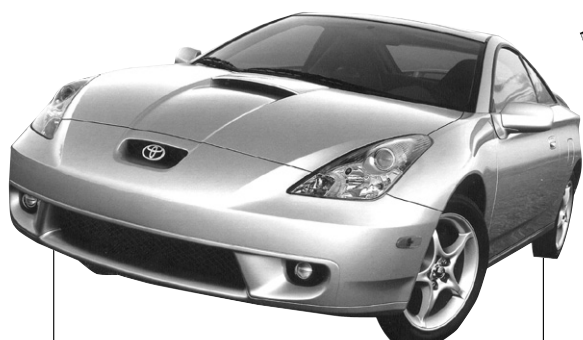
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