

The Carmel Pine Cone

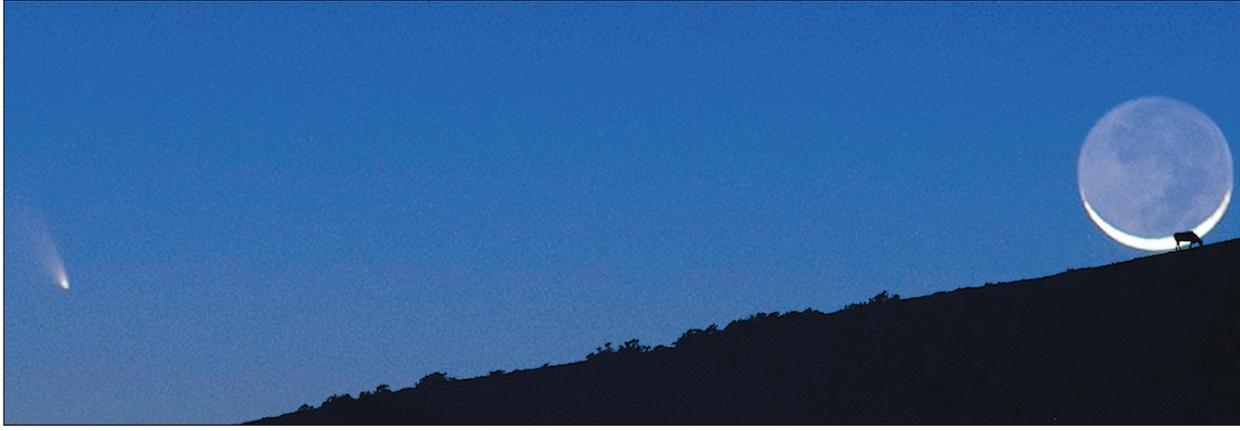
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The great comet chase



Photographer Michael Troutman traveled to the ends of the earth — or least the Old Coast Road in Big Sur — to capture images of a comet last week. The remarkable pictures he got just after sunset as the comet and the moon headed toward the horizon surprised even him.

■ It isn't easy getting the shot of a lifetime

By MICHAEL TROUTMAN

COMETS ARE magnificent, mysterious and fickle. I fell in love with comets when I was 9 years old and saw Kohoutek (considered by many to be a “dud”) in the skies above the Monterey Peninsula in 1973. The first comet I photographed, and the most spectacular I've seen, was Hale-Bopp in 1997 — it was absolutely magnificent. Later this year, we will be visited by Comet Ison, which will likely be at least as spectacular as Hale-Bopp and could turn out to be one of the greatest celestial events in recorded history, becoming as bright as the full moon, visible in broad daylight and spanning nearly half the sky. Or it could break apart, fizzle and “punk out.” The unpredictable nature of comets means we will just have to wait and see. But I'm ready for it.

I also thought I was ready when the comet PanSTARRS headed our way a couple of months ago. In fact, I looked forward to it as a “dry run” for much more ambitious plans

involving Comet Ison this fall. I knew that this comet would be faint (barely visible to the naked eye), low on the horizon, and that there would be only be one day to photograph it the way that I wanted, when it would be in conjunction with the moon. As this window approached and the comet started climbing into the Northern Hemisphere, it became clear that weather (clouds and fog particularly) were going to be a real issue. My plan was to get some elevation and a clear view west away from city lights; the Big Sur coast seemed an ideal choice not far from home. I zeroed in on either Hurricane Point or the Old Coast Road as optimal viewing and photography locations.

It indeed took three days chasing the comet to finally catch it, and then only after I had given up almost all hope. My wife, Kelly, and I went to Hurricane Point on Sunday; it was a lovely sunset, but no comet was visible

See **COMET** page 9A

Son of Leon Panetta considering run for Congress

■ Says he'll wait for Farr to retire

By KELLY NIX

THE MONTEREY Peninsula's political landscape experienced a seismic shift this week when county deputy district attorney James Panetta — son of former Defense Secretary, Director of the Central Intelligence Agency and Congressman Leon Panetta — confirmed he is considering a run for the U.S. House of Representatives.

Many local Democrats have their eye on the seat occupied by Sam Farr, 71, who succeeded the elder Panetta in Congress in 1993.

In an extensive interview with The Pine Cone from his Salinas office, James Panetta talked affectionately about giving back to the community — one of many values he said his grandfather, Carmelo, instilled in him.

“My grandfather came here from Italy and always said, ‘Give back to your community and country which has given us so much,’” Panetta said.

Panetta, who served in the Navy reserves for nearly nine years and was awarded a Bronze Star while on active duty in Afghanistan in 2008, said he may decide to run for the congressional seat now occupied by Farr and previously occupied by Leon Panetta for 16 years.

“I've talked to people about it, and it's something I'm seriously considering,” the younger Panetta said.

‘Knew in my heart’

A 43-year-old graduate of Carmel High School (class of 1987), Panetta moved back to the Monterey Peninsula three years ago after working as a deputy district attorney in Alameda County for 13 years. His wife, Carrie, is an Alameda County Superior Court judge, and the couple has two girls, ages 6 and 8.

“Even though I was gone up in Oakland and was doing my job there, I always knew in my heart that this is where I'll be,” he said. “Part of the reason I came home was to serve my community.”

But Panetta said he won't commit to running for the representative seat until Farr retires.

“Sam is doing an excellent job, and until he decides to step aside, that decision won't be made,” he said.

His father told The Pine Cone Thursday he supports his son's aspiration to run for office.

See **PANETTA** page 28A



PHOTO/KELLY NIX

James Panetta says he's seriously considering running for Sam Farr's seat, but only when the congressman — who has been on the job since 1993 — retires.

Pay, benefits for CUSD teachers, administrators revealed

■ Tularcitos janitor received \$81K

By MARY SCHLEY

THE CARMEL Unified School District paid 619 employees a total of \$26,252,758.05 last year, and more than 10 percent of those on the payroll — 71 — earned six-digit salaries, according to salary information provided by the district in response to a public records act request.

Workers' pay accounted for a significant chunk of the school district's budget, which totaled \$41,631,960 in fiscal

year 2011/2012. Most of the district's revenues come from property taxes.

Four men in CUSD's administrative office received the most pay, with the highest gross salary of \$226,717.01 going to superintendent Marvin Biasotti. He was followed by chief business official Rick Blanckmeister, who received \$170,138.04; chief academic officer Edmund Gross, \$168,043.04; and chief technology officer Paul Behan, \$167,806.55. They also received substantial contributions to

See **PAY** page 11A

Bach Festival adds more Bach

By LISA CRAWFORD WATSON

AFTER SEVERAL years of highlighting other composers who followed in Johann Sebastian Bach's footsteps, for this year's 76th season of the renowned event, festival organizers have added more music by the master himself.

“We have listened to our audiences and have paid attention to every comment,” says executive director Debbie Chinn. “People feel this is their Bach Festival. As we embark on our next 75 years, it is our intention to keep classical music relevant for people who are new to Bach and for those who have been coming to this festival for 20, 30 and 40 or more years. So for those who assume we are moving away from Bach, we are

See **BACH** page 17A

Fire fee postponed due to appeal backlog, taxpayer group lawsuit

By MARY SCHLEY

THE STATE Board of Equalization and Cal Fire were served with a lawsuit filed March 12 challenging the legality of a \$150-per-habitable-structure “fire prevention benefit fee” imposed last fall on property owners in areas where the state is responsible for fire protection. And on Wednesday, the agency said it has stopped billing property owners for the fee on the request of Cal Fire, the state's firefighting agency.

When property owners in the affected areas on the Monterey Peninsula — including unincorporated Carmel, Carmel Valley, the Carmel Highlands, Pebble Beach and Big Sur — began receiving bills for the new tax last October, some decried it as an illegal tax imposed by Gov. Jerry Brown as part of a law passed in 2011. The Howard Jarvis

See **FEE** page 28A