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EXPERTS DEFEND FIRE BREAKS, BRUSH CLEARANCE

By CHRIS COUNTS

DESPITE CLAIMS at recent public hearings that clearing brush to create fire breaks and defensible spaces in Big Sur makes the danger worse, local fire officials say the opposite is true and that aggressive removal of fire-prone trees and shrubs is critically needed to protect rural communities from the next wildfire.

Mike Caplin, who lost his Palo Colorado home in the 2016 Soberanes Fire, said more vegetation, not less, needs

to go. A board member of the Fire Safe Council of Monterey County, Caplin said there is simply too much fuel for the next blaze. He also pleaded for less red tape to do the work.

“Monterey County is hazardedly overgrown, in large part due to all the rules and regulations for cutting down trees,” he told The Pine Cone. “The county is even protecting dead trees. We live in the Soberanes Fire burn area. I can see trees that were killed by the fire that are still standing — they’re going to be fuel for the next fire. We are primed for a nightmare — all it’s going to take is a fire on a day with sustained winds.”

Critical buildup

The rules around removing vegetation for fire clearance need to be loosened, Caplin said. “We need to change rules and regulations to not only allow but encourage landowners to thin their fuels so we don’t end up with a catastrophic fire,” he said.

One of Caplin’s neighbors, Mid Coast Fire Chief Cheryl Goetz, said her community — where 57 homes burned in 2016 — faces just as critical a wildfire threat today as it did a decade ago. Despite massive efforts to clear brush, the Palo Colorado area continues to be overwhelmed by vegetation.

“It’s been eight years since the Soberanes Fire, and the fuels are worse now,” she said. “We had some work done by Cal Fire three years ago, but the vegetation has come back with more voracity — I’m really worried.”

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Rosen fails to get felony election fraud case tossed

By MARY SCHLEY

A FORMER Carmel Unified School District Board member who was arrested for election fraud just a few weeks before voting day last November — and subsequently lost — also foundered in her efforts to convince a judge to throw out the case against her. As a result, Carmel Valley resident Anne-Marie Rosen pleaded not guilty to four felonies in a Salinas courtroom in March and is set to appear in court again next month.

The Monterey County District Attorney’s Office filed charges against Rosen last fall after an investigation

revealed she lied about where she lives in order to qualify for the Nov. 5, 2024, ballot. According to the allegations, Rosen was a longtime resident of Middle Canyon Way on the north side of Carmel Valley Road, but changed her voter registration on June 26, 2024, to indicate she lived in another home she owns on East Garzas Road in a neighborhood south of Carmel Valley Road.

Reelection bid

The distinction was important because the school board, including Rosen, had voted to shift from at-large elections to district elections. To be able to run for another four-year term, Rosen would have to live in one of the three zones that were on the ballot.

“Rosen was running to represent the board in Trustee Area 5,” Monterey County Chief Assistant District Attorney Berkley Brannon explained at the time. “Previously, she represented she resided at an address in Trustee Area

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CPD tracks down, nabs man sought by FBI

By MARY SCHLEY

A 29-YEAR-OLD man sought by the FBI for narcotics trafficking was arrested in Carmel April 16 following a bit of savvy policework, Sgt. Gerald Maldonado said this week.



Jonathan Ureta

According to a “Wanted by the FBI” poster, Jonathan Ureta, along with Louis Escobar and Sergio Ureta-Castro, has been charged by the U.S. District Court in New Mexico “with drug-related crimes.” The poster asks anyone with information on the men to contact their nearest FBI office or American Embassy. Maldonado said Ureta has been on the run for a decade.

Last week, the FBI advised Carmel P.D. that he was in the city — how the

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Group wants Pastor approval overturned

By MARY SCHLEY

NEARLY A dozen residents, many of whom have vocally opposed it over the past six years, are asking the Carmel City Council to invalidate the planning commission’s unanimous approval of Patrice Pastor’s proposed mixed-use project on Dolores south of Seventh.

According to paperwork filed at city hall Wednesday, attorney Krista Ostoch, whose offices are on Via Nona Marie, is representing former councilman Mike Brown, electrician Mike Cate and restaurant owner Rich Pepe, along with Kristi Reimers, who lives to the rear of Pastor’s project.

Also listed as part of the effort to get approval overturned are Vinz Koller, Courtney Kramer, Cindy Lloyd, former city councilman Steve Hillyard and former planning commissioners Don Goodhue, Ian Martin and Julie

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CHOMP must limit spending, state says

■ Effort to control patients’ charges

By KELLY NIX

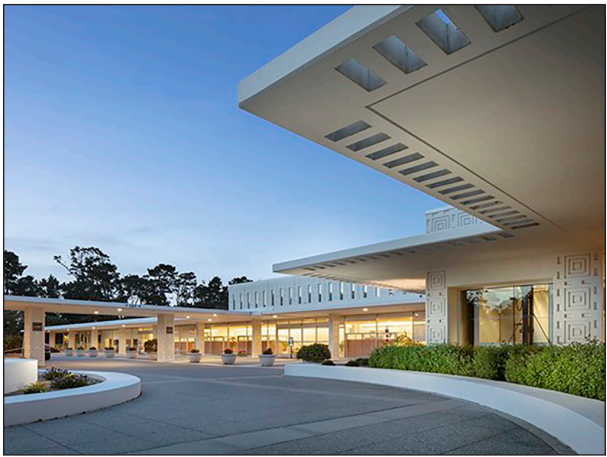
A STATE agency this week imposed rigid spending restrictions on seven California hospitals it says charge their patients too much for medical services, including Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula and Salinas Valley Health, both of which criticized the decision.

The two Monterey County hospitals and five others in the state that the Office of Health Care Affordability board says are “high cost” must restrict spending growth to 1.8 percent next year, the healthcare board decided Tuesday. In 2027, the companies’ spending growth will be limited to 1.7 percent, and in 2029 it decreases to 1.6 percent.

‘Rate of growth’

The move seeks to limit how much patients are charged by restricting how much hospitals spend.

“Limiting the rate of growth for these hospitals would



PHOTOS/PINE CONE FILE

Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula (top) and Salinas Valley Health (above) will be under severe spending restrictions beginning next year, a state agency ordered.

bring the costs incurred by consumers for these hospitals more in line with the broader hospital sector, thereby reducing historical inequities between high-cost facilities and more efficient facilities,” the Office of Health Care Affordability explained in February.

High ‘profits’

The agency, created in 2022 by Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom, maintains that high healthcare prices “affect access and equity,” and it cites statistics indicating that “more than half of Californians report skipping care due to cost, and within this group nearly half say skipping care made their condition worse.” More than one-third of residents reported having medical debt in 2023, it said.

According to the Department of Health Care Access and Information, Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula and SVMH reported considerably higher profit

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