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SM City Hall: Savior or slumlord?

City ownership of trailer park still an issue at lawsuit's end

BY DAVE DANFORTH
Daily Press Staff Writer

Residents at one of Santa Monica's last trailer parks are feeling squeezed by City Hall, which some suggest is nothing but a slum landlord.

By one account, the city has saved Mountain View Mobile Inn from ravenous developers. It has been preserved as a temple to housing for its residents — and the 90 mobile homes they live in.

"You mean to say they were negotiating to buy this park for $7 million for several years and didn't know what was there?"

— PAUL DeSANTIS
Attorney

To believe another, the same 5-acre trailer park on Stewart Street is a slum, representing a botched opportunity to lift from squalor some residents living three-to-a-living room, and run by a City Hall that should condemn it.

There is one problem: City Hall already owns it. And this same City Hall is either a visionary savior or a one-eyed Jack which realizes it is nursing a failure but is loathe to admit it.

Mountain View is an almost quaint sight, with its small coaches and snaking roads. It isn't typical Santa Monica housing, but it's a chance for residents to own their own piece of the rock. Residents own or rent their coaches, but pay rent to City Hall for the plots on which they sit.

Its rich, 50-year history includes three lawsuits, an alleged methane gas mess next door, and all sorts of dark allegations — from a resident conspiracy against its own lawyers to the exact nature of a proposed $2 million payment which some called a "kickback" (see related story).

City gets into trailer park business

The city came to own Mountain View last year, when it settled a toxic waste lawsuit. Its goal was lofty: to apply Santa Monica affordable housing legislation to save it. But the goal the city espoused a year ago — the maintenance of 141 affordable housing units — is now deemed unattainable by the same city which championed it just last year. It says affordable or not, 141 is just too tight a squeeze.

For residents, even with the relief of city ownership, it's decision time. They can either proceed with a city-subsidized, $7 million conversion to a park they would own themselves. Or they can revert to a recently-ended experiment: Choosing a non-profit corporation to operate it, freeing the homeowners from the headaches of collecting each other's rents.

Last year, the city rejected a plan to replace the 90 often-rickety now-occupied mobile homes with new condominiums at the same rents. The city essentially said that would be making a deal with the devil: It would allow 51 additional free market units to be built to subsidize the low rents. The city council said it wanted to protect all 141 units as affordable, and found the price, including a $2 million "development fee" for attorneys, too rich.

Now the city is in a peculiar quandary. It has found that there's not enough space in the park to keep all 141 units, and also squeeze in wider streets, assigned parking, modern electric and sewer service, and natural gas lines to replace propane tanks. Yet, said city housing and redevelopment director Bob Moncrief, if the rent control board doesn't approve the reduction, "we have a problem."

See PARK, page 3



Carolyn Sackariason/Daily Press

Phyllis Goff, a longtime resident of Mountain View Mobile Inn, is up in arms about the decades-old problems that plague the park, which the city owns and maintains.

City acquires trailer park the messy way

BY DAVE DANFORTH
Daily Press Staff Writer

It was no plan, but rather a messy legal battle that brought about the city takeover of the Mountain View Mobile Inn trailer park.

The round of lawsuits that beset the park was sparked by a long-closed city landfill operation next door. Ring Trading, the former owner of the Mountain View parcel, sued the city of Santa Monica in May 1997 for a host of problems, including a methane gas leak, other toxic and noxious chemicals, and dust pollution. Several of the residents there prepared to jump into the suit the next year.

Out of the legal circus emerged a proposal to replace 141 trailer pads, some empty, with 51 free-market condominiums and 90 other "affordable" condominiums to replace the still-occupied mobile homes. The profit from the sale of the 51 extra units would subsidize controlled rents, under a plan advanced by Paul DeSantis, a real estate lawyer and affordable housing advocate.

DeSantis brought in another specialist, Barbara Peters, to propose the "largest affordable housing project" in Santa Monica history.

See BATTLE, page 3

Three men shot in Pico neighborhood

BY CAROLYN SACKARIASON
Daily Press Staff Writer

Three men are recuperating in the hospital after they were shot Tuesday night in the 1900 block of 20th Street, between Pico and Michigan.

Santa Monica Police Lt. Frank Fabrega said officers responded to a 911 call from a resident in the area who heard shots at about 9:45 p.m. At the scene, officers found two black men with gun-inflicted wounds. They were transported by ambulance to a local hospital. The third victim, also a black male, had left the scene and drove himself to a nearby hospital before police arrived.

SMDP detectives believe the shootings are not gang related. However, the victims cannot provide any information about the suspect(s).

"There is no indication that they were in a car or on bicycle or on foot," Fabrega said. "We just don't know."

Two of the men live in the area where shooting occurred while the another lives in Los Angeles. All three men were shot while standing on the sidewalk. Their injuries are not life threatening.

The SMPD robbery-homicide unit is investigating the incident.

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HOROSCOPE

Stars say 'be a kid' today Scorpio

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)
★★★ If you slow down rather than push the limits, nostalgia sets in. Remember, not all has to be done this very second. Touch base with an old friend. Mend a fence or two with others. Choose your words rather than blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. Tonight: Nap, then decide.

TAURUS (April 20-May 20)
★★★★★ Reach out for your friends, making sure that someone is OK. You might need to say "no" to a loan or a request that makes you uncomfortable. Others attempt to draw you into their "stuff." Pick and choose what you want to do. Surprisingly, everyone is OK with that. Tonight: Where the crowds are.

GEMINI (May 21-June 20)
★★★ Don't push too hard and exhaust yourself. Know when you've hit a brick wall, acknowledge limitations and move to another issue. Your drive, strength and intellect often make you the lead player. Bone up on diplomacy with a difficult associate. Tonight: Clear your desk.

CANCER (June 21-July 22)
★★★★ An underlining sense of fatigue slows you down. Use the yellow pages. Make calls rather than run around the corner. You'll accomplish more with less effort. Stay in tune with your needs. Tonight: Hop on the computer and send e-mail cards.

LEO (July 23-Aug. 22)
★★★★ Another drops a problem in your lap. You could toss it back, but probably won't because being responsible suits you fine. Listen to what is being offered. Work with a close associate or partner, even if it means adjusting your special plans. Tonight: Slow down with a loved one.

VIRGO (Aug. 23-Sept. 22)
★★★ Pressure builds at work. It seems as if everyone needs or wants something from you. Establish limits nicely. You might opt to isolate yourself for a while in order to complete needed tasks. Be upbeat and positive with your actions. Tonight: Out, finishing off last-minute details.

LIBRA (Sept. 23-Oct. 22)
★★★★ Focus on completion rather than initiation. If you have a lot of shopping left, you might want to hop on the Internet or think about gift certificates of some sort. News from a distance tosses your schedule off. Don't let this stop you. Tonight: Work late (or play Santa's helper).

SCORPIO (Oct. 23-Nov. 21)
★★★★ Someone might be put off by a statement or decision you make. Or could it be your flirtatious ways? Stay away from the mistletoe! Stop and consider who and what is really important to you in the long run. Initiate a fun project with a child or loved one. Tonight: Be a kid.

SAGITTARIUS (Nov. 22-Dec. 21)
★★★ Don't push a close friend or roommate beyond his or her limit. Know when to stop, and your relationship with this person improves. Don't worry about some moving of furniture or change on the home front. Nothing really is that big of a deal, ultimately. Tonight: Close to home.

CAPRICORN (Dec. 22-Jan. 19)
★★★★ Speak your mind, especially if you feel burdened by accepting too many responsibilities. Ask for help if that is what you want. Others might balk at first, but they will chip in. You forget you're not Goliath or Superman! Organize remaining chores. Tonight: Catch up with key people.

AQUARIUS (Jan. 20-Feb. 18)
★★★★ Expenses go way overboard if you're not careful. A devil-may-care attitude might be satisfying right now, but consider the toll. Use good sense and cut down risks. Your sense of well-being needs to become a higher priority. Tonight: Treat yourself to a special dessert.

PISCES (Feb. 19-March 20)
★★★★ You're full of energy and dynamic get-up-and-go. You charge into an assignment, though you might not complete it right now. Realize how many projects you begin and what needs completion. A partner could become discouraged finishing up all you begin! Tonight: Do what you can to ease tension.

WEATHER

Today ... Sunny with a high 68°F. Winds from the Northwest at 5mph.

Tonight ... Partly cloudy with a low of 45°F. Winds from the West Northwest at 2mph.

Tomorrow ... Partly cloudy High—60°F Low—48°F

QUOTE of the DAY

"If this is coffee, please bring me some tea; but if this is tea, please bring me some coffee."

— Abraham Lincoln

CORRECTION — In the Dec. 18 edition it was incorrectly reported that Mayor Michael Feinstein would propose looking at creating an auto dealership mall between Olympic and Colorado Avenues, stretching from Lincoln Boulevard to 11th Street. That information was based on an earlier staff memo that was incorrect. Feinstein proposed looking at locations other than Santa Monica Boulevard, not a specific neighborhood.

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STATE

Dick Clark sues Recording Academy president Greene

BY ANTHONY BREZNICAN
AP Entertainment Writer

BEVERLY HILLS — Dick Clark filed a $10 million lawsuit Wednesday against Recording Academy President Michael Greene, accusing him of barring artists who appear first on Clark's American Music Awards from performing during the Grammy Awards.

A visibly angry Clark said Greene persuaded Michael Jackson to break a promise to appear in the upcoming American Music Awards show on Jan. 9. The Grammys air on Feb. 27.

"Mr. Greene has caused me a lot of pain and a lot of stress," Clark said. "I've known Michael Jackson since he was a kid. ... To have another party interfere in that relationship makes me very, very angry."

Jackson publicist Dan Forman didn't immediately return a voicemail message.

The Recording Academy issued a statement denying any wrongdoing.

"It clearly is the nature of the entertainment business to offer your audience something exclusive," the statement read. "We do nothing outside normal industry business practices."

Clark said he understands the Grammy's desire for exclusivity but objected to Greene pressuring performers to break existing agreements with the AMAs.

In past years, Clark said Greene was responsible for preventing Britney Spears from appearing on the American Music Awards and banned Sean "P. Diddy" Combs and Toni Braxton from performing on the Grammys because they appeared on the American Music Awards.

In the lawsuit filed in Los Angeles Superior Court, Clark accused Greene and 10 unnamed defendants of interfering with contracts and prospective business relations, and unfair competition.

Besides damages, Clark wants the alleged blacklisting tactics rescinded. Clark said he didn't sue the Recording Academy because he doesn't believe the general membership approves of Greene's tactics.

Clark said he had spoken with Greene about the issue in the past and had received assurances it wouldn't occur again.

Clark said he was compiling a list of all performers forced to back out of the American Music Awards or the Grammy Awards in past years because of the alleged tactics.

Federal government pays to analyze border pollution

By the Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — The federal government will pay $2 million to monitor and analyze ocean pollution along the U.S.-Mexico border that comes from untreated sewage.

The funding is a result of a legal settlement reached between the Surfrider Foundation and the U.S. International Boundary and Water Commission. The settlement was given to a federal magistrate Tuesday.

"This settlement resolves almost two years of litigation," said Randall Humm, a Department of Justice attorney. "It will improve knowledge about the marine environment and help decision makers make better decisions involving environmental protection."

The settlement stems from a lawsuit Surfrider filed in November 1999 to force the commission to upgrade its sewage treatment at a plant near the border.

The commission's plant, which treats sewage from Mexico, has had repeated violations of its state permit and the federal Clean Water Act since the South Bay ocean outfall pipe became operational in January 1999.

Surfrider sued the government to have independent ocean monitoring so that toxic effluent is not harming kelp beds or beaches. The settlement will allow the monitoring to occur.

Some South Bay beaches were closed 39 days last year because of high bacteria levels. The bacteria may be coming from the Tijuana River but environmentalists suspect that ocean currents could be pushing contamination ashore from either the U.S. outfall or Mexican sewage discharged at the shoreline at Punta Banderas just south of the border.

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LOCAL

Mobile home park 'saved' from condo development

PARK, from page 1

Attorney and longtime affordable housing advocate Paul DeSantis isn't swallowing a word of City Hall's line that it may not be able to keep all 141 units (some are now unoccupied).

"You mean to say they were negotiating to buy this park for $7 million for several years and didn't know what was there?" he asked.

The 'grand plan' has holes

DeSantis, who represented resident-tenants involved in a three-way lawsuit with the city and former park owner Ring Trading, proposed the 51 extra "luxury units." He calls the city's stewardship "a scandal," and said city officials would be all over the park for its sub-standard condition if someone other than the city was the landlord.

Phyllis Goff, who heads the homeowners association, doesn't entirely agree. "We're fighting to preserve our mobile homes, whichever way it can be done. We've saved this place as a mobile home park."

"We're fighting to preserve our mobile homes, whichever way it can be done. We've saved this place as a mobile home park."

— PHYLLIS GOFF
Homeowners' association president

A 1992 Santa Monica law would seem the perfect way to allow residents to own the park themselves. The statute is known as "TORCA" — Tenant Ownership Rights Charter Amendment. The city envisioned Mountain View as an ideal TORCA case, and committed $4 million in 1992 from funds collected from condominium conversions throughout the city. The plan called for the city to buy the park and then sell it back to an association owned by the tenants. At its heart was a loan with remarkable terms.

According to Moncrief, the tenants would collect space rents and pay their expenses. If there was money left over, the tenants would give it to the city. If there was nothing left, the city would be forgiving. "If affordability dictates it, we wouldn't get a penny," Moncrief said, adding that the goal was to preserve space rents as they are now: About $300 per space, depending on size, and whether each included its own coach.

But if the tenants couldn't cover their expenses, they'd have to raise their own rents. And Goff points to the pitfall of demographics. Over the years, large families have moved in, and fewer coaches are occupied by their owners. She can imagine rent as a problem for some tenants, with others forced to act as collection agents against their neighbors.

What now?

The residents association has been leaning towards inviting a non-profit group to run the park and manage it, as the city has already done.

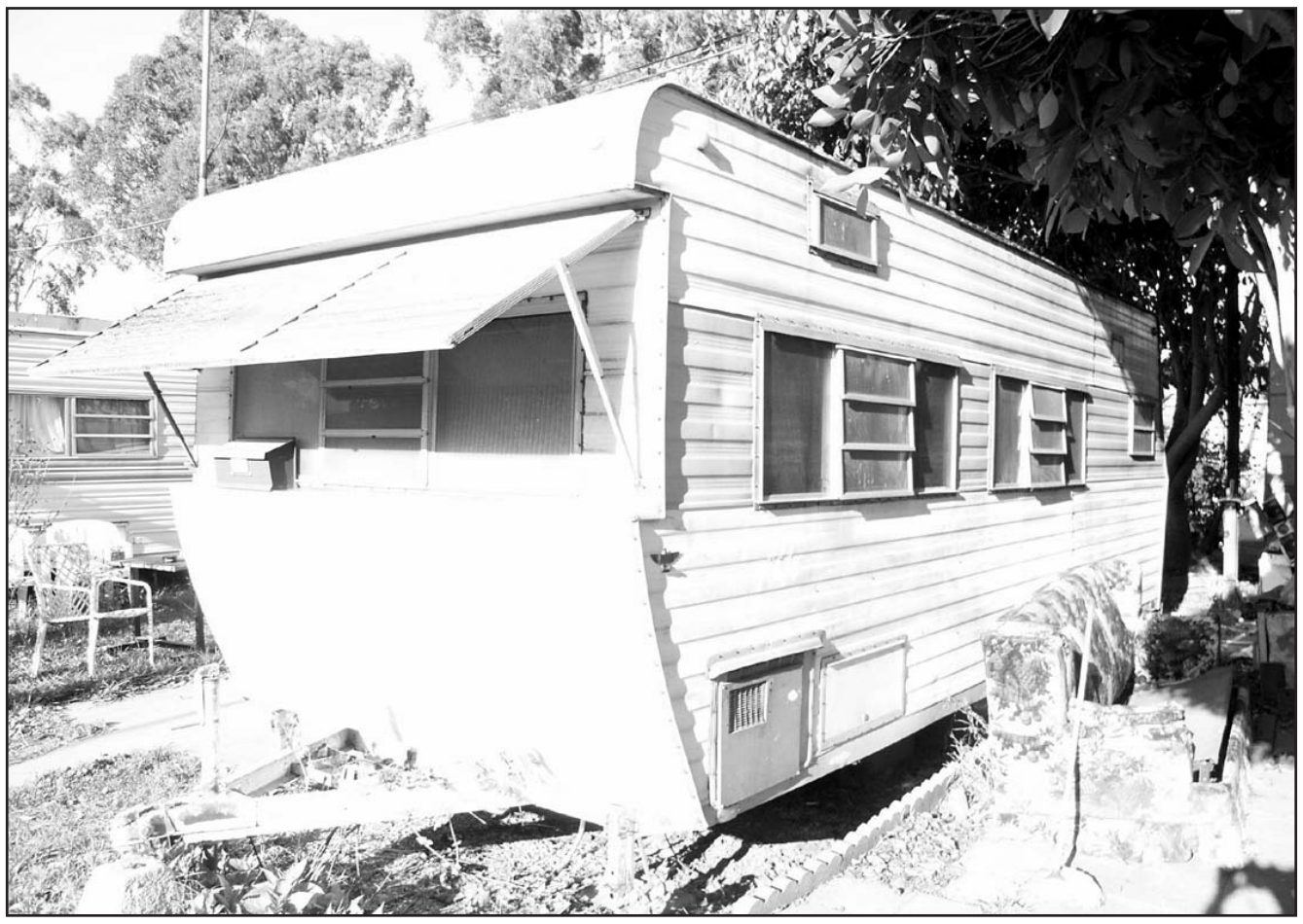
It picked an Orange County-based group, Jamboree, to operate Mountain View. But the city's Moncrief and Jamboree recently agreed to discontinue their deal, largely because Jamboree isn't local enough to stay on top of the park's maintenance.

DeSantis worries that it would take a calamity like a propane tank exploding to spur the city to action. Although much has changed over the past decade in court papers and ownership, there is little visible to show for it. Yet to some, like Goff, the status quo is a welcome relief compared to the specter of ownership by a developer.

The TORCA law has now expired, though the Mountain View application, filed in 1996, still could go through. Discussions are moving, by all accounts, very slowly. The city council, rent control board, and planning commissioners must finally weigh in. Some see sufficient victory in a benevolent city takeover. Others worry that political winds may change, bringing a less sympathetic city leadership to power.

Still others see nothing benevolent at all at Mountain View. DeSantis, who presented the condominium plan, sees failure.

"They could have had attractive housing there, with 90 affordable units, at the same price the mobile units would cost," he said. "Now they have a run-down trailer park instead."



Carolyn Sackariason/Daily Press

This trailer is one of 90 in the Mountain View Mobile Inn that provides affordable housing in Santa Monica. Rents are between $250-$350 a month, but some residents save on rent because they cram many people into one unit.

'Covert operatives' believed to be part of settlement

BATTLE, from page 1

At the same time, they represented residents in the lawsuit. Their platform for advancing the development plan drew fire, although it included amenities such as a bell tower and a stream.

Phyllis Goff, who has twice served as head of the Mountain View homeowners' association, worried about the uprooting of residents during construction. The project would have been built in phases, with residents able to stay throughout. But to Goff, the promise of more open space had a hollow ring.

"We would lose our homes and yards, for what?" she sniffed, insisting residents didn't need the planned 50 percent more open space "just to look at."

Amidst the proposal was a controversial $2 million "development fee" for legal work, largely done by DeSantis and Peters.

A city lawyer notes that DeSantis' strong views about his rejected proposal might be explained by that fee. Deputy city attorney Cara Silver termed it simply "a kickback."

"It was a conflict of interest, an obvious problem," she said. "Certainly it was something the city council questioned."

DeSantis said the fees were a small part of a "global settlement proposal" — a legal term for a full settlement of the three-way suit involving Ring Trading, the city, and park residents. The settlement called for the city to simply buy out park owner Ring Trading for $7 million and an end to Ring's methane suit against it. The city would then eventually sell the park back to the residents through Santa Monica's affordable housing laws.

The city shot down the DeSantis proposal before buying the park. It worried about the reduction of affordable housing at Mountain View.

Brian Evans, a self-proclaimed roller skate inventor and intellectual property specialist, terms himself the "last man standing." Evans didn't agree with his neighbors who dropped their suit against the city. Without a lawyer, Evans pressed his case. He insisted that the city "abate" the environmental problems, and push through the resident buyout of the park, which, by then, many of his neighbors doubted would work. They feared the job of collecting rents from their neighbors, including larger families and economically stressed residents, would be too distasteful.

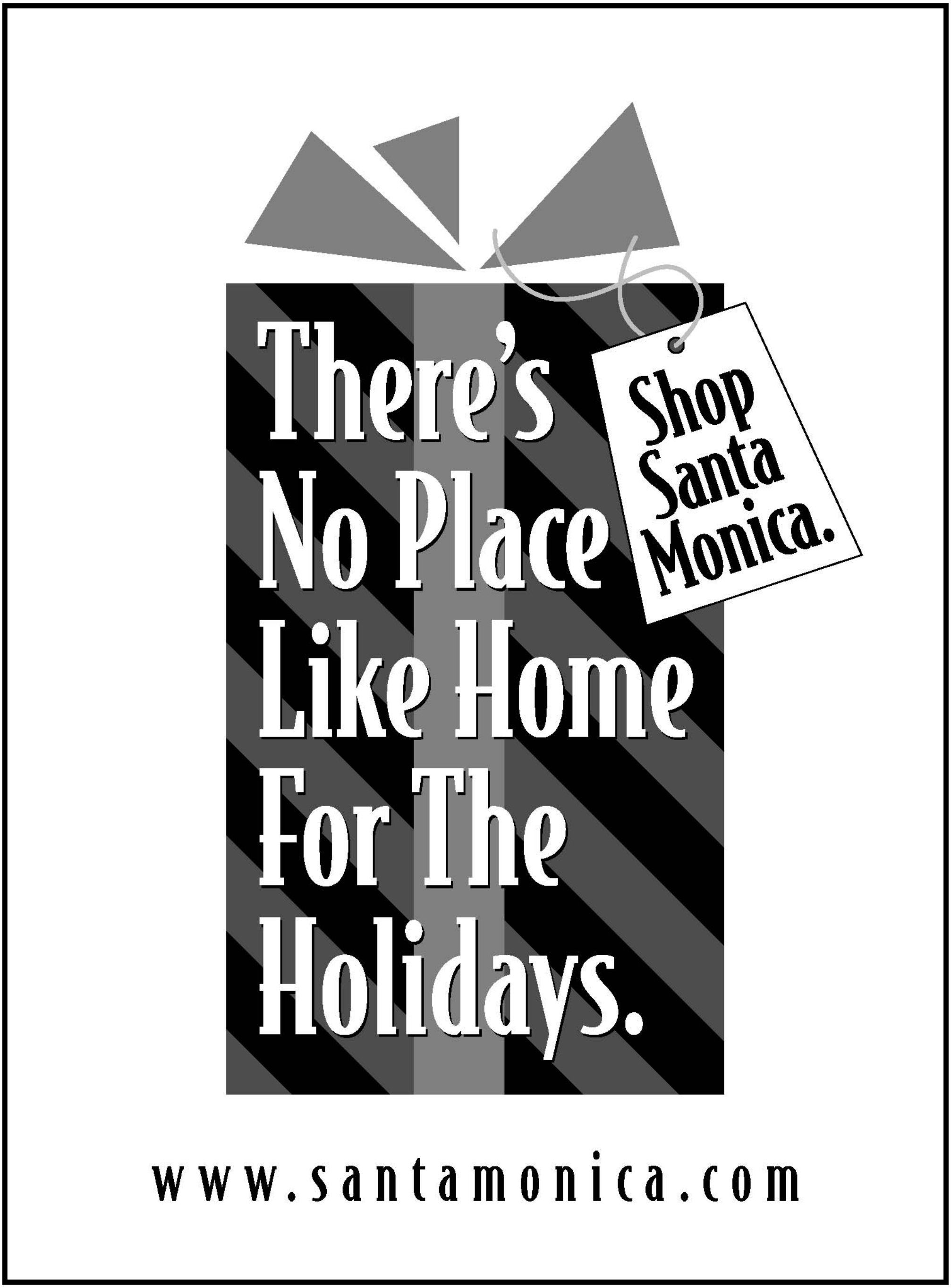
To complicate matters, Evans decided not to pay his rent for at least the last year, based on the city's failure to act. The city has now sued to evict him, while a Santa Monica judge has dismissed his suit, leaving him with slim odds resting on an appeal.

If homeowners couldn't agree with Evans, they also couldn't agree with each other. One such disagreement forced DeSantis and Peters out of the development business and out of the suit with Ring Trading.

Although the attorneys claimed the residents as their clients, some went to City Hall and negotiated directly with Moncrief at the same time their association was nominally suing the city. The move inflamed the attorneys, who withdrew from the case after some residents openly criticized their "global settlement" and the 51 free-market condos.

The split left Evans to conclude that Ring Trading had found "covert operatives" to "take over" the association and move it towards a city-funded settlement — an assessment with which DeSantis agrees.

"I feel very sorry for the tenants. I feel they've been betrayed," he said. "Defeat was pulled from the jaws of victory. They had an opportunity for a proposal that would have done honor to the city. And now they have a slum."


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Suspected terrorist transferred to Washington

BY KAREN GULLO
Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON — The first person charged with plotting the Sept. 11 attacks with Osama bin Laden has been flown to the Washington area, the U.S. Marshals Service said Wednesday.

A Marshals Service plane flew Zacarias Moussaoui to Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport in suburban Virginia and he was immediately taken to an undisclosed secure facility, Marshals spokesman Dave Turner said.

"We have taken all appropriate steps and measures to ensure the safety of him and the public," the spokesman said.

Moussaoui, 33, will stand trial in U.S. District Court in Alexandria, Va. His arraignment is Jan. 2.

He is charged with conspiring to commit acts of terrorism, aircraft piracy, destruction of aircraft, use of weapons of mass destruction, murder of U.S. employees and destruction of U.S. property. Four of the charges could result in the death penalty.

Benigno Reyna, director of the Marshals Service, said providing security for Moussaoui will be "unlike any other case. We've handled terrorists before. Now it's having an impact on the sanctity of life itself."

Meanwhile, an Algerian man convicted in a plot to bomb millennium celebrations said under interrogation that he met Moussaoui in a terrorist training camp in Afghanistan, a law enforcement official said.

Ahmed Ressam is cooperating with authorities in an effort to reduce a 130-year prison term for helping a convicted terrorist prepare to bomb Los Angeles International Airport around New Year's Eve 1999.

Ressam has told the FBI that he saw Moussaoui at a training camp they both attended a few years ago, the law enforcement official said, speaking on condition of anonymity. Moussaoui, a French citizen of Moroccan descent, is charged with conspiracy to murder thousands in connection with the Sept. 11 attacks.

Ressam, 34, was arrested two years ago in Port Angeles, Wash., with a trunkload of explosives — apparently intending to bomb the airport, among other targets. He was convicted in April.

Mike Filipovic, Ressam's attorney in Seattle, could not be immediately reached for comment. Jerry Diskin, a government lawyer with the U.S. Attorney's office in Seattle who prosecuted Ressam, declined to comment.

In an indictment against Moussaoui, authorities allege he acted in a similar manner to the hijackers, including getting flight training, inquiring about crop dusting and having connections to the same Hamburg, Germany, terrorist cell frequented by hijacking ringleader Mohamed Atta.

The indictment also linked Moussaoui to Ramzi Binalshibh, an alleged member of the German cell who was roommates with Atta. The FBI believes Binalshibh was meant to be the 20th hijacker.

al-Qaida fighters escape from Pakistan guards

BY RIAZ KHAN
Associated Press Writer

PESHAWAR, Pakistan — Dozens of fighters from Osama bin Laden's al-Qaida group, arrested as they crossed the border from Afghanistan, rose up against their Pakistani guards Wednesday, seized weapons and escaped. Seven al-Qaida fighters and six police were killed, officials said.

After a brief and bloody gunbattle in the morning, Pakistani tribal forces and army helicopter gunships pursued the fugitives, capturing 21. As night fell, they were searching for 20 more in the mountainous border region, officials said.

The al-Qaida fighters — mostly Arabs — were from among 156 arrested over the past two days as they came across the border, the government of Northwest Frontier Province said in a statement. Just on the other side of the frontier, Afghan forces backed by U.S. airstrikes drove al-Qaida followers from their mountain base in Tora Bora in recent days, sending many fleeing into Pakistan.

Hundreds of al-Qaida — including some top commanders — were allowed to escape by commanders in the Afghan eastern alliance that led the assault on Tora Bora, an alliance official said. Two alliance commanders have been rebuked for conniving to let bin Laden followers flee into Pakistan, the official said.

In Tora Bora, the search continued for remaining al-Qaida members or clues to the whereabouts of bin Laden. U.S. helicopters ran night missions through the mountain valleys, while Afghan fighters brought more prisoners and documents from a sweep of snow-laden cave hide-outs.

The prisoner revolt took place near the northwestern Pakistani town of Parachinar. The prisoners, held in the town overnight, were being transferred in a convoy of buses and trucks to a larger facility, the provincial government said.

"One of the Arabs shouted 'Allahu Akbar!' (Arabic for "God is great") and with that slogan, the others attacked," bus driver Rehman Ali told The Associated Press. He said they seized guns from the six guards on the bus and shot them dead. Three prisoners were killed in the struggle.

Ali said the prisoners tried to drive the bus away, but lost control and it overturned. The fighters poured out and engaged security guards from the other buses in a firefight, he said. Three more prisoners were killed and one was wounded, and seven police were wounded, he said.

The provincial government said a total of seven Arabs and six security officials were killed. Their reports could not be reconciled. The government said 48 al-Qaida men were on the bus.

Tribal security officials and soldiers went after them, using ground troops and helicopter gunships, catching 21, and throwing a security cordon over the area to search for the rest, the provincial government said.

Last month, al-Qaida forces in northern Afghanistan revolted the day after their capture, sparking a three-day battle at the fortress near Mazar-e-Sharif where they were being held. A CIA operative, Johnny "Mike" Spann was killed, as were dozens of guards and hundreds of prisoners.

Pakistan has poured helicopters and thousands of soldiers into the tribal areas along the border and set up 300 checkpoints to cut off escape routes from Tora Bora. Pakistan earlier said it had arrested at least 108 fighters fleeing the area, including at least 60 Arabs and other non-Afghans.

Britain announced that it had offered to the United Nations to lead a multinational peacekeeping force in Afghanistan and to commit 1,500 troops. Defense Secretary Geoff Hoon told Parliament that the exact composition of the force — which could number 3,000-5,000 troops — will be resolved in the coming days.

A vanguard of 200 British soldiers could move from Bagram airport to the Afghan capital, Kabul, in time for Saturday's inauguration of a six-month interim government. The U.N. Security Council was poised to approve the force, possibly by Thursday, after key council members agreed the troops would be authorized to use military force if necessary.

An Afghan alliance commander said a few non-Afghan fighters were captured overnight without resistance, and more stragglers were expected to surrender as the weather turns colder and the snow deepens.

Hulking black U.S. helicopters took off repeatedly after dark Tuesday and before dawn Wednesday, flying without lights up the valley leading to the warren of caves. The special forces troops assigned to comb the area refused to speak to reporters.

B-52 bombers and EP3 Orion reconnaissance aircraft droned overhead, but no ordnance was dropped.

Afghan fighters returned to their base with piles of maps and Arabic-language documents from caves they searched Tuesday, including a topographical map marking mortar positions and their field of fire, and a training manual on aiming tank fire.



Associated Press

Firefighters hose down one of the three big rig trucks that were involved with a passenger car in a multi-vehicle accident that killed three people on southbound Highway 99 in Elk Grove, Calif., Wednesday. Traffic north and southbound on Highway 99 were closed as authorties cleaned up the scene.

Federal government to help billionaire pay for duck club

By the Associated Press

AFTON, Calif. — The federal government is helping billionaire stockbroker Charles Schwab foot the bill for his expansive duck hunting club in Glenn County.

The 1,550-acre expanse of permanent wetlands and seasonally flooded rice fields attracts more than ducks and geese. Last year, Schwab and his family received $564,000 in federal supports for rice.

Subsidies for rice, cotton, corn and other agricultural commodities are a staple of Congress' farm bill. But commodity payments are coming under fire by critics who say subsidies currently reward landowners who plant a few select crops, rather than struggling small farms. Since most payments are tied to acreage, more land equals bigger checks, causing corporate farms to win out.

"You end up with people like Mr. Schwab, people who don't need the money, asking the taxpayer to beef up their bottom line, or help them hunt ducks," said Cena Swisher of the Washington-based Taxpayers for Common Sense.

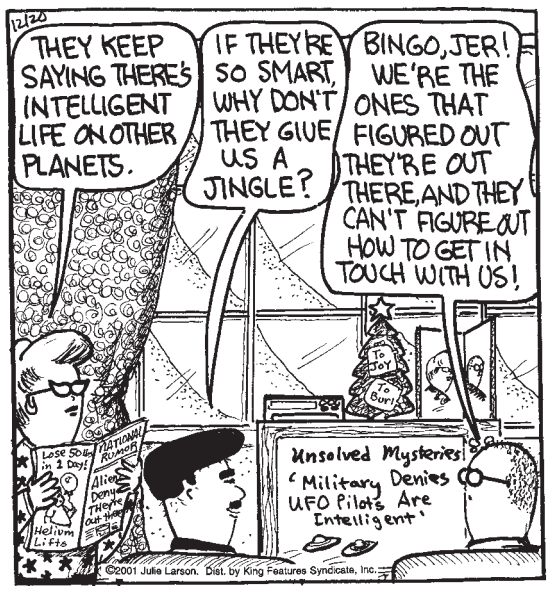
Supporters of U.S. farm policy say commodity subsidies keep land in production, farmers working, food prices low and rural communities healthy.

Schwab's net worth is estimated at $4 billion. The subsidies granted to Casa de Patos ensure that Schwab's rice always will be sold at a profit. A spokesman said Schwab declined to comment.

California, the nation's most fertile state, ranked far below Midwestern peers in total support payments.

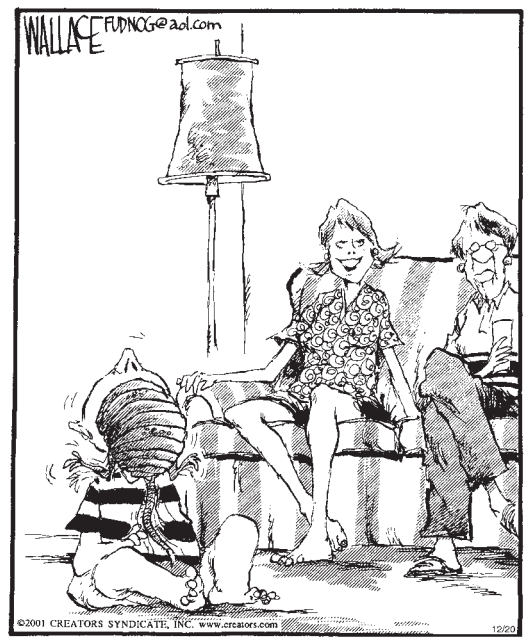
COMICS

The Dinette Set by Julie Larson



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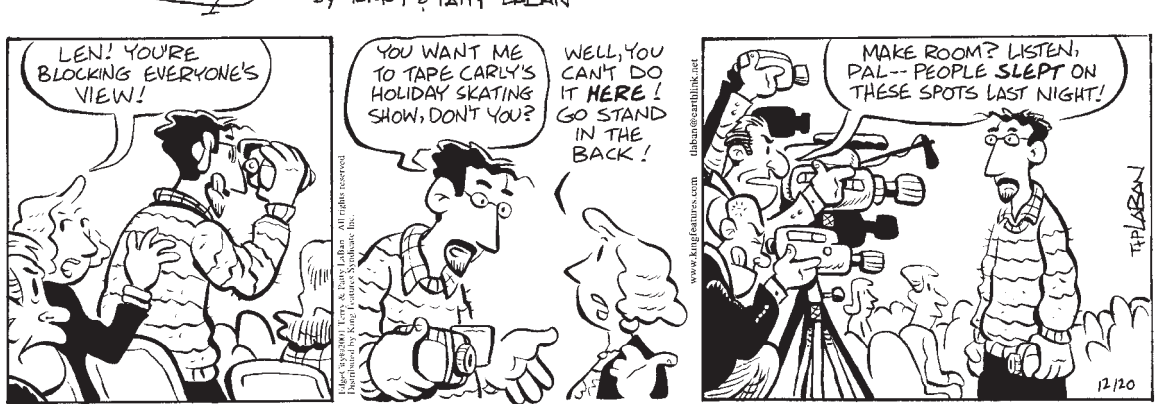
By Russ Wallace



"He's at that stage where he puts everything in his mouth."

edge City

by TERRY & PATTY LABAN



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ACROSS

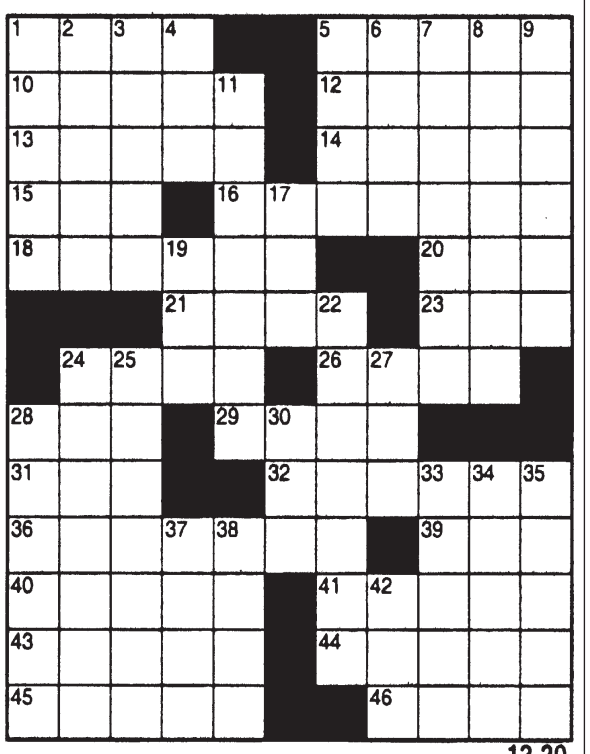
1 Nanny's aid
5 Heist
10 Purple shade
12 Nimble
13 In complete agreement
14 Slanted edge
15 Buddhism branch
16 Nimble
18 Frank McCourt's mother
20 Decimal base
21 Moral no-nos
23 Hill resident
24 Bigwigs
26 Pinball game ender
28 Fire
29 Yon people
31 Archaic
32 Come into view
36 Oxford school, familiarly
39 Game cube
40 Garland setting
41 "Star Trek" character
43 VCR button
44 Showed nervousness
45 Valentine's Day gift
46 Koppel and Danson

DOWN

1 Public square
2 Out of bed
3 By the way
4 Staff
5 City autos
6 Historic times
7 Crucial
8 Lead, e.g.
9 Give in
11 Ma, for one
17 Writer Fleming
19 Sixth sense, for short
22 Increases
24 California city
25 Book parts
27 Mischievous one
28 Southern turtle
30 Owns
33 Draw out
34 Broadcast
35 Goes through
37 Spiked club
38 Believers
42 Monopoly token

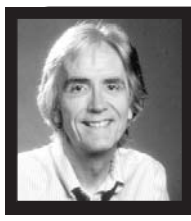
C	A	R	A	T	S	■	A	M	E	S
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■	■	■	N	E	W	A	R	K	■	■
F	A	M	E	■	■	R	E	S	T	S
A	R	I	■	P	O	I	N	T	U	P
T	E	N	■	E	P	A	■	O	N	E
A	N	K	L	E	T	S	■	N	E	W
L	A	S	E	R	■	■	B	E	S	S
■	■	T	A	S	S	E	L	■	■	■
F	O	O	D	■	A	D	O	R	E	R
I	D	L	E	■	I	N	T	O	T	O
B	E	E	R	■	L	A	S	T	E	D

Yesterday's answer



12-20

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NEWS OF THE WEIRD

by Chuck Shepard

Talk about bad plumbing!

• Joseph Chopnowski, 40, was charged with criminal mischief in Berlin, Conn., in November after items that blocked a sewer line (newspapers, batteries, clothes, plastic bags, soda cans, a wrench) were traced back to his house, and after neighbors reported that he often spent many hours a day working at the sewer "clean-out" in his front yard. Apparently, Chopnowski had for years been flushing things down his toilet and then running huge amounts of water into the sewer to flood them along (but several times before had been forced to call a contractor to unblock his line).

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BACK PAGE

Drink the wine and your arteries will be fine

BY ALEX DOMINGUEZ
Associated Press Writer

Researchers say they have discovered the key component in red wine that explains the so-called French Paradox, or the way the French can eat lots of cheese, buttery sauces and other rich foods and still suffer less heart disease than Americans.

The explanation is pigments known as polyphenols.

The pigments are not present in white wine or rose, and they seem to be less potent when they are present in grape juice.

Polyphenols inhibit the production of a peptide that contributes to hardening of the arteries, researchers report in Thursday's issue of the journal Nature.

In laboratory dish experiments, polyphenols in red wine decreased the amount of the peptide endothelin-1 produced by cells taken from the blood vessels of cows.

Endothelin-1 is a potent blood vessel constrictor, and overproduction of the compound is thought to be a key factor in why arteries clog with fatty deposits, said the researchers from the William Harvey Research Institute at the London School of Medicine & Dentistry.

In the study, the cow cells were exposed to extracts from 23 red wines, four white wines, one rose and one type of red grape juice.

Researchers found the decrease in endothelin-1 levels was related to the amount of polyphenols in the wines.

The white and rose wines — which contain little or none of the pigment — had no effect on endothelin-1 levels.

Red grape juice, which has plenty of the pigment, was markedly less potent in reducing endothelin-1 than red wine. The researchers said that suggests that something in the winemaking process changes the pigment's properties.

Researchers believe the pigment comes from red wine skins. In white wine and rose, the grape skins are taken out before fermentation.

The type of grape also appeared to matter. Four of the six most effective red wines used in the study were made entirely or partially from cabernet sauvignon grapes.

"The key message is moderate consumption of red wine is likely to prevent heart disease, but we have no evidence that white wine or rose would have a similar benefit," said Roger Corder, who led the study.

The lower incidence of heart disease in France, despite a diet rich in butter and other fats, has led researchers to look to the consumption of red wine, another staple of the French diet.

Other studies have shown red wine helps fight heart disease, and scientists have theorized that the benefits are caused by antioxidant compounds that prevent or slow the damaging effects of oxygen on the body.

Corder's research shows a different mechanism altogether. He said it is a more plausible explanation for the French Paradox.

David Klurfeld, a researcher at Wayne State University who linked red wine and a reduction in heart disease in 1981, noted that the cells were tested in a dish and said it is unclear how polyphenols work in the body. However, he said, the research opens another pathway that should be pursued.

"Is this the only mechanism, or is it a combination? There's not enough evidence that points us in any direction," Klurfeld said. "We're basically playing spin the wine bottle here."

Santa's elves are found in jail

By the Associated Press

MODESTO, Calif. — Santa's finding his elves in an unlikely place this year — jail.

Inmates at the Stanislaus County jail are handcrafting more than 800 wooden toy boxes and model cars for needy children, county Sheriff's Department spokesman Kelly Huston said Tuesday.

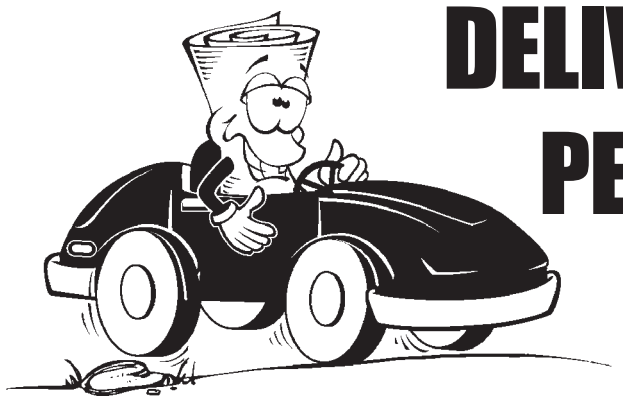
"The idea came up less than a month ago and the inmates jumped at the opportunity to do something good for kids," said Lt. Sandra Clark, commander of the Sheriff's Department Honor Farm jail.

The toy boxes contain chalkboards, chalk and a sponge eraser. Original patterns are cut using improvised drills and saws, then the pieces are sanded, lacquered and painted, Huston said.

"My father was a master wood craftsman and maybe that's where I get it," said inmate and informal shop foreman Jeff Merrill, 35, of Modesto.

The team of nine inmates wants to finish 350 boxes and 500 car by week's end. Inmates will be allowed to give the toys to their children and grandchildren, while the rest will be donated to charities.

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