



**CREEK WITHOUT VOICE PREMIERS**  
Community Board, A2



**TWO BULLDOGS NAMED ALL-LEAGUE**  
Sports, A6

# MARTINEZ NEWS-GAZETTE

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ALWAYS 25 CENTS

## Incumbents reign, Weir prepares to certify election

BY GRETA MART  
Staff Reporter

By law, the November 2 election results must be certified, or made official by the California Secretary of State, by November 30.

This year the Contra Costa County Election Division needed every minute of the past three-and-a-half weeks to count the unprecedented piles of vote-by-mail ballots in addition to tallying up the results from Election Day.

Contra Costa County Clerk-Recorder Stephen Weir said he plans to certify all the elections under his purview on Monday and Martinez Deputy Clerk

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## Save energy, money

If purchasing a new appliance is on your holiday to-do list, don't forget that the California Energy Commission has expanded the Cash for Appliances Rebate program. The Cash for Appliances PLUS rebate program now includes high energy efficient dishwashers, freezers, water heaters, and heating, ventilating, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems.

Eligible energy efficient appliances and rebate amounts available are: refrigerators \$200, clothes washers \$100, and room air conditioners up to \$50. California Cash for Appliance PLUS rebates include: dishwashers \$100, freezers \$50, water heaters \$300-\$750, and HVAC systems: \$500-\$1000.

Consumers still have up to 120 days from the purchase date to submit their rebate application by mail. Choices for eligible models include 273 clothes washers, 139 refrigerators, 314 room air conditioners, 25 dishwashers, 165 freezers, 258 boilers, 2887 furnaces and more than 300 water heaters including solar. Eligible air conditioning units can be found at [www.ceedirectory.org](http://www.ceedirectory.org). A complete list of eligible models is here: [www.cash4appliances.org/products/index.html](http://www.cash4appliances.org/products/index.html)

To date, the Energy Commission has received more than 167,000 applications with approximately \$4,532,550 million still available. A tracker is updated on the remaining funds available: [www.cash4appliances.org](http://www.cash4appliances.org).

## MARTINEZ ENTREPRENEURS

### Pâtisserie sustains despite cut in biz



BY GRETA MART  
Staff Reporter

On the day before Thanksgiving the countertop of the elegant cake shop on Main Street was filled with holiday pies — pumpkin, pecan, cherry, and apple. To the right of the cash register now boasts ornately decorated cupcakes, a new addition that caters to the ever-growing demand. Karen Del Bontá, the owner of Martinez's Le Gâteau Éléphant, is innovating in an effort to battle the poor economy.

Still the economic downturn of the past few years has had a domino effect cascading into every corner of the business community.

With over 12 percent of Californians currently without a job and no substantial recovery in sight, fewer people are getting married. When couples do decide to throw a nuptial party, weddings are being scaled down and many of the traditional ceremony staples scuttled, including the ubiquitous wedding cake, a revenue mainstay of Martinez's Le Gâteau Éléphant. For the past 16 years, Del Bontá has created over 10,000 wedding cakes at her professional kitchen and retail shop on Main Street.

Del Bontá said this week hers was traditionally a recession-proof business, but now "the economy has hit everybody." She has watched the size of cakes ordered creep ever downward and the retail portion of her business take a nose dive.

However, she said Wednesday she forecasts she'll weather the storm one way or another.

"I'm willing to work harder to keep it going," said Del Bontá.

Cake/Page A11

**DELICATE ART.** Le Gâteau Éléphant owner Karen Del Bontá worked with rapid precision on Wednesday as she put the finishing touches on a St. Honoré Cake, specially ordered for the holiday weekend. The historical confection is named for the patron saint of pastry chefs and bakers, Saint Honoratus of Amiens.

PHOTO BY GRETA MART

## Native plant nursery sprouts up

BY GRETA MART  
Staff Reporter

In the shadow of an eight-lane freeway, a refinery and a chemical company that manufactures herbicides, a Martinez resident is hoping his new business venture will take root and thrive.

Troy McGregor has started a native plant nursery on a lot he rented on Bridgehead Road off of Mococo.

Called Garden Natives, the nursery sports row upon row of unique and appealing plants specifically chosen for their drought-resistant natures and suitability to the region.

McGregor, an Australian by birth, moved to Martinez in 2006 for love and marriage; his wife had settled here a decade ago. When he first arrived in

the Bay Area circa 1990 after a career spent in the Australian military, McGregor said he was at a loss in deciding on a new professional until he used a web-based survey to help him identify his skills and interests.

After filling out the lengthy questionnaire, the computer program isolated the answer: he should go into landscape architecture.

"It was the polar opposite of what I had been doing," said McGregor, and while he wasn't too keen on the architecture part, he was into native plants and figuring out which plants would be best for a particular design and environment. He was especially attracted to propagating and growing watershed plants and local natives. Over the years, he



PHOTO BY GRETA MART

**NATIVE GROWTH.** Troy McGregor, shown here trimming the merchandise into showcase condition as he awaits customers at his new native plant nursery.

Nursery/Page A11

## City, MUSD, Opera Co. in unison

■ Martinez Opera Contra Costa will perform Carmen this spring, in the nation's first Spanish-version production of the popular French opera.

BY GRETA MART  
Staff Reporter

Thanks to the negotiating skills of City staffer Michael Chandler and Martinez Unified Superintendent Rami Muth, the Martinez Opera Contra Costa was successful in its bid to book a spring performance at a Martinez venue, said the Opera's executive director this week.

A one-day performance of Carmen, in the nation's first Spanish-version production of the popular French opera, is planned for March 12.

Ever since the City and the District signed its 'Fee For Service and Joint Facilities Use Agreement,' a pact for \$500,000 in the summer of 2009 from the City in return for a laundry list of creative repayments, MOCC's Maria Billingsley had been seeking use of the Performing Arts Building at Alhambra High to mount a 2010 production.

An initial stipulation of the loan, the "reduction in the costs associated with renting the [Performing Arts Building (PAB)] located at Alhambra High School by local theater groups;" made it into the official resolution as "using a number of the school district's facilities at no cost for a specified time period."

However, repeated attempts to nail down a date had been rebuffed by the District, said Billingsley.

The loan agreement also forgave \$6,024 the Martinez Opera Company still owed the MUSD for its 2008 PAB rental for a Madame Butterfly performance.

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## PARTLY CLOUDY



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## CAKE

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A Marin County native, Del Bontá got her first bakery job at age 16 as a counter girl. Her penchant for ogling the staff artisans' moves as they conjured up edible magic led the owner to insist on training her on the job.

After 13 years of working for others, she decided to branch out

on her own.

Like so many who find themselves living in Martinez, it was the affordable housing that enticed her and her husband to settle in the community and locate their business here. For the first nine years she was at 720 Main Street before she moved to 712,

where customers come to gaze at the delectables in the front cases or sip espresso at several cafe tables.

Del Bontá said the best part of her job is working with newlyweds-to-be.

"The brides are so excited, I get to work hand on with them to make a perfect day. I love being a part of it," said Del Bontá. When asked about the worst part of her enterprise, she replied, "the long

hours. Often it's 14-hour days and my feet start to hurt!"

And now it's the economy. "It's impacting us hugely.

Less people are getting married and walk-in traffic is way down. Not very many people are even opting for wedding cakes."

But Del Bontá is in it for the long haul.

"Our emphasis is on look. Taste too, of course, but our designs are pretty unique," said

Del Bontá. As the company's website describes, "Karen has mastered the art of working with marzipan, white chocolate, and rolled fondant to reproduce 'edible' flowers, ribbons and bows in any shape or color, and is known for her exquisite work with molding smooth rolled icings over cakes. Her ability with freehand drawing, three-dimensional artwork and fresh flower design produces unique custom cakes..."

One regular customer, who said he enjoys coming in for a coffee and glance at the day's baked and iced edible jewels behind the counter, gave his assessment of the busy Le Gâteau Élégant team on Wednesday.

"They should have cartoon bluebirds fluttering around their heads, tying silk ribbons in their hair, that's how darn cute they are," he said.

## ELECTION

Continued from Page A1

Mercy Cabral indicated she will post the final results on the City's website immediately thereafter.

Currently, in the race for City Council, both incumbents are the winners. Of the total 21,595 ballots counted, Mike Menesini earned 5,589 votes (25.88 percent); Lara DeLaney came in second with 4,761 (22.05 percent); Kathi McLaughlin earned 5,589 (21.23 percent); Gay Gerlack

received 4,380 votes (20.28 percent) and Scott Alstad garnered 2,226 (10.31 percent).

Kathi McLaughlin said Friday evening in a phone interview that she will hold off on making an official statement until Weir has announced the certified results to make a "final, final decision."

"My thinking at this point – I spoke to Steve Weir this week

and given the expense of a recount – it's way more than I thought, more like \$6,000 – that it's close but not that close.

Everyone on my campaign team is waiting to see what the final count to make a decision. I believe we have five days for that," said McLaughlin. "I have to say that I was really impressed with the care that Weir and his staff took making sure that every vote was counted. I felt a lot more comfortable that there are safeguards in place. It doesn't seem to be worth the money [to request a

recount], whether or not I could afford it."

Asked her overall feelings about the election and its outcome, McLaughlin replied, "we came pretty close. As somebody pointed out, when you add up the Gerlack, McLaughlin and Alstad vote, more than 50 percent were essentially anti-RDA votes, and that is gratifying.

The candidate expressed concern that the newly-re-elected Council is "moving very quickly to consolidate," mentioning the recent activity on the North

Pacheco annexation and the General Plan update.

"I'm concerned they are taking on all of this during a very busy season that makes it hard for citizens to attend meetings," said McLaughlin.

Still a member of the Martinez Unified School District Board of Education for the next two years, McLaughlin said the certification will also bring a busy time for her in that capacity as the Board moves to implement Measure K.

"[The Board] reorganizes

every December at the first meeting per the Education Code, so we'll be electing new officers. I will continue to serve on the Board and I have another year as the delegate to the California School Board Association. They have an assembly twice a year and next week it's in San Francisco," said McLaughlin. "On the Board, we have 60 days after the certification to establish a citizen's oversight committee and that's what we'll be working on for the next two months."

## NURSERY

Continued from Page A1

began volunteering for the Carquinez Regional Environmental Education Center and other groups involved in restoration planting.

When he realized that the only other native plant nurseries were over two-and-a-half-hours away from Martinez, he began thinking along the lines of starting one for this area.

At his new space, which he moved into two months ago, he sells plants he has grown from seed, cuttings or those he has bought 'shovel-ready.' Until he found a retail location, his was a home-based business since 2007. He said he looked high and low for a suitable location with a landlord that was interested in his type of business; McGregor said he

found them difficult to come across. Now his office is a small trailer provided by his landlord; he put down a weed mat on the bare lot, set up a netted cover and opened for business.

McGregor said he has expanded his inventory to include native Australian plants and ones that thrive in Mediterranean climates.

"I consult on a lot of lawn tear-outs, when someone wants to replace their lawn with a native garden," said McGregor. "I help them decide on design and plant size choices. Always the first question I get is when to plant. You always want to plant in the fall because the roots have a chance to expand in the soil during the cool months so that they are focusing on root growth without stressing. Then you will have a happy blooming period in the spring."

He said he follows the

maxim, 'spring is for getting ideas, summer is for doing the prep work and fall is for planting.' McGregor added that smaller plants are always better to install as their roots aren't bound so tightly and have a better chance of penetrating the soil.

McGregor gives kudos to the folks at U.C. Santa Cruz's Arboretum, who tend the largest collection of Australian and South African natives outside those countries; he frequents their periodic plant sales and will select merchandise for his Martinez nursery. He looks for suitable, non-invasive plants and shrubs that will fit in with indigenous grasses and succulents.

As authors Brett Hall and Melinda Johnson explain in the magazine Pacific Horticulture, "each year, the Arboretum at UC Santa Cruz works closely with growers in Australia and here in California to introduce new plants

through a unique program called Koala Blooms. In this collaborative effort, many impressive Australian plant cultivars are evaluated for their beauty, durability in landscape situations, potential for invasiveness, performance in nursery conditions, and sturdiness with regard to drought, weather extremes, and soil pathogens. From all the choice plants selected and trialed, only a few are introduced each year. The program generates a small income to support the Arboretum."

He pointed to a few of his favorites, such as the Woolly Bush, a shrub that grows to six feet by four feet and "shimmers silver in the sun," banksias, a shrub with an unusual flower head; and leucadendron.

McGregor's new nursery is open Wednesdays through Fridays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. His website contains DIY guides and

a plant database. See [www.gardennatives.com](http://www.gardennatives.com) for more

information; you may also call McGregor at 925-818-4460.



PHOTO BY GRETA MART

**GREENHOUSE.** Located on Bridgehead Road near the intersection of Marina Vista and I-680, Garden Natives offers a comprehensive array of drought-tolerant and deer-resistant plants, as well as those proven to attract butterflies and hummingbirds.

## OPERA

Continued from Page A1

Usually, the MUSD charges \$100 per hour, with a four hour minimum, rental fee for the PAB. The in-kind loan repayment plan specified that from 2009 to 2012, local community groups, such as the Martinez Opera, would save an estimated \$86,400 in rental fees.

Billingsley said this week the biggest challenge in bringing an Opera production to the PAB was conflicting use.

"We were going back and forth because we were told we couldn't use the facility during the week, but it would be impossible to mount a full production without being able to go in and do tech rehearsals, set the scenery, etc," said Billingsley. "We decided to do a concert version so we minimized everything and could get in Saturday morning and moved out at the end of the day."

Carmen, a comedic opera written by Frenchman Georges Bizet, is set in Seville, Spain, but the opera has only been performed in this country in the original French or translated into English. Bizet died of a heart attack when he was 36; he didn't live to see his opera become one of the most popular and performed production in the world.

Billingsley is holding auditions on December 11 to hire the professional singers, however, local talented singers who know a little Spanish might find a role in the large chorus as she said she is looking for chorus singers.

Although Billingsley said she and the company were disappointed they were unable to secure dates for a 2010 performance, they are pleased everyone could agree on March 12. Earlier in the year, she vowed that her number one wish for the future of

the Martinez Opera Company is simply to schedule an appropriate local venue "without having to go through a tremendous amount of stress and work this uphill battle."

When discussing possible alternative Martinez venues, Billingsley said other performance venues around the City are not large enough to accommodate a full orchestra, stage and audience.

"The Campbell Theater is too small ... we have a beautiful theater in the PAB, it has enough high-tech that we can do stuff, it fits an orchestra," Billingsley explained in July after expressing frustration at what she saw as

stonewalling on the part of the District. "This opera company is not isolated from the community, we want to involve the community as much as possible and some people say we should just take it out of Martinez. I don't want to do that."

She said after Chandler stepped in to help speed up the negotiations, there was a better line of communication between the District, AHS administration and the City.

"[Chandler] is great. He was very determined to help us get some [possible performance] dates," said Billingsley.



CONTRIBUTED

**MARTINEZ OPERA.** A flier for the one-night performance of Carmen in Martinez.