

C.V. landmark destroyed in early morning fire

By CHRIS COUNTS

A STRUCTURE that was a hub of activity in Carmel Valley more than a century ago burned down early Monday morning. Simply called The Barn or the Grange Hall by many, the small but evocative building was located at Carmel Valley and Robinson Canyon roads next to the Farm Center.

Firefighters arrived on scene just past midnight Feb. 24 and worked to keep the fire from spreading to vegetation



and nearby structures, but deputy fire marshal Rick Magno of Monterey County Regional Fire told The Pine Cone that the building is a total loss. Magno is investigating the blaze and said it’s too early to say what caused it.

A spirited debate over the future of the landmark building was underway on social media even as news of the fire broke. Many of those commenting wondered if arson was to blame, and several suggested a homeless person was

See DESTROYED page 13A



One of Carmel Valley’s most cherished historical buildings (left) burned down Monday. A painting by Paola Berthoin (above) shows it before the fire.

Putting housing plan into action means big changes

By MARY SCHLEY

THE EIGHT-YEAR housing plan that Carmel officials went to great effort to get certified by the state last year isn’t just a document filled with big ideas. It’s filled with numerous obligations that will change the way the city does business — including giving planning staff the authority to approve major housing projects that usually undergo significant scrutiny by various commissions. Changing such a significant part of the process removes what state officials say are barriers to creating more residences.

At a special planning commission meeting Tuesday night, principal planner Marnie Waffle, who has become the department’s subject matter expert on housing, presented several amendments required to bring the municipal code into compliance with the housing plan, which envisions the addition of 349 units in the city through 2031.

The document contains numerous programs and policies meant to achieve five goals pertaining to the construction, protection and improvement of all types of homes, affordable and otherwise.

‘Removing regulatory barriers’

Incentives, easier permits

At the Feb. 25 meeting, Waffle presented the first set of code changes that will “remove regulatory barriers to the construction of housing, define various housing types, and provide incentives to construct affordable housing,” she explained. According to the plan’s timeline, they were supposed to have been completed last year.

Waffle asked planning commissioners and the public for feedback on topics ranging from banning single-family residences in commercial districts and defining “employee housing,” to eliminating “unnecessary” use permits for housing developments.

The code also has to include incentives for mixed-use development that include affordable units and reduce parking requirements for various types of housing, including in

See HOUSING page 16A

Supes put foot down on battery storage in county

By KELLY NIX

A BAN on new indoor battery storage facilities and a requirement that existing systems in Monterey County be upgraded to the “highest industry standards” are among the recommendations adopted this week by elected officials following the Jan. 16 fire at a Vistra Energy lithium battery plant in Moss Landing that forced about 1,500 people to evacuate and led to hundreds of health complaints.

The Monterey County Board of Supervisors Tuesday voted 4-0 to follow recommendations made by an ad hoc committee composed of District 2 Supervisor Glenn Church and District 5 Supervisor Kate Daniels. District 3 Supervisor Chris Lopez was absent from Tuesday’s meeting.

Cease operations

Other recommendations adopted Feb. 25 include a request that Vistra cease operations until the cause of the blaze has been determined and appropriate safety remediation measures have occurred, that PG&E and Vistra halt expansion of their facilities until safety-minded state legislation has passed, and that the company work with county officials on recovery of its damaged facilities.

The supervisors followed Church’s recommendation that the panel hold public meetings at least once a month to discuss issues surrounding the Vistra fire and

the company’s operation. Battery storage collects power from the grid when it’s plentiful and releases it when it’s needed, usually during peak times or outages.

Church blamed the State of California for allowing the battery storage industry “to bypass local ordinances,” and he referred to Assembly Bill AB205, a law signed by Gov. Gavin Newsom nearly three years ago that mandated an expedited process to permit battery storage businesses in just 270 days.

Monterey County’s approval process for such a

See STORAGE page 15A

CHOMP says hospital prices aren’t that easy

By KELLY NIX

A PRESIDENTIAL order that seeks to compel hospitals and health insurers to disclose actual prices — not merely estimates — could affect the bottom line of at least one local hospital.

President Donald Trump’s order signed Tuesday directs the departments of the Treasury, Labor, and Health and Human Services “to rapidly implement and enforce” his healthcare price transparency regulations.

“Our goal was to give patients the knowledge they need about the real price of healthcare services,” Trump said. “They’ll be able to check them, compare them and go to different locations, so they can shop for the highest-quality care at the lowest cost.”

‘Don’t fully account’

In his first presidential term, Trump mandated that hospitals and insurers make prices public but blamed the Biden administration for failing to “prioritize further implementation” and enforce the requirements.

A spokeswoman for Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula’s parent company suggested this week that such federal requirements don’t fully account for the complexities of market forces and local economic conditions and could stress the hospital financially.

“These regulations could potentially place financial strain on hospitals like ours, which are already balancing the delivery of high-quality care with the need to maintain

See PRICES page 22A

A month for stumps, a drop in DUIs and other revelations at State of the City talk

By MARY SCHLEY

AT THE Carmel Chamber of Commerce’s State of the City breakfast Tuesday, Mayor Dale Byrne shared his ideas for getting things done, city administrator Chip Rerig said there will be a bigger push to require downtown property owners to maintain the sidewalks, and Police Chief Paul Tomasi explained what he looks for in prospective employees.

Those were among the tidbits and topics discussed during the Feb. 25 breakfast at the Carmel Woman’s Club that featured chamber board member Cynthia Buhl interviewing the three public officials.

Byrne, who was elected mayor in November 2024 alongside new councilmen Hans Buder and Bob Delves, said he ran on a platform of public safety



Dale Byrne

See CITY page 14A



PHOTO/MIKE BUFFO, HOUSE OF 8 MEDIA

Just the smokestacks remain from the former oil-fired power plant in Moss Landing, while in the background are its modern counterparts, including Vistra Energy’s burned storage facility and an undamaged one owned by PG&E.