

AROUND THE COUNTY

Supervisors get a bleak budget brief

By JILL BALLINGER
GAZETTE EDITOR

The Mariposa County Board of Supervisors got a brief, albeit bleak, budget report from County Administrative Officer (CAO) Rick Benson on Tuesday morning. Benson had recently attended a meeting of all CAOs in California.

Benson said that in the past early budget projections haven't worried him much. "I'm very nervous this time," he told the board on Tuesday morning. "The plan, if that's what you want to call it, is very tenuous."

The state faces a deficit of \$19.9 billion in the coming fiscal year, and Benson said the "serious expenditure reductions" will likely come from health and social services and will be painful. "It's very dramatic what they're looking at," he said of the state.

The governor's budget proposal includes a shift in how gas tax is allocated to local government. If it changes, it could have serious implications to Mariposa County roads. Benson explained the change as "really a lot of smoke and mirrors" that helps the state reduce its obligation to public education.

Still, Benson knows that what is proposed is not likely to be what is passed. "No one really expects this it will be imple-

mented," Benson said of the budget plan, "because it's impractical."

The state is expected to have adequate cash flow through April, and Benson said no tax increases are proposed. "There just isn't anymore to go after," he said. "We've run out of rich people," in California.

Mariposa County remains in better fiscal shape than most. Benson said he was one of just three or four other CAOs that didn't have to report mid-year cuts or massive layoffs at the meeting. Transient Occupancy Tax (TOT) held steady last month, but sales tax revenue declined.

The continued budget crisis has the CAO cautious, however. "I'm going to stop saying we're doing OK," he said. "We're treading water. Other counties are under water."

Supervisor Janet Bibby said she is hearing bad news from neighboring counties. "It's getting more grim," she said of unemployment and other economic indicators.

Board Chairman Kevin Cann noted the importance of the revenue tourism brings in. "TOT is becoming an even greater percentage of our income," he said.

The County will have a mid-year budget review in the near future.

'Party' ends with one arrest

An 18-year-old Cathey's Valley resident was arrested after several witnesses said he broke into an unoccupied house to have a party. Brandon McCutcheon has been charged with first degree burglary.

According to the Mariposa County Sheriff's report, a neighbor saw four vehicles parked in front of a house on Highway 140. He knew that the homeowner was not there and that no one was supposed to be there. The neighbor was able to get license plate numbers on three of the four cars at the scene while he asked the juveniles there to wait for law enforcement to arrive. The juveniles told the neighbor they were there for a party.

Deputies found a broken window cover that was determined to be the entry point. There were a number of boxes in the front room ransacked and the carpet had been van-

dalized with bleach. Beer cans were on the dining room table.

The homeowner said he had been there earlier, and there was no damage. Witnesses identified McCutcheon as the organizer of the party. One girl said she stayed only until she learned the home was not McCutcheon's. Other witnesses said they also believed the home was McCutcheon's. One said McCutcheon had been "partying" at the home for several nights.

When deputies contacted McCutcheon, he told them he didn't know anything about the party. He allegedly told the officers he was grounded for the weekend and therefore couldn't have been at the party. Cell phone records, however, and witness statements, show that McCutcheon made arrangement to be picked up at the end of the road and taken to the party.

Solid gold



GAZETTE PHOTO BY JILL BALLINGER

ALL SIX MEMBERS OF THE MARIPOSA FFA CHAPTER WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE MERCED-MARIPOSA SECTION PROJECT COMPETITION EARNED GOLD AWARDS, WITH MIKAELA WILLIAMS BEING HONORED AS OUTSTANDING FRESHMAN. THE MARIPOSA COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS ALSO ISSUED PROCLAMATIONS TO EACH OF THE HONOREES, AND SUPERVISOR KEVIN CANN ATTENDED THE EVENT WITH THE CHAPTER. PICTURED, STANDING, FROM LEFT, ARE ADVISOR BUZ ARNOLD, JOCELYNN BARRINGTON, CARLY BRYSON, ADVISOR WAYNE FORSYTHE, AMBER KAUS, ADVISOR PATRICK SMITH AND WILLIAMS; AND SEATED, FROM LEFT, TIM ANDRE AND JAMES PALMER. CANN SAID THE COMMUNITY SHOULD BE PROUD OF THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF THE PROGRAM. "THE QUALITY OF THE KIDS, AND QUALITY OF THE ADULTS IN THIS PROGRAM IS UNSURPASSED. WHAT THEY GIVE OUR COMMUNITY REALLY CAN'T BE CLASSIFIED. IT'S INVALUABLE," CANN SAID.

Park adds permits to Half Dome hikes

Hiking to the top of Half Dome is one of the most popular outings in Yosemite National Park. The iconic granite monolith, at 8,842 feet above sea level, attracts people from all over the world who attempt to climb to the summit.

Most visitors ascend Half Dome via the cables, which are in place from mid-May through mid-October.

Approximately 84,000 people climbed to the top of Half Dome in 2008. Although there are several trailheads leading to the cables on Half Dome, the majority of visitors start their hike at the Happy Isles Trailhead in Yosemite Valley.

The increase in popularity of the hike has resulted in large numbers of visitors using the cables, particularly on weekends and holidays. During last summer, Saturdays and holidays averaged 840 visitors per day. On peak days, visitor numbers were estimated at 1,100 to 1,200.

This increase has resulted in significant safety concerns. Specifically, there was both a visitor fatality and a visitor who sustained serious injuries on the cables during two consecutive crowded



PHOTO COURTESY OF NPS
HIKERS LINE UP TO SCALE HALF DOME.

weekends last summer. This increase in use has also impacted the resources and has negatively affected the visitor experience. For example, visitors have had to wait up to an hour to ascend the cables on a busy day.

In an effort to address these issues, the Park will institute an interim program that will require a Day Use Permit to hike the cables on Half Dome on Fridays, Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays starting in May, 2010. Four hundred permits will be issued per day, 300 of these will be Day Use Permits and 100 will be included in wilderness permits. These permits are required for the use of the trail from the base of the Subdome to the summit of Half Dome and include the Half Dome cable route.

The Half Dome Day Use Permits will be available starting March 1, 2010 through www.recreation.gov or by calling 1-877-444-6777. Each person climbing the Half Dome cables will be required to have their own permit.

Up to four permits may be obtained under one reservation. The permits are free, however, there is a non-refundable \$1.50 service charge for each permit obtained.

During this interim program, visitor use and impacts to the Park will be monitored. Yosemite National Park Rangers will be studying visitor use and safety, assessing the visitor experience, and compiling data that will be analyzed by Park managers. At this point, the interim program will be in effect for the 2010 visitor season, as well as the 2011 visitor season. An Environmental Assessment process for a long-term plan for the Half Dome Cables will begin public scoping in spring 2010.

Board officially ends fire emergency

By JILL BALLINGER
GAZETTE EDITOR

More than a year and a half after the Oliver and Telegraph Fires blazed, Mariposa County was finally able to end its emergency status regarding both. The Mariposa County Board of Supervisors closed the books on the local emergencies at Tuesday morning's meeting.

County Administrative Officer (CAO) Rick Benson said the board's consent agenda was a little shorter than it has been since summer of 2008. Each week since then, the board has had to continue the local emergency until all federal and state reimbursement was received.

"No longer is there a need to declare an emergency," Benson told the board, explaining that the county had received \$543,519 in reim-

bursment from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and State Office of Emergency Services. The money did not just go to the fire and sheriff's department.

It covered direct and indirect costs for damages to roads and expenses incurred by the public works department during the suppression effort. Reimbursement was also made to the human services department for activities not funded through other sources. The bulk of the funding, however, was for fire and law enforcement services.

Fire Chief Jim Wilson said such emergencies present learning experiences. "We have learned a lot. It will certainly pay off in the future," he told the board. "We need to ensure that when we have a potential disaster, we declare early and often and have our foot in the door," for federal and state help.