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Cell phone ‘ban’ is more of a suggestion

GOV. GAVIN Newsom signed California’s Phone-Free Schools Act to much applause in 2024 as teachers, parents and even the media thought public schools across the state would soon be rid of smartphones — but one year later, not much has changed.

Despite the law’s name, the legislation does nothing to keep phones out of schools. It’s not a ban, as some have assumed. In fact, schools are still required to give kids access to their phones.

Early last year, the law’s bipartisan authors introduced a strong bill that would have allowed districts to go as far as

Capitol Access

By CAITLIN CONRAD

prohibiting smartphones on campus. But the language was watered down in the legislative process, and what passed was a law that only requires districts to restrict phone use during class time — something you’d hope schools were already doing.

“Initially they were proposing a much stronger bill, but due to timing and legislators’ appetites, it wasn’t feasible to come out with a full bell-to-bell K-12 ban,” said policy advocate Jodie Carreon with Distraction-Free Schools California.

A bell-to-bell ban would require kids to stow phones for the entire school day.

20 states act

Twenty states, plus D.C.’s public schools and the U.S. Virgin Islands, have implemented that kind of ban on wireless communication devices. Exceptions are made for medical reasons and students with disabilities, but for the vast majority of kids in bell-to-bell ban states, phones have to be put away in lockers, lockable pouches or backpacks for the entire day.

Away-for-the-day policies are something California school districts can implement under the Phone-Free Schools Act, but they’re not required, and none of our local

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WORKSHOP ON OBJECTIVE DESIGN RULES SET

By MARY SCHLEY

THE FIRST community meeting on rules that will make granny units and other types of housing easier to build while still fitting with Carmel’s character will be held Jan. 14 at 4 p.m. in city hall.

The session will be hosted by city staff and



PHOTO/PINE CONE FILE

Tourists in the 1950s enjoying Carmel’s architecture. An effort is underway to write design standards that will protect the town’s charm while meeting state housing laws.

Big storm makes a mess out of Christmas

By PAUL MILLER

ALMOST FORTY-EIGHT frustrating hours after drenching rains and ferocious winds knocked out the power late Tuesday night, thousands of Monterey Peninsula residents and hundreds of businesses were counting up the losses of such an extended outage during the biggest holiday week of the year.

“The storm really ruined our Christmas,” said Lydia Lyons of Patisserie Boissiere on Mission Street. “We had almost 100 reservations for dinner Christmas Eve. We were devastated and sad beyond belief that we couldn’t serve them.”

She said the restaurant’s staff kept “hoping and praying that PG&E would come through” and get the power back

on Wednesday afternoon — as they had been predicting since a few hours after the outage began.

More days in the dark

But with the damage to the Carmel grid more severe than everyone hoped, and with another storm on the way overnight, PG&E was forced to take their crews off the streets late Wednesday — and suddenly, the time the power would come back on was pushed back two days — to 11 p.m. Friday.

“With the weather picking up, we’re pulling our crews and I’m sorry to report that we won’t be completing restorations tonight,” a PG&E spokesperson said Wednesday

See **BIG STORM** page 28A



Sunrise on Christmas morning featured a rainbow over Monterey Bay that heralded the end of a major two-day storm, but as the rain and winds moved on, they left behind widespread power outages and damage, including to this house on Mission Street in Carmel.



PHOTOS/(LEFT) PAUL MILLER, (RIGHT) CITY OF CARMEL

MPUSD teachers lament low pay, turnover

By LILY PATTERSON

IT’S BEEN an enlightening few weeks for local teachers, after union members discovered a waiver that exempts the Monterey Peninsula Unified School District from spending the state’s mandatory minimum on their salaries. Three years ago, MPUSD quietly joined a third of California’s unified school districts in using the loophole, but since the Monterey Bay Teachers Association caught on in

late October, they’re using it as a talking point.

“We are one of the lowest-paid districts in Monterey County. The last two years, we have not had an ongoing salary increase, and our teacher turnover is between 15 and 25 percent,” according to union President Rosalyn Book, a teacher at La Mesa Elementary School.

Dozens of teachers appeared before the school board at its Nov. 18 meeting and again on Dec. 9 ahead of negotiations between the union and the school district, which began discussing their 2025-2026 contract last week.

Most shared personal testimonials of financial hardship and the “revolving door,” as one Seaside High teacher referred to the classroom next to his, where three instructors have come and gone since he started working there less than two years ago.

Said Valerie Jean Rivera, an art teacher at Seaside Middle School and a 21-year veteran of MPUSD, “I am only one of six national board-certified teachers in this district, and I stay because I own a house here,” she said. “People who have been here for 10 years are still struggling.”

‘Move in right direction’

“Many teachers go to neighboring districts that pay more and contribute more to benefits. Our students deserve high-quality educators who stay in our district and put roots in our community,” Book said in a statement to The Pine Cone.

Marci McFadden, chief of staff at MPUSD, gave other reasons why Monterey schools lose an average of 100 teachers per year — a 20 percent turnover rate, 5 percent higher than the average district in California, where staff shortages are one reason students are lagging

representatives from Opticos Design, the firm hired by the city council in October to develop “objective design and development standards” for accessory dwelling units, multifamily housing and mixed-use complexes.

State housing laws require cities and counties to approve ADUs over the counter — i.e., with no nitpicky public hearings — as long as they meet basic standards, giving local governments very little say in how they look and where they can be situated.

But they also allow jurisdictions to create standards that give them some control while not requiring applicants to comply with rules that are wide open to interpretation.

When she presented the proposed Opticos contract to the council, principal planner Marnie Waffle explained that objective design and development standards “are a different way of writing design guidelines that eliminate subjectivity and provide developers with more certainty in the design review process, and reduce the time required to review and process” development applications for certain types of housing, while maintaining community character.

‘Human scale’

For example, rather than referencing “human-scaled entries,” which is up to planners to define, an objective design standard might read, “A front entry shall consist of a single door that is no taller than 7 feet, 6 inches,” she

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See **TEACHER PAY** page 16A