

Alameda Journal

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Adoptable animals A pair of pleasant dogs [A5]

Community Take an extra light tour [C1]

A few moments with the big guy



Madeline Heaps, 4, chats up Santa, who's visiting Christmas Tree Lane.

By Peter Hegarty

His beard was white and his belly jiggled, but something wasn't quite right.

Adjusting the glasses balanced above his snowy mustache, Santa whispered a confession: Sporting the red suit while sitting under a spotlight on Thompson Avenue, he was hot — roasting, in fact.

"This is not North Pole weather," Santa said, nodding with all the wisdom of the ages. "Definitely not. It's California. What was I thinking?"

Twins Ryan and Tyler were first up on his lap. Soon after came Martha and John, followed by Kaya and Miguel and B.J. and Adrienne and Samantha and a caravan of others. Zachary was so shy he stood with his



Abel Valdivia, 4, has a moment with Santa.

back to Santa, and buried his face behind two fists as his mother snapped photos. He never said a word.

"I usually" answers a 4-year-old girl after Santa finishes if she would like to sit on his lap. "I think I would rather stand. I'm feeling about three-quarters shy right now."

Instead, she stood holding her mother's hand and carefully outlined what she wanted for Christmas.

"Now, tell me," Santa asked each child who came to meet him. "Have you been very good this year, or just good?"

Most declared they had been very good, but a handful confessed they had mostly been OK.

Raelynn made a list of what she wanted. It included a wish that everybody in the world would have a

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Voters to decide Belt Line land use in 2002

By Susan Fuller

STAFF WRITER

In two years, island voters will decide whether to change the zoning of the unused Belt Line rail yard to open space.

Calling it irresponsible to make the zoning change immediately, the City Council voted 4-0 in favor of the only other choice open to them: put the initiative on the November 2002 ballot. Councilwoman Barbara Kerr recused herself because she lives near the property. The council met on Dec. 19.

"I think it would be unfair, as tempting as open space is, to adopt the initiative as an ordinance and not let the voters speak," said Councilwoman Beverly Johnson.

Last month, when the initiative first was presented, the council requested a report on the effects of the rezoning.

Rezoning would cost the city \$766,000 annually, \$313,000 in initial real estate transfer taxes and undetermined sums from land sale proceeds and property taxes, according to the report. The action would also interfere with the city's ability to comply with the Association of Bay Area Governments' housing mandate, and would require amending the General Plan and Housing Element. It would also jeopardize a developer's commitment to funding for the Northern Waterfront Specific Plan.

All public speakers at the council meeting, with the exception of an attorney for Alameda Belt Line, asked for immediate rezoning.

The report has "no accounting for cost

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City shaves 40 feet from new height limits

By Susan Fuller

STAFF WRITER

Compromising between preservationists and downtown businesses and property owners, the City Council unanimously approved a new community commercial zoning designation with a 60-foot height limit for Park Street commercial buildings.

The council also approved the controversial jog in the line between areas that permit and ban auto-related uses just off Webster Street. The vote to include the building at the southwest corner of Pacific Avenue and Webster Street that Sam Koka plans to use for a garage was 3-2, with Council Members Barbara Kerr and Tony Dayvog dissenting.

Buildings 100 feet tall were allowed on Park Street in the zoning ordinance's first reading on Dec. 5.

Historic preservationists objected. The Alameda Architectural Preservation Society board was willing to support a maximum height of 90 feet, said Christopher Buckley. He cited several retail districts, including College and Piedmont avenues in Oakland and Main Street in Walnut Creek, with height limits between 35 and 50 feet.

Judith Lynch showed computer-modified photographs of what the Masonic Hall, at the corner of Alameda Avenue and Park Street, and other historic build-

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Alamedan to succeed Chan as county supervisor

STAFF REPORTS

The Alameda County supervisors unanimously selected Alice Lai-Bitker to assume the seat vacated by Wilma Chan after her November election to the state Assembly.

Lai-Bitker, an Alameda resident, has been an assistant to former board president Chan for the past six years.

The new supervisor said she was surprised by the honor.

"To be honest I didn't really think

population and we have a particular amount of people who are low-income," Lai-Bitker said after the meeting. "I would like to be able to



Out of the dark: The meaning behind lighting the holidays

tell the elves to work overtime to fill all the orders." Despite admitting that he felt more than a little toasty, Santa also said that he felt right at home in the 3200 block of Thompson, where he has been a fixture of the street's Christmas Tree Lane for more than 50 years.

"If I visit your house on Christmas

Ballot

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of services (to a new housing development), lost park land, increased traffic and diminution of air quality," said Jean Sweeney, who started the initiative petition.

"Threats of lawsuits for loss of possible revenue is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard," said Alameda Tim Englert, the most outspoken open space advocate. "These people don't own the land but are acting like they do. Stand up to these bullies."

The ownership issue ought to be resolved before a zoning change, said William Bitting, the railroad's attorney. Changing the zoning would result in eminent domain condemnation proceedings, which "have a tendency to go all the way," he said.

The Belt Line rail yard is located south of Marina Village, bound by Atlantic Avenue and Sherman Street on the north and east. The southern boundary is defined by rear property

lines on Eagle Avenue. More than 10 percent of Alameda's registered voters signed the petition to rezone the former rail yard from medium-density residential and general industry to open space. The petition asks that the question be placed on the ballot, not approved by council, a point raised by Councilwoman Johnson.

A 1999 bid by Pleasanton-based Sun Country Developers was reportedly in the \$15 million to \$22 million range. Pending lawsuits over ownership of the Belt Line complicate the ownership picture. In 1999, the city gave notice of its intention to buy the land based on the 1924 agreement that created the railroad. The railroad sued to prevent the city's bargain basement purchase, and the city counter-sued, alleging that the railroad intends to break the old contract.

If the courts decide Sun Country has a legal right to buy the property on the open market and the city has zoned the land for open space, the developer would likely seek damages.

Hanks

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spoil the movie's outcome for viewers. The emotional payoff of the movie, he says, is not Chuck's triumphant and daring escape from the island, but rather what happens when those two people, who love each other so much, are at long last standing in the same room together again.

The aforementioned volleyball (which was in one of the dozen or so FedEx packages that wash up on shore with Chuck after the wreck) represented the closest thing Hanks had to a fellow actor. Chuck dubs the ball "Wilson," paints a face on it and talks to it as if it were a person. But other than that, there's no one to share dialogue with, no one to react to.

One thing he had going for him was the reality of the experience itself. On

development in the area," he said. "In 1958 there was no need for computer stores in the zoning ordinance."

PSBA was willing to accept a 60-foot limit to accommodate preservationists concerns while making it a little easier for a developer to consider a Park Street site, Ratto said. In other business, the council unanimously:

■ Elected Al DeWitt as vice mayor.

■ Approved extension of the agreement with Northbay Ecumenical Homes and First Republic Bank for the Community Assisted/Shared Appreciation (CASA) home ownership program until the end of 2001. The CASA program makes silent second and third mortgages to low- and moderate-income households to purchase a home.

■ Accepted the city's Comprehensive Annual Financial Report for the fiscal year ending June 30, the auditor's reports on parking citation processing, compliance with state mandated appropriation limits and appropriate usage of county transportation funds.

■ Accepted the audit report for two pension plans, which have no contributing members and no funds, for the year ending June 30. The \$4 million annual benefit cost is borne by the general fund.

■ Approved amendments to the agreement that governs an investment pool the city uses for short-term deposits.

tions with Atlantic Avenue and Marina Village Parkway.

■ Delegated authority to execute certain agreements with Caltrans for federal- or state-funded transportation projects to the city manager or his designee. The City Council will still authorize project applications, matching funds, approve final plans and specifications, authorize call for bids, award the contract and accept final work.

■ Authorized the purchase three dump trucks and three pickup trucks.

■ Increased rates at the Chuck Corica Golf Complex as approved by the Golf Commission.

■ Installed Council members Al DeWitt and Barbara Kerr, City Auditor Kevin Kearney and City Treasurer Kevin Kennedy

■ Commended Lewis Hurwitz for his 15 years of service as the City Treasurer.

■ Removed from the agenda a proposal to authorize the city manager to execute an amendment to the funding agreement for the Cross Airport Roadway project at the recommendation of city staff. The Port of Oakland and the city are still in negotiations regarding timing and financial responsibility in the amendment.

Hanukkah

There is no evidence that the historical foundation for Hanukkah, the rededication of the temple by the Maccabees after their victory over the Syrians, happened in the winter months, according to Rabbi Alan Bennett of Temple Israel.

Yet the holiday, with eight nights of candle-lighting, occurs each year near the solstice.

"There's no doubt in my mind of the coincidence of this holiday with the solstice," Bennett said. "Officially there's no connection."

The story about a day's worth of oil in the temple that lasted eight days doesn't have anything to do with the solstice, Bennett said. The temple was always dark and people needed light any time of the year to see what they were doing.

"When folks decided to make a holiday to recall this event, the oil lamp was what they needed to rededicate the temple," he said.

Santa Lucia Day

No one is quite sure why Lucia, a 4th century Sicilian saint, came to be so revered in Sweden. Some say she once visited the country, and others believe missionaries brought stories of her life which entranced the Swedish people. Santa Lucia is celebrated in Sweden and Norway on December 13.

A girl dressed in white with candles on her head, accompanied by assistants carrying candles, serves S-shaped saffron rolls, hot chocolate and coffee to parents and neighbors at 5 a.m. on Lucia Day. The young visitors, standing in the doorway against a snowy background, sing "Santa Lucia" and Swedish folk songs.

The celebration continues at schools, where students eat the same foods. In the evening, teenagers gather again at friends' homes and sing again.

"Santa Lucia Day has lots of light in a very, very dark time of the year," said Alameda accountant Lars Hansson, who lived in Sweden until 20 years ago. He hasn't celebrated Lucia Day since he has lived in America.

ously celebrated between Dec. 26 and Jan. 1 was formulated and initiated by Dr. Maulana Ron Karenga, a professor of Black Studies at California State University at Long Beach.

The holiday has its foundations in the enhancement of revolutionary social change for Black Americans and awareness of exploitation during the Christmas season, the lack of an African-American holiday and reconnection with traditional ways of life. Kwanzaa is a cultural holiday, available to and practiced by Africans of all religious faiths.

There is a festival and feast each of the seven nights of Kwanzaa. Family and friends unite around the table. Seven candles—three green, three red and a black one in the center—form the centerpiece. Each night emphasizes one principle—unity, self-determination, collective work, responsibility, cooperative economy, purpose, creativity and faith.

The candles are lit in sequence, adding one each night.

"The symbolism of the candle is reuniting and re-lighting with the principle," said Ardella Dailey, assistant superintendent of Alameda Unified School District. "It's a re-affirmation that you will go through the new year living under the principles."

Christmas

Scholars disagree on the month of Jesus' birth, but most believe the Christmas occurs in December because it is an outgrowth of pagan solstice festivals.

Although we don't know when astronomers learned about the skies, the 12 days of Christmas are based in clear understanding of the solstice, said Larry Schulz, pastor of First Congregational Church.

The sun comes up one minute late each day leading up to Christmas. "The 25th is the first day that minute come back," he said. The evenings don't start getting longer until Jan. 6—Twelfth Night.

Light overcoming darkness is at the center of many Christmas traditions and celebrations, from the star of Bethlehem to an aria in Handel's Messiah