

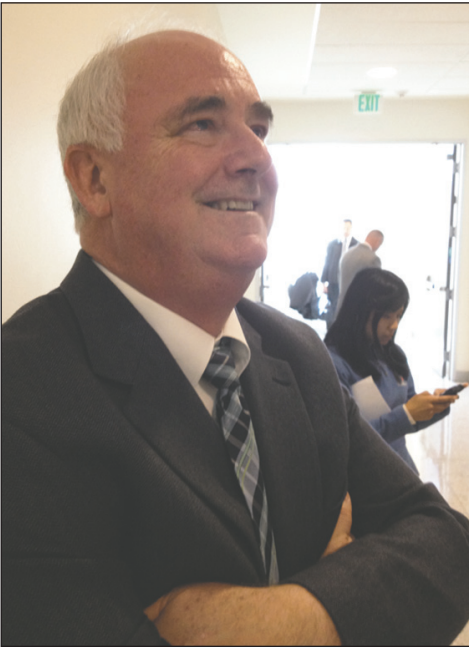


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COLLINS MAKES PLEA DEAL, AVOIDS JAIL TIME



PHOTO/KELLY NIX

Steve Collins chats with reporters outside the Salinas courtroom where he pleaded ‘no contest’ to three charges this week, ending his case. KSBW reporter May Chow is in the background.

By KELLY NIX

THE FORMER county water board director charged with dozens of criminal counts for overbilling a Castroville artichoke grower and conflicts of interest related to the now-defunct \$400 million regional water project pleaded no contest to just three charges in a plea deal with prosecutors Tuesday.

In a court hearing in Salinas that lasted only 15 minutes, Steve Collins pleaded no contest, the same as a guilty plea, to two felony counts and one misdemeanor, which will mean he will be placed on three years’ felony probation and likely won’t serve any time in jail.

Before his hearing, Collins spoke casually to reporters outside the courtroom.

“At the end of the day,” Collins said, “I felt like I was going to a gun-fight with a pocket knife, so I agreed to a plea deal.”

Minutes later, Collins pleaded to a felony count of violating govern-

ment code section 1090, which precludes public officials being financially interested in any contract made by them in their official capacity, and a felony count of grand theft by false pretenses for overbilling Ocean Mist Farms more than \$89,000 between Nov. 17, 2008, and May 13, 2011, for meetings he did not attend or that did not occur. Collins had originally been charged with more than 40 criminal counts.

“He will, as a consequence of the plea and conviction of Government Code Section 1090, be forever precluded from holding public office in the state of California,” Monterey County Assistant District Attorney Stephanie Hulsey told Superior Court Judge Robert O’Farrell Tuesday.

Collins was ordered to pay \$89,754.26 in restitution to Ocean Mist Farms. If he doesn’t pay the amount in full during the three years he’s on felony probation, his proba-

See **COLLINS** page 23A

PG&E officials try to appease uneasy council

■ Gas explosion community meeting set for March 26

By MARY SCHLEY

PRELIMINARY RESULTS of an investigation into what caused a house at Guadalupe and Third to explode March 3 show that gas leaked from a PG&E main that was being worked on in the street and then accumulated inside the vacant house where it was sparked by the pilot light of a stove, PG&E Vice President Kevin Knapp told the Carmel City Council at a special meeting Tuesday.

He and other officials from the utility company will also talk about the accident and their plans for resuming work replacing gas mains in town at an open house set for Wednesday, March 26, from 4 to 7 p.m. in city hall.

The leak that led to the explosion occurred when a PG&E worker tapped into a gas main he thought was just steel, but it actually contained a plastic insert. As he worked on the line, gas leaked between the steel shell and the plastic lining and followed the main into the home.

“The area of space between the steel and the plastic allows gas to go anywhere,” Knapp explained.

An independent consultant called Exponent is conducting an investigation for PG&E, and Knapp said it will be complete in another two or three weeks. Meanwhile, the California Public Utilities Commission is undertaking its own examination of the explosion that destroyed the house and damaged a couple of nearby homes but miraculously resulted in no injuries.

PG&E officials also told the council they have fielded 23 inquiries related to the accident, and that repairs to adjacent residences have been completed. The home that was destroyed is fenced off.

At the council meeting, Knapp said PG&E officials plan

See **PG&E** page 21A

Mayors unanimously oppose Cal Am takeover bid

■ Activists bitterly denounce vote

By KELLY NIX

THE SIX Peninsula mayors last week took a firm stance against a water activist group’s June ballot initiative that seeks a public takeover of California American Water’s Monterey Peninsula system.

At a March 13 meeting at Monterey City Hall, the mayors unanimously opposed Measure O, an initiative sponsored by the group, Public Water Now, that will appear on the June 3 ballot. The measure calls for the public takeover of Cal Am’s local system, if doing that would be financially feasible.

Though the agenda for last week’s meeting asked the mayors to decide whether to commission a \$50,000 study of the Cal Am takeover initiative, the mayors instead opted to aban-

don a study in favor of taking a position against the measure.

Toward the end of the meeting, after numerous people spoke for and against the takeover initiative, the mayors’ consensus was that pursuing the buyout of Cal Am now would not benefit the community, which has been ordered by the state to find a alternative water supply to the Carmel River by the beginning of 2017.

“What has been very striking to me in all of the passion that we have heard,” Pacific Grove Mayor Bill Kampe said of the Measure O supporters, “is not one person has said here’s how it helps you get a new supply of water — better, faster, more reliably or with greater certainty. Nothing.”

And, Kampe said, making the Peninsula’s water supply

See **OPPOSE** page 26A

A little privacy, please!



You think the city manager of Carmel is in hot water? His counterpart in Pacific Grove is in trouble for allowing a construction project to disturb mating Monarchs. See page 6A.

Cabins with wheels offer option for families, quandary for officials

By CHRIS COUNTS

TO PROVIDE vacationing families with a unique option for overnight accommodations, the owner of Saddle Mountain RV and Campground in Carmel Valley is hoping to one day replace RVs on his 90-acre property with “park model” cabins, which have wheels but resemble permanent cabins.

At least one of his neighbors, however, has voiced concerns about his plans and would like to see more oversight from Monterey County officials.

In response, a county planner told The Pine Cone that county officials are meeting with state officials to sort out how such structures might be permitted — and by what

See **CABINS** page 11A

Tavener gets \$55K; Burghardt, \$180K

■ ‘Wonderspace’ by another name?

By MARY SCHLEY

WHILE SOME questioned whether Wonderspace founder Richard Tavener would be the best man for the job of destination marketing consultant, the Carmel City Council voted Tuesday night to approve his new \$55,000 contract, which will be covered by city tax dollars and a \$1 fee imposed on hotel guests.

Members also OK’d a new \$180,000 agreement with Burghardt + Doré, the PR and marketing agency that has worked for the city since 2006, though city administrator Jason Stilwell said the city will be seeking bids from other firms in the future. PR man Jeff Burghardt’s contract covers the current fiscal year, which ends June 30, after which bids will be sought from all firms interested in marketing the city.

Tavener’s mission, meanwhile, would be to increase

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