

# THE ISLAND

Alameda Times-Star

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## Candles pierce gloom of Christmas amid power crisis

**M**Y FIRST RULE as a columnist is that the right idea will come at the right time. A press release, letter, e-mail or phone call always comes when I need it — barring occasional dry spells. Rule Two is that I never decide a column's theme in advance. I interview the subject first, then look for the message or unusual twist.

I broke rules one and two this week. As a result, I had no material as of Monday evening.

My new Rule Three is "Rules are rules for a reason."

It all started with the feeling that Christmas spirit ran low this year. Was it just me? Did work pressures or the relative lack of rain and cold temperatures affect my perceptions? I wasn't sure, but I didn't share my feelings for fear of being labeled a Grinch.

Then I learned that others felt the same way. Some blamed the election fallout monopolizing our minds well into December. Others attributed their sluggish attitudes to dry weather, an iffy

Suzanne T. STORAR



stock market, and solar flares.

The column idea, "How Alamedans can get into the Christmas spirit," popped into my head. The theme of light came to me, and I decided to list the best and brightest decorations in town. Of

course, I knew about the ISO and Stage 2 electricity alerts. But I thought that people keen on outdoor displays would simply hit the switch later in the evening.

Andrew and I went out, after 8 p.m., in search of lights. We wheeled around Broadway, worked our way to the Gold Coast, wove through Ferrisside, and ended on Bay Farm. Many houses were as brilliant as ever. Thompson Avenue, AKA Christmas Tree Lane, blazed like a fire.

But other streets were dark.

Our headlights bounced off unlit bulbs tucked in shrubs and darkened candy canes. The homeowners had decorated, but chose to keep the lights off. After all, who wants to be responsible for a rolling blackout? Especially when the first Alameda neighborhood to go dark is Ferrisside, where scores of children visit Santa on Christmas Tree Lane.

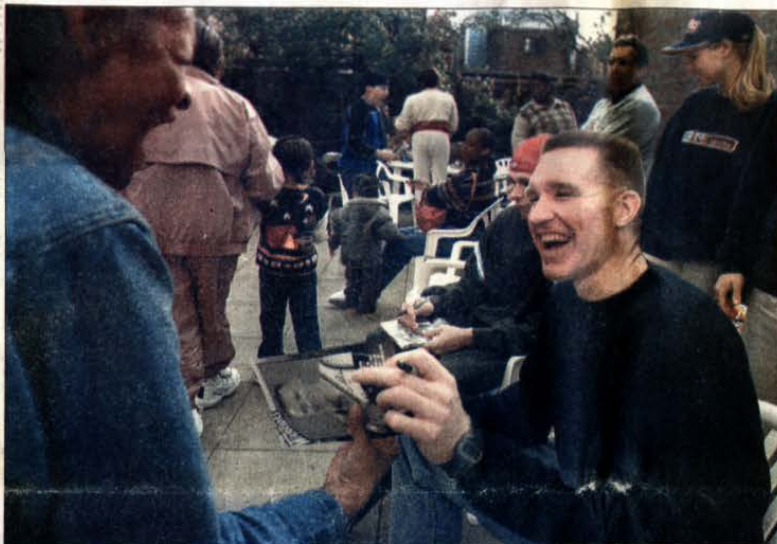
I tried to repackage my "go see the lights" idea by listing homes that still put on the glitz. But, while I support independent decision making and the right to de-

crate one's house, others may not feel the same way. Listing specific properties could make some homeowners the focus of bad feelings in these dicey electrical times. And a ban on column idea repackaging will be the subject of my new Rule Four.

We need to see the light — literally and figuratively — during short winter days. Ceremonies of light have been a part of December for centuries. How would Alamedans get in on the tradition

Please see **Storar**, LOCAL-2

## TREASURES FROM THE CARAVAN



RAY CHAVEZ — Staff

Golden State Warriors guard Chris Mullin shares a moment with a fan as she gets an autographed picture as part of the team's Community Holiday Caravan. Players, coaches and staff deliver toys and gifts to different organizations throughout the Bay Area as part of the Caravan. And on Wednesday, they visited the Berkeley Emergency Food and Housing Project.

## Suspect held in drifter's baffling death

By Harry Harris  
STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND — It was the kind of case a homicide investigator dreads: A man's body is found floating in water, dead for some time, with no obvious signs of how he died, no witnesses and no clues leading to a suspect, or even if there was one.

But the mystery surrounding Daniel Spates' death last summer has been solved, police say, noting that the suspected killer was charged Wednesday with murder.

The investigation that led to suspect Demetrius Conwell, 36, was headed by homicide sergeants Ersie Joyner III and Jeff Loman. Their commanders say it is a textbook example of units within the police department working together, coupled with

records' review and old-fashioned leg work.

When Spates' body was found Sept. 4 floating in a canal next to Laney College that runs from the Estuary to Lake Merritt, Joyner said he had his doubts about finding what actually led to the death.

Spates, 34, was unemployed, a transient who had a minor criminal record and no one had reported him missing.

"We weren't even sure at first if it was a murder or a natural death," Joyner said Wednesday. "We just knew we had a lot of work ahead."

There was serious decomposition to Spates' body but the trauma to his face, neck and scalp was detectable.

It was not until Oct. 3, after microscopic evaluation revealed Spates' larynx was

broken, that the Alameda County Coroner's Office determined he was killed by someone else and officially classified the death as a homicide.

Joyner and Loman worked the case as time permitted, including reconquering the area, but their big break did not come until Nov. 18, thanks to another police unit.

As part of a violence suppression project, in which suspects arrested by patrol officers are brought to investigators to see if they have information on other cases, a narcotics suspect was brought to the homicide unit.

He told Sgt. Ian Haney he had heard about a man beaten to death a few weeks

Please see **Solve**, LOCAL-10

## Island voters to determine rail yard fate

### Pleasanton developer hopes to build 200 homes on land

By Kristin Bender  
STAFF WRITER

ALAMEDA — In November 2002, voters will decide if the Alameda Beltline Railroad Yard — 22 acres of valuable northwestern land — will remain as open space.

But for the next two years, the land south of the Marina Village Business Park will remain a place where vernal tree frogs and singing meadowlarks meet hikers, bicyclists and children at play.

The Alameda City Council on Tuesday unanimously approved an ordinance that asks voters to decide the fate of the land.

Councilmember Barbara Kerr recused herself from the vote because of a conflict of interest. Her home is 300 feet from part of the property.

"I think it would be irresponsible for this City Council to adopt this (ordinance now) and not allow the voters to be part of the decision," said Councilmember Beverly Johnson.

Mayor Ralph Appezzo concurred. "As far as I'm concerned, no action will be taken until the people speak in 2002," he said.

Outdoor lovers said the land is a gold mine because it links bike trails from the ferry and Alameda Point and those that lead over the Fruitvale Bridge to the BART station. But developers also have an interest in it for 200 upscale homes.

The voters will now have to decide. There are 52 rail lines in California that have been developed as trails. Another 78 are in the works, according to Rails-to-Trails.

In many communities where they have been proposed, such trails get overwhelming community support, said Kate Bickert, state director of Rails to Trails. Along with the Trust for Public Land, Rails has offered guidance and assistance in finding funding.

In my experience, Alameda has a lot more support for this trail project than in other places," Bickert said.

The open-space ordinance was on the table because 10 percent of Alameda's voters earlier this year signed a petition to turn the former belt line into parkland. At its meeting, the council could have approved the land as open space.

Alameda has a dearth of parkland, according to a city report. California cities strive to meet standards calling for 3 to 6 acres of green space per 1,000 residents. When Alameda is built out and 52 acres of parkland designated in the city's general plan are constructed, Alameda will have only 2.3 acres per 1,000 residents, the report says.

But open space advocates aren't the only ones interested

Please see **Yard**, LOCAL-2

## Potluck volunteers aid in linking food chain

By Jason Bono  
STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND — Maggie Kostoff



their leg muscles to generate force very quickly when they walk," said Timothy Griffin, a UC Berkeley graduate student in integrative biology. Comparing penguins to animals with similar leg lengths show they burn about the same amount of calories, he said.

The findings by Griffin and

sthetic limbs," Griffin said.

Kram and Griffin decided to study penguins because they seem to be doing everything wrong. An earlier study showed penguins were burning twice as many calories when walking compared to other animals of similar size.

## Hand grenade removed from East Oakland yard

FROM STAFF REPORTS

OAKLAND — The Alameda County Bomb Squad removed what is believed to have been a live hand grenade from the back yard of an East Oakland home Wednesday night.

The grenade, with its pin in place, was found in the bushes of a home on the 1900 block of 84th Avenue shortly before 5 p.m.

The grenade was a hollow training grenade with an opening on the bottom that had

been sealed and it was filled with an unknown substance, police said.

Bomb squad members removed the grenade and were expected to detonate it at their facility near the Santa Rita Jail in Pleasanton.

Investigators have no leads on how the grenade ended up in the bushes. Anyone with any information is asked to call 238-3455.

The CSAA and the California Highway Patrol advise motorists to leave early, drive cautiously and rest every two hours. Bring flashlights, cellular phones and jumper cables.

If you are driving to the airports, officials at SFO and San Jose International Airport say long-term parking spaces will run out by midday Friday. By Wednesday, Oakland International Airport still had 7,000 long-term parking slots available and expected spaces through the holidays.

The peak travel day at SFO will be Saturday, with Friday

of cars into the rental lot, they abandoned the rental cars in the road and ran to the terminal. Both lanes out of the airport were blocked until a tow truck could remove the mess. Passengers reported that it took them 40 minutes to get to the freeway that night.

Air travelers are advised to arrive two hours before their flights, to keep gifts unwrapped unless they are checked-in and to arrange for ground transportation or take public transit.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Don't wrap gifts until you arrive or check-in wrapped gifts. Ask about carry-on limits when you confirm your flight. Book standby berths on the first flights of the day, if you have no tickets.

### Advice for motorists

Check car fluids, brakes and wipers before you leave. Rest every two hours or 100 miles. Bring pillows, blankets and toys for kids. Bring snacks and bottled drinks. Drive cautiously, keeping 3 seconds behind the car ahead of you. Bring emergency equipment: jumper cables, flashlight, cellphone and flares.

Leave early. Bring a map and plan your route in advance.

Sources: California Highway Patrol, California State Automobile Association and Bay Area airports

## Yard: Report shows Alameda lagging in per capita income

Continued from LOCAL-1 in the land.

Last year, Sun Country Developers in Pleasanton made a reported \$15 million to \$22 million bid on the property. The developer wants to build about 200 single-family homes that would be priced from \$400,000 to \$450,000.

Ownership of the land is tied up in court. The land is owned by the Alameda Beltline,

but based on a 1924 agreement that created the railroad, the city has the right to buy back the property for the original purchase price plus improvements.

Last year, when the city announced its intention to buy the property, the railroad sued to prevent the sale. The city countersued, on the basis that the railroad would be breaking the old agreement. The suits are expected to be settled before the measure goes before voters.

The belt line and its extensions lie south of Marina Village between Constitution Way, Sherman Street and Eagle and Atlantic avenues.

It was once home to railroad tracks used by trains serving companies on the northern waterfront. If development prevails, it will bring the city more than \$1 million in taxes and redevelopment fees.

**Babies of the Year 2000**

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