2026 GOLDEN PINE CONES

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The Carmel Pine Cone

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Jerome's survives, but office complex destroyed

■ Carmel Valley fire devastating to many

By CHRIS COUNTS

WITH FLAMES and smoke billowing skyward behind it early Wednesday morning, Jerome's Carmel Valley Market appeared doomed. But thanks to light winds and a quick response by firefighters, the market escaped the blaze with almost no damage, while a two-story office complex behind it burned to the ground. At least four art studios and galleries next to Jerome's were also badly damaged, along with some offices, a tattoo parlor and a home. The fire erupted around 3 a.m.

"Looks like very black smoke coming out of the roof right about where Jerome's would be," one resident reported on Facebook shortly after the fire erupted. "This is just awful."

A woman who lives nearby described what she saw.

"I walked up Paso Hondo to Murphy's side gate," she said. "The fire hasn't spread widely to Murphy's, but the apartment complex by the Rombi Wines tasting room looks completely gone. There are quite a few people waiting it out on Center Street."

Other firsthand accounts indicated that at least five fire

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PHOTOS/(LEFT) MIKE BUFFO, HOUSE OF 8 MEDIA, (ABOVE) DOUG STEAKLEY

A two-story office building in Carmel Valley Village (left) was destroyed in Wednesday's fire, while Jerome's Market (center right of photo) was left relatively unscathed. Rescue workers (above) survey the destruction.

Down to the wire for TOT increase

By MARY SCHLEY

THE FIGHT over a ballot measure that would increase the transient occupancy tax rate by 2 percentage points to 12% is drawing to a close, and proponents and opponents are doing their best to convince voters to take their sides. In the runup to Nov. 3, they've been peppering the city and surrounding areas with signs, writing passionate letters to the editor and sharing their positions with anyone who will listen.

Not surprisingly, the hotel industry and some other business owners have come out strongly against it — and raised more than $30,000 to bolster their campaign — while the full Carmel City Council and a highly active group of residents are stridently arguing in favor of the TOT increase, Measure M, as well as its sister ballot measure, N, which seeks to raise the local sales tax by .375%.

Big money

Combined, the city estimates they'll generate an additional $3.8 million for the general fund, and every council member voted to put them on the ballot.

The group that supports the taxes, Citizens for Carmel's Future, has raised more than $12,000 to fund its pro-M and pro-N campaigns, mostly from city residents, compared with the hotels that dominate the opposition's donations, according to forms filed with the California Fair Political

See **ELECTION** *page 24A*

Medi-Cal keeps the hits coming

■ Unnecessary surgeries, fraudulent prescriptions, hospice care for the healthy

PROSECUTORS ANNOUNCED yet more charges this week against alleged scammers accused of operating large health care fraud schemes in California and costing taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars.

Among those charged are two Southern California medical professionals who allegedly defrauded Medicare of $135 million through medically unnecessary arterial

Capitol Access

By CAITLIN CONRAD

procedures at two Los Angeles-based clinics. Another group of alleged fraudsters is charged with deceptively billing the government $138 million in three hospice schemes. Included in that group is a Los Angeles man who federal prosecutors say ran more than a dozen hospice facilities that collected $107 million in claims despite non-death discharge rates above 75% — and exceeding 90% at some sites. Such rates set off alarm bells, as hospice is designed for people on their deathbeds.

Swindlers on the loose

News from the Department of Justice that swindlers may have cheated state and federal governments out of money intended for those who truly need it has lost some of its shock value. Similar headlines about California-based cases have appeared throughout the year as federal officials crack down on healthcare fraud schemes. Some in our deep-blue state may even brush off the revelations as another way for the Trump administration to point fingers at California. But this month, the admonishments are also coming straight from Sacramento.

In a letter dated Oct. 15, California State Auditor Grant Parks warned the governor and legislative leaders that

See **FRAUD** *page 29A*

County rejects federal claim of 310 illegal voters

By KELLY NIX

MONTEREY COUNTY officials this week rejected a federal demand to help identify 310 people the government described as "likely aliens" on local voter rolls, calling the action an "assault on the integrity" of the county's elections. Officials also maintain there is no evidence that the people identified are unlawfully registered. However, in California, it's also true that nothing is done to verify the citizenship of voters.

'Hand over records'

On Oct. 23, two federal agents delivered a letter from U.S. Attorney Craig Missakian to Monterey County Registrar of Voters Gina Martinez. The letter said 310 people are unlawfully registered in the county and asked officials to segregate any ballots from those individuals until their citizenship could be verified.

"Within 48 hours, we ask that you commit to working with the Department of Justice and the Department of Homeland Security to identify who on the accompanying list is a citizen and who is not," the three-page letter said.

Figures disputed

Missakian also asked Martinez to provide all records concerning the people on the list, including Social Security numbers, driver's licenses, voter registration applications and documents submitted or obtained during registration or licensing.

"This process will protect American citizens' votes while preventing noncitizens from participating in the federal election in violation of federal law," the letter said.

The DOJ also asked the county not to process any returned ballots from people on the list until their citizenship status could be determined.

On Tuesday, Monterey County officials rejected the

See **VOTERS** *page 28A*

ICE chastises sheriff's office for thwarting arrests

By KELLY NIX

U.S. IMMIGRATION officials this week condemned the Monterey County Sheriff's Office for "harboring" two people sought by federal agents who were released from the county jail in Salinas. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement accused local officials of "siding with criminals" after a Monterey County supervisor personally intervened as federal police waited to apprehend the men.

Early Tuesday evening, several agents in green tactical vests marked "Police ICE" waited outside the jail, hoping to detain two men the agency said have prior arrests for DUI, drug offenses and providing false identification to authorities.The federal agents were unable to arrest the men.

After learning Tuesday that ICE planned to detain them upon their release, the sheriff's office placed the jail on lockdown from 5 to 8 p.m. The lockdown halted inmate releases, new bookings and visits.

Cmdr. Andy Rosas said the lockdown was intended to

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SCREENSHOT FROM KSBW ACTION NEWS 8

On Tuesday, supervisor Wendy Askew (right) told an ICE officer outside the county jail that no inmates would be released who are "at risk" of being detained by the feds.

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