

# The Carmel Pine Cone

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## City officials say PG&E staff shortages caused dark Christmas

By MARY SCHLEY

PROLONGED, WIDESPREAD power outages resulting from storms are not unfamiliar to Carmel residents, but the swift demands made of PG&E by elected officials were unusual, as downed trees left thousands of

people in the dark last week.

City councilmembers Hans Buder and Jeff Baron reported several calls with representatives and upper management of the utility company that started soon after the outage hit Tuesday night, impacting more than 4,700 customers served by the main circuit that enters the city at its

northeast corner. The storms, which carried torrential rains and high winds — including gusts recorded at more than 100 mph — wiped out power in much of Northern California, plunging nearly 811,000 customers into darkness, just in time for Christmas.

In advance of the storms, PG&E proclaimed it was ready. “PG&E is prepared for these storms with a full emergency response with all centers activated,” the company said.

“More than 5,500 PG&E front-line coworkers and contractors will be on storm duty,” PG&E said.

But that wasn’t enough, apparently.

**Only five crews on duty to fix broken power lines**

**On holiday**

On the afternoon of Dec. 24, Buder sent an email to constituents reporting a conversation with PG&E’s Central Coast government affairs representative, who speculated the lights would be back on in most of Carmel that night.

At 2 p.m., the company reported it had restored power to over 134,000 customers in other parts of the state.

Baron said the company advised the city that an inspection had identified four locations of power lines damaged by trees and that work would begin the afternoon of Dec. 24, but that a second inbound storm might undo those efforts.

“It appears that they will begin physically working on our outage, and it appears that their work may be completed by midnight, but that the repairs may not hold,” he wrote in an email.

“We don’t know why it has taken all day to get to this point, but we will have a conversation with them to determine where the process failed us after the event is over,” Buder added.

Worse than that, the predicted restoration of power failed to materialize as crews ceased working when more wind and rain swept through the area Wednesday night, making conditions too dangerous to remain in the field.

Buder provided an update on Christmas Day. “According to PG&E there are ‘29 to 30 work locations’ on the circuit impacting the bulk of Carmel,” he said. “I was told that due to holiday-related staffing shortages, there are only five crews” available.

To help, the company summoned contractors from

See **BIG STORM** page 14A



PHOTOS/(ABOVE) KERRY BELSER, (RIGHT) HANS BUDER



Thanks to two councilmembers’ intervention with the CEO of PG&E, utility crews were out in force the day after Christmas along Second Avenue (above, at Pescadero Street, and right, at Lincoln), where the town’s main distribution line runs.

## Tree risk: balancing character and safety

By KELLY NIX

WITH GLOBAL warming causing more rain and storm events, more frequent lengthy power outages, and increasing threats of wildfires, should Carmel do more to minimize risks from falling trees?

After last week’s outages, which affected thousands of people on the Monterey Peninsula, The Pine Cone asked Mayor Dale Byrne whether Carmel should wage a more concerted effort to remove trees that are too close to power lines to reduce the risk of outages and wildfire.

**‘Already engaged’**

“The city is already engaged in a proactive, deliberate tree maintenance program,” he said this week. “We have completed a comprehensive audit of all city-owned trees, resulting in an extensive list targeted for trimming or removal.”

See **TREES** page 20A

## MORE THAN 13 INCHES OF RAIN IN BIG SUR

■ No major damage to Highway 1

By CHRIS COUNTS

A SOGGY end to 2025 continued this past week when another storm hit Monterey County, letting loose more than 13 inches of rain on one of Big Sur’s distant peaks over the span of just a few days.

According to National Weather Service meteorologist Nicole Sarment, 13.51 inches of moisture were recorded on Mining Ridge in Big Sur from Dec. 20 to 27. Just a month earlier, 11 inches of rain was measured during a week at the same site, which is 3,255 feet above sea level. Sarment said the new totals are just preliminary estimates

See **HEAVY RAIN** page 15A

## P.G. grapples with state’s housing demands

By LILY PATTERSON

‘AMERICA’S LAST Hometown’ has officially redeemed itself in the eyes of California’s Department of Housing and Community Development, now that the Pacific Grove has submitted its plan to house tomorrow’s residents, and zoned enough land within the city’s 3 square miles to accommodate 1,125 new homes and apartments by 2031. The plan was approved Dec. 17 by the city council, which seems confident the housing department will do the same. The state expressed its support for the current draft in July, after an environmental review greenlit all sites named in the 441-page document, which was prepared by city staff and consultants under Community Development Director Jon Biggs.

Possible locations for new apartments or mixed residential-commercial buildings include several blocks downtown, on Sunset Drive between Asilomar and the high school, between Central and Eardley avenues, and in the upper Forest Avenue commercial district, “which has large parking areas and additional buildout potential.”

**Significant rezoning**

Other neighborhoods required significant rezoning to help the city meet the state’s housing target — most controversially, a 3-acre triangle bounded by Sinex, Dennett, and Grove Acre near Asilomar. There, the plan suggests a “conservative” 67 new homes could be built in the scenic neighborhood, as well as on 6 acres owned by the First United Methodist Church on Sunset Drive. Both sites were upzoned from a maximum buildout of nine units per acre to 29 units.

The hulking draft previously approved by the

planning commission Nov. 13, outlines goals including “housing opportunities for low- and moderate-income

See **HOUSING** page 16A

## Sacramento under pressure to strengthen DUI laws in 2026

CALIFORNIA’S FORMER reputation as a tough-on-drunk-driving state is poised to make a resurgence in 2026 — this after a year of criticism from major media outlets on its lax treatment of repeat offenders.

## Capitol Access

By CAITLIN CONRAD

Staffers with State Sen. Bob Archuleta’s office say a big announcement expected early in the New Year will include a comprehensive package of DUI legislation. Details on the effort are being kept under wraps, but one staffer said it has the support of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers and the district attorneys of two large counties.

In the 1980s, California led the crusade to change America’s attitude toward driving under the influence. Mothers Against Drunk Drivers, now based in Texas, started in Fair Oaks after founder Candace Lightner’s daughter was killed by a drunk driver. The organization led the crusade to establish the legal limit of .08 percent blood alcohol, increase

See **DUIs** page 12A

## Is this the lion?



PHOTO/URBAN TRAPPING

A dead mountain lion was found along San Benancio Road Dec. 16, leading some to suspect it was responsible for a recent killing spree of pets. See page 6A.