

The Carmel Pine Cone

Volume 104 No. 46

On the Internet: www.carmelpinecone.com

November 16-22, 2018

TRUSTED BY LOCALS AND LOVED BY VISITORS SINCE 1915

Car fire near Post Ranch Inn gives a fright

By CHRIS COUNTS

A VEHICLE went up in flames near the Post Ranch Inn in Big Sur Nov. 2, igniting some nearby brush. But firefighters quickly doused the blaze before it could threaten the resort or nearby homes in the Coastlands neighborhood. It scorched 3 to 5 acres before it was extinguished.



PHOTO/MONTEREY COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

A vehicle caught fire in Big Sur Nov. 2, and flames threatened to spread to nearby homes and a resort. But firefighters responded quickly to put it out.

Big Sur Fire, which has its firehouse nearby, received word of the fire at 9:17 p.m. and rushed to the area, where a neighbor, Butch Kronlund, was already dousing the flames with a garden hose.

"Upon arrival, there was a vehicle fully engulfed on the Upper Coastlands Road and the fire had spread into the vegetation and was threatening the two structures closest to the vehicle," reported Big Sur Fire Chief Martha Karstens. "Also a concern was the flaming debris falling down to the Lower Coastlands Road near another structure."

The fire brigade responded with three engines, two water tenders and 17 firefighters.

Fortunate winds

"We were able to get the fire knocked down and alleviate the further threat to Coastlands and the Post Ranch," Karstens continued. "We were very fortunate not to have the winds we had been experiencing the previous evenings."

While firefighters from various agencies battled the blaze, Highway 1 was shut down for about an hour. "We were, of course, concerned it could jump the road and head up to Ventana and Coast Ridge," Karstens said.

See FIRE page 27A

Veterans, equine charities were fraud, jury says

Family sued Pine Cone for reporting allegations but is ordered to pay \$8.8M

By KELLY NIX

THE FRESNO family that filed a \$20 million defamation lawsuit against The Pine Cone for reporting allegations of corruption in two charities was found liable by an Alameda County jury last week for violating numerous laws related to the operation of the nonprofits, including spending donations they claimed would be helping wounded veterans on themselves.

Attorney General Xavier Becerra filed suit in 2017 against Matthew G. Gregory, wife Danella Gregory and their two adult children, Matthew J. Gregory and Gina D. Gregory, accusing them of falsely telling donors that the money they raised would be used for a therapeutic equestrian program for injured veterans.

Following a civil trial that began Aug. 27 in Alameda County Superior Court, a jury on Nov. 5 found that the family fraudulently solicited charitable donations — through charities called the Wounded Warriors Support Group and Central Coast Equine Rescue and Retirement — under the pretext of assisting wounded veterans and their families.

"The jury found that Matthew G., Matthew J. and Danella Gregory knowingly engaged in persistent and pervasive fraud, mismanagement or abuse of authority, and that the charities' assets were being misapplied or wasted by them," according to court documents filed by Deputy Attorney General Julianne Mossler.

'Aided and abetted'

The jury also found that Gina Gregory — an attorney who represented herself, her mom and her brother in the trial — aided and abetted the charity directors, her family members, to advance "her own interest or financial gain."

Though the Gregorys live in Fresno, they used Carmel post office boxes for their nonprofits, and Matthew G. Gregory told The Pine Cone last year that they wanted to establish a riding program for veterans in Carmel Valley.

See FRAUD page 21A

A.G. says the charities' assets 'were being misapplied or wasted'

Panetta hopeful new congress will get things done

By KELLY NIX

WITH A Democrat-controlled U.S. House of Representatives about to take hold, Rep. Jimmy Panetta said he's hopeful that members on both sides of the aisle will be able to agree on changes to immigration laws and a host of other issues that matter to Americans.

In a phone interview from his office in Washington D.C. Wednesday, Panetta told The Pine Cone that he wants to see the House work together despite a divided government.

"Hopefully we can get things done that will benefit the people on the Central Coast of California," said Panetta, a Democrat and member of the Problem Solvers Group that seeks to find bipartisan ground on difficult issues.

No longer a freshman

Securing a nationwide infrastructure bill and passing legislation that reduces healthcare costs while protecting those with pre-existing conditions are also priorities, Panetta said, as is ensuring border security while protecting the country's Dreamers.

"It's these types of things that I think this next Congress is going to be focused on, and hopefully we will be able to do it with bipartisan support," he said.

No longer a freshman congressman, Panetta — a former U.S. Navy reserve officer who served in Afghanistan — said on Monday he contacted Democrat and Republican military veterans who are also incoming members of Congress.

"I reached out to them to let them know that they can contact me if they have any questions. Even though we may be on different teams politically," he said of Republican members, "I think we are all one big team here in Congress."

He went on to say, "We have to get rid of the partisanship and get things done."

On the caravan

The representative from Carmel Valley also weighed in on the migrant caravan composed of thousands of mostly Central Americans who are trying to reach the United States, and he blamed the Trump administration and the GOP for not doing enough to prevent the mass migration.

"If this was an issue that was so pressing to them, they had two years where there was a Republican administration, Republican House and Republican Senate where they could have changed the laws," he said.

The first wave of migrants — many of them single men from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador in pursuit of jobs — reached Tijuana Wednesday by the hundreds. Others in the caravan have told reporters that crime rates in their home countries — usually not considered a valid reason for seeking asylum in the United States — led them to make the long journey north.

While Panetta said that lawmakers could discuss the possibility of streamlining the process for asylum

See PANETTA page 22A

County to review Medi-Cal overpayments

By KELLY NIX

THE DEPUTY director of Monterey County's Department of Social Services said this week that officials plan to evaluate the way the agency operates after an audit found that the county made more than \$20 million in "questionable" Medi-Cal payments to more than 2,500 people.

The State Auditor's office on Oct. 30 released a report revealing that the state Department of Health Care Services paid a total of more than \$4 billion on behalf of people who were supposedly eligible for the free medical care program but were not actually qualified. The mis-spent money came from state and federal taxpayers.

'Won't happen again'

Of the \$4 billion, Monterey County is reported to have paid \$21.8 million to 2,563 questionable beneficiaries. While the audit largely blames the state for the errors, county social services interim deputy director Cindy

Cassinelli said her department is going to assess its work practices.

"We did review the report and we do not dispute the findings," Cassinelli told The Pine Cone Tuesday. "And we have efforts underway to evaluate our current best practices so this won't happen again."

The county plans to conduct the evaluation of its system internally, not with the help of a consultant.

Cassinelli also said social services would continue to work closely with the state's health services department to ensure that the "correct benefits are going out to the right individuals."

County workers are tasked with determining whether someone is eligible for Medi-Cal benefits and sending the data to the state, but the auditor points the finger at the state Department of Health Care Services for failing to ensure that counties resolved discrepancies.

"Our statewide comparison of Medi-Cal beneficiary

See MEDI-CAL page 22A

Beauty or the beast?



Architect Samuel Pitnick's updated rendering of a modern house proposed for Camino Real didn't win over the neighbors, whose complaints about its looks persuaded the planning commission to ask him for changes. See the story on page 3A.