Year In Review
YOUR COMMUNITY IN YOUR HANDS
January 4 - 17, 2018

A look back at local news and events in 2017. Photo by Ben Schutzer.
I like to walk a lot, I know my way around this town like it’s the back of my hand, and I love to get out on my own to run errands and explore.

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The Bay News covered a variety of stories in 2017, with employment dramas at Morro Bay City Hall, the City's sewer project and marijuana regulations post Prop. 64, topping the list of the most oft covered stories.

There were double troubles in Cayucos with the school district thinking about major changes and the fire department beginning the process to dissolve, and each will run their course in 2018.

Los Osos was relatively calm for, well, Los Osos, as the gorilla looming over everyone was finally, mostly excised in 2016 with the completion of the community sewer. As is our custom every year, The Bay News takes a look back at the top stories we covered in the 26 issues of 2017, The Bay News’ 29th year in publication. Enjoy.

— Neil Farrell, Managing Editor

January

Morro Bay’s City Manager, David Buckingham, had a whirlwind half-year starting in December 2016, when it was discovered that he was a Top-5 finalist for a like job in Whitefish, Mont., a ski resort town on the eastern side of the Rocky Mountains. He said that the hostility of the November 2016 election — and a “get rid of the city manager” campaign theme — gave him pause and he decided to look for another job to protect his family’s future.

He didn’t get the Whitefish job, and in April he made the Top-2 (out of 60 applicants) for the city manager job in Vail, Colo., which he described as a “lifetime dream” job.

He didn’t get that job either, and on May 12, he lost his Morro Bay job, turning in his resignation effective June 26. However, the City Council made it effective immediately.

That put Finance Director, Craig Schmollinger, in charge as interim city manager for a couple of months until the Council brought in Marty Lomeli, a retired veteran city government professional, who led the search for a new permanent city manager.

The Los Osos Community Services District, which has had a revolving door on its general manager position, decided to hire a firm to manage the district, and the woman who took the job knew what she was in for. “This is a tough position,” said Renee Osborne, the new GM for the District. “I grew up here and I know Los Osos has been through a lot, and I can only imagine that if you’re not from here — you could get into a bad spot, if you don’t fully understand the community. You need to know the community, so you can understand their needs.”

Osborne came here at 19 to attend Cuesta College, and works for Grace Environmental Services. She came in as the District was working out bookkeeping issues from the previous administration, catching a lot of flack from critics and trying to implement a work program designed to ease the saltwater intrusion. The CSD also asked rate payers to approve water rate hikes to pay for it all. The CSD got its rate hike, several major projects were completed and the CSD staffers got modest raises, too.

Call it the “Dreadful Dredging” experience. The plan was for Ahtna Design-build Corporation of Irvine, Calif., under a $4.37 million contract with the Army Corps of Engineers, to...
come in and remove some 240,000 cubic yards of material from the harbor entrance channel and deposit it on Morro Strand Beach.

But everything went haywire from the beginning. Dredging operations were supposed to start in January but didn’t start until February and were put on hiatus by late April, after the contractor saw delays for weather, a major equipment failure, the death of one of their men to a heart attack, and ultimately bumping up against the annual snowy plover nesting season on Morro Strand.

With nesting season upon them, the State Parks Department ended the beach disposals, forcing Ahtna Design to snake a hose all the way out through the harbor mouth and about mile south to dispose of its material in the approved offshore disposal site. Their disposal pipe plugged and during a fierce storm a 1,500-foot section of pipe broke loose and eventually washed up on the Sandspit, where it remains.

The curtain rose in Morro Bay when the By the Sea Productions was given the OK by the City Planning Commission to stage live theater in the community room at St. Peter’s By the Sea Church in Morro Bay. It was the first time a live theater troupe has set up shop in Morro Bay. The troupe was formerly the Pewter Plough Playhouse Players in Cambria but moved when they lost their lease. There were concerns expressed by a couple of neighbors about cars and noise but they’ve produced several plays and reader’s theater performances with no troubles, so it looks like they’ll be here to stay.

A Morro Bay Police officer helped welcome the first local baby born in 2017. Ofc. Riddering was on patrol Friday, Jan. 13 about 6 a.m. in the 2800 block of Birch Ave., when he heard an unexpected scream pierce the neighborhood. Ofc. Luke Riddering stopped his cruiser to investigate and traced the screams to a home where a woman was in the throes of childbirth. "Officer Riddering observed the baby’s head beginning to crown," Dep. City Manager Ikani said. "An ambulance was dispatched and the officer began assisting the mom in the interim."

Acting Police Chief, Cmdr. Jody Cox said, "As soon as the ambulance arrived, the baby girl was born into the hands of Officer Riddering."
SLO County Probation Department opened the first major expansion of the Juvenile Services Center since its construction in the early 1980’s, a $19 million project that modernized and expanded the facility to do more than simply incarcerate teen offenders. The County also opened in 2017 a new $41 million Women's Jail.

In the waning days of his presidency, President Barack Obama expanded the California Coastal National Monument, extending protections to the Piedras Blancas Historic Light Station here in SLO County. Meanwhile, after Donald Trump became President, he ordered a review of federally protected lands that included the Carrizo Plains National Monument. But while other areas were shrunk, Carrizo Plains was left alone, for now.

A large landslide on Jan. 6 brought down a hillside on Highway 41 in the S-curves. Steve Balaban, Caltrans' project engineer said at about 6 p.m. some 2,000 cubic yards of materials came down in a massive landslide that covered the roadway and stranded at least one vehicle. “That happened before the rain,” he said. “And then it started to rain.” Caltrans brought in a “Spider” excavator to knock down loose rocks and boulders in a controlled landslide. Caltrans draped the hillside with chain to knock down any rocks that want to come down this winter. The road was closed for more than a month.

The 2017, 12th Amgen Tour of California professional bike race held its Stage 3 race from a Pismo Beach start to Morro Bay finish on May 16 bringing the greatest cyclists in the world for largest professional race in the U.S. to the Central Coast again. It was the third time Pismo has hosted either a start or finish and the second for Morro Bay, which hosted a start in 2016. Alas, the Tour of California will skip entirely SLO County, due in large part to the continuing closure of Hwy 1 south of Gorda by the Mud Creek Slide.

A new permit put the Morro Bay Desalination Plant back in business after the Coastal Commission approved a new permit for the feed-water wells along the Embarcadero. First built in the early 1990s as a supplemental water source in the face of a prolonged drought, the plant on Atascadero Road has been used mainly when State Water Project deliveries have been unavailable. The plant is fully permitted to clean the groundwater from the Morro Basin and as an emergency supply only. If the City wants to turn it into a full-time treatment plant, it will need to get a new coastal development permit.

After the Cayucos Sanitary District decided to end its partnership with Morro Bay and build its own sewer treatment plant, progress in 2017 was at break-neck speed, at least by government standards. And by end of the year, the CSD had permits in hand for a plant on ranchland on Toro Creek Road, and plans to break ground in February 2018, with a 14-18-month construction period. The pace of the CSD's project has far out-paced Morro Bay’s efforts.

For nearly 60 years it’s been a fixture on the Morro Bay Waterfront but the end is in sight for the Morro
Bay Aquarium, as the lease is slated to expire in September 2018. The City has been working with Central Coast Aquarium of Avila Beach (CCA) on developing a new aquarium for several years now, and while the non-profit organization had a major breakthrough when it was pre-qualified for a $20 million USDA loan, it had to complete a feasibility study first.

In the end it came down to 200 pounds of cow cod. That’s how close the make-or-break point came for Tiffany and Capt. Rob Sietz, of the CFV South Bay, who for some 5 years were the only local trawl fishing boat to lease from the Morro Bay Community Quota Fund’s share of the overall allowable take of the U.S. West Coast Groundfish Fishery.

The Sietz’ pulled up stakes and returned to Astoria, Ore., and the Community Quota Fund went in search of a new boat to relocate here and land their fish on local docks. In May they announced that Capt. Kyle Pemberton of Half Moon Bay agreed to move his operation to Morro Bay in summer and work the Quota Fund’s holdings in the fishery. Capt. Pemberton worked the summer and fall and has since motored off to fish Dungeness crab, and is expected to come back after crab season and continue to bring the community fresh local seafood.

Applications are currently being accepted to fill current and upcoming 2018 vacancies on the following Commissions and Advisory Boards: Tourism Business Improvement District (TBID) Advisory Board (1), Recreation & Parks Commission (2), and Harbor Advisory Board (2).

Applications for these positions may be obtained at City Hall, 595 Harbor Street, or on-line at www.morrobayca.gov under the “Your Government” tab. If you have any questions, please call 772-6205 during normal business hours.

The closing date for submitting applications is Thursday, January 4, 2018, at 5:00pm. Interviews are scheduled to take place on January 10, 2018. Applicants should be present at the interviews in order to be considered by the City Council.

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April

County Supervisors unanimously agreed to allocate money to get the ball rolling on fixing and re-opening the Cayucos Vet’s Hall. In May 2016 major structural problems were discovered in the circa 1870s building and it was closed for safety reasons. Last April, Supervisors hired Studio Design Group Architects, Inc., of San Luis Obispo, for Phase 1 of what’s officially called the “Cayucos Veterans Hall Rehabilitation Project,” by County Public Works. There’s been no word on when the Vet’s Hall, the real heart of the community, might reopen.

Hwy 1 had more than its share of problems in 2017, starting in January-February with the collapse of the Pfeiffer Canyon Bridge and a massive landslide that buried the roadway and cut off Big Sur, was followed up with the even huger Mud Creek Slide south of Gorda. The roadway was closed most all of 2017, and will continue to be closed to through traffic perhaps throughout 2018. Caltrans replaced the bridge and cleared one slide area, but the Mud Creek Slide keeps the roadway closed and 5 million motorists a year from California’s most scenic and perhaps most famous stretch of highway. The closures have hit local tourism businesses hard and set tourism promotion agencies, like the Morro Bay Tourism Department, the County Tourism Marketing District and others working hard to try and bring folks to the area.

Morro Bay reached into the vaunted LAPD for just the 11th police chief in more than 30 years, with more than 300 total years of experience between them. Chief Larry Todd, and then Cmdr. Jody Cox, who took over for several months after Chief Todd left (retired police can only work so many hours under the terms of their retirements).

Chief Allen brings a wealth of experience to the role of police chief in Pacific Grove. Christey had been replaced by Interim Chief Larry Todd, and then Cmdr. Jody Cox, who took over for several months after Chief Todd left (retired police can only work so many hours under the terms of their retirements).

Chief Allen brings a wealth of experience in all phases of police work, and takes on the role with veteran officers, with more than 300 total years of experience between them.

May

Dissention was in the air when the Morro Bay City Council got the sobering news that its $167 million new sewer plant and water recycling facility would cost a single family home using just 500 gallons of water, more than $240 a month for 30 years (a total of about $88,000). That was apparently just too costly to continue down this path, so the council put the brakes on the project, asked for a peer review of the work so far and the cost estimates. That study was critical of the cost estimates, the choice of technology and choice of the so-called “South Bay Site.” The project team came back with an analysis of three potential projects at three different sites, including an old cement plant on Atascadero Road, which came in cheapest and easiest to do. Nevertheless, the Council, after first paring down the project, and putting recycling component into Phase 2, lowering the costs to $150 million (including contingencies), which continues to draw opposition, in particular from a new citizen’s group, Citizens for Affordable Living or CAL.

A Cambria woman, Elizabeth Edith Shaw, 68, was arrested for suspicion of embezzlement, in a case deemed “Troubling” by the District Attorney. According to Dep. D.A. Lee Cunningham (who retired at the end of the year), D.A. investigators and Sheriff’s detectives arrested Shaw for allegedly embezzling more than $1 million over a 12-year span from her former employer, Winsor Const., of Bay Area and was eventually replaced in November by County Public Works Director, Wade Horton.

June

During the rainiest winter in many years, Hwy 1 continued to take a beating when the Mud Creek Slide buried Hwy
Marijuana was on a lot of people’s minds in 2017, as the State, cities and counties began the process of coming up with regulations after passage of Proposition 64 in November 2016, which legalized the use and cultivation of, and possession of small amounts of marijuana by those 21-over. The City of Morro Bay spent much of the year on a marijuana ordinance, and the ordinance that the Council finally passed in November, allows just two medical-only dispensaries, and puts down onerous restrictions on homegrown gardens of weeden. The Council called it a good first step, critics called it out of touch with the industry and the spirit of Prop. 64. Nothing will happen until July 2018, when the council will take applications for the two dispensary licenses. And the Council also plans to put a taxation measure on the ballot sometime in 2018, as does SLO County, which passed an even more restrictive ordinance that prohibits any pot stores from opening in the unincorporated towns.
July

A Los Osos man who suffers from dementia wandered away from his home on June 29, but was found alive the next day by Sheriffs searchers after an overnight search. The 69-year-old man wandered away from his home in the 2900 block of Clark Valley Rd., about 2 p.m. Thursday, June 29 and was reported missing at 9:10 p.m. that night. The report prompted a full search and rescue effort to be launched by the Sheriffs Department, which found him alive, but suffering from dehydration and exposure.

Morro Bay's beleaguered sewer project got a shot in the arm when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced the City had been picked to apply for a big, low-interest loan directed at innovative infrastructure projects.

The EPA said Morro Bay was invited “to apply for an $82 million Water Infrastructure Finance and Innovation Act [WIFIA] loan. The City of Morro Bay submitted a letter of interest to EPA in April 2017 and was selected from a group of projects that represent large and small communities from across the United States.” Of course the offer comes with a catch — namely the City has to be innovative which could mean recycling the wastewater (in an undetermined method at an unknown cost). Seeing the low interest loan offer as too good to pass up, the Council in the fall voted to stick with the South Bay Site at a new reduced cost estimate of $150 million (down from $167 Million) and to move forward quickly to ensure we get the loan.

City Hall shake-ups continued, when the Finance Director, Craig Schmollinger, resigned after just over a year in Morro Bay. His last day was Aug. 11. Schmollinger told The Bay News that he had some family issues that he must help with and decided to return to the San Diego Area, where he is originally from.

According to records kept by the Morro Bay Fire Department, the town got a total of 27.18 inches of rain from October 2016 through the end of April (plus a trace of rain that fell in early May), this after some 5 years of drought, touted as the worst in the State’s history. The rainy season ran from July 2016 to the end of June 2017, which means we are now in a new rain year.

Morro Bay’s total was some 11.18 inches more rain than the 16-inches that is considered normal rainfall, but below the 30-inches mark, when rainfall tends to cause movement on the local hills. According to PG&E meteorologist and newspaper columnist, John Lindsay, Baywood Park received 26.36 inches of rain.

August

A commercial fishing boat rests on the shore of “Abalones,” an obscure coastal trail and secluded beach off the north end of Ocean Avenue in Cayucos, stuck in the sand and the bureaucracy after running aground in an early morning fog.

The CFV “Point Estero,” ran aground in the early morning of Thursday, July 28, when equipment failure and a p
soup fog set them off course while heading home with a boatload of slime eels. With various government agencies—Coast Guard, State Parks, Fish & Wildlife Oil Spill Response Team—took over; she could not be pulled off the beach. She sits there still, a gaping hole in the back deck and a hold filled with seawater. The State Lands Commission now owns the Point Estero, which they estimate will cost some $176,000 to salvage.

A project to bring a maritime museum to Morro Bay, while in the works for two decades, is finally shaping up and expects to open a small exhibit center on Front Street in February. The project has always stuck around but over the past few years, it’s really taken off. First the historic tugboat Alma was moved over, taking her place alongside the DSRV Avalon, and a 33-foot Coast Guard surf rollover boat.
Morro Bay Fire Department welcomed a new reserve firefighter to its ranks and new full time fire marshal, replacing long-time Fire Marshal, Tom Prowse, who had to give up a position he's held for about 16 years and more than 40 total years in the fire service. Fire Chief Steve Knuckles on Aug. 1 swore in new reservist, Peter Rivera and new Fire Marshal, Matt Vierra.

The suspicious death of a Bakersfield man and the odd manner in which his body was discovered in Cayucos provided one of the more bizarre stories of the year.

According to Sheriff's spokesman, Tony Cipolla, at about 2:30 p.m. Tuesday, Aug. 15, deputies on routine patrol came across a white Jeep Cherokee parked on the wrong side of the street with people sitting inside. They stopped to investigate.

“Deputies made contact with the occupants of the vehicle,” Cipolla said, “and noticed a strong odor coming from the back of the vehicle. Upon further investigation, a body was discovered in the back cargo area of the SUV.”

On Aug. 17, the Coroner’s Office identified the dead man as Donald Eugene Cunningham, 83 and a transient from Bakersfield. The man, 59, and woman, 50, were also transients from Bakersfield, and the girl was their 13-year-old daughter. It was revealed that Cunningham died in Bakersfield and the couple was taking him to the coast for “burial.” In the end, the couple had their charges reduced and the teenager was placed in foster care.

**September**

A popular young man’s death Aug. 18 while surfing off Moonstone Beach in Cambria sent shock waves of grief across the North Coast and down to Venice Beach.

Liam Alexander Taylor, 19, also known as “Skinny” and “Red” died at Moonstone, which is notorious for large waves over shallow water. Though fellow surfers pulled him from the water, he died at the hospital from a devastating head wound. He is survived in Cambria by his mother Shelley Triggs and little brother Koa, and in Venice Beach by his father Pat Taylor and stepmother Marjorie Weitzman Taylor. Skinny was a popular lifeguard, skater and surfer both in SLO County and Southern California and also worked with the County’s Junior Lifeguard Program in Cayucos, where he was both a friend and mentor to many local youngsters.

Volunteers flocking to Houston to help rescue thousands of stranded residents in the wake of Hurricane Harvey, were joined by one of Morro Bay’s harbor patrolmen. Dana Stein volunteered with the surf rescue training company, K38 Rescue International, taking vacation time off to help with the rescue efforts in what’s been called a once-in-800-years storm. When he returned to Morro Bay, Stein described his experience as, “Crazy.”

“We drove day and night to get there,” Stein said. “We had four new Kawasaki jet skis that were donated to the K38 Program” for the crew of a dozen volunteers, including K38 founder and team leader, Shawn Alladio.

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The Cayucos Elementary School District held a town hall meeting in late September to re-open discussions on how to proceed with the issue of where Cayucos’ high school aged kids will and should attend high school.

The issue has been one the community has struggled with for many years, as under the current setup of school districts, Cayucos kids are supposed to attend Coast Union High in Cambria, but that hasn’t been the preferred option for some time.

A survey by the school district could only identify eight Cayucos kids going to Coast Union High. Most Cayucos teens — of which there are about 25 a year graduating 8th grade — attend Morro Bay High, which is not in the same school district and presents a problem, because the San Luis Coastal School District doesn’t get property taxes to cover those kids.

In December, a San Luis Coastal District ad hoc committee, looking into ways to cover an expected $8.9 million hole in the budget that will come with the closure of Diablo Canyon, recommended charging those students to attend the district schools, some $400,000 a year. No decision has been made, but the recommendation indicates the district’s accommodating policy might change.

It’s been struggling for several years with two nagging problems, and now it appears the moment of truth is at hand for the Cayucos Fire Department and the community will in 2018 face losing local control over its fire department to County Fire, which itself is run under contract by Cal Fire.

Cayucos Fire District Director, Steve Beightler said the issue boils down to two basic problems — money and personnel. As in, they don’t collect enough money through a special fire tax on property to properly staff and equip the department (A ballot measure to greatly increase those fees failed at the polls); and they’ve had trouble finding acceptable candidates for the “volunteer” department, which is really made up of reserve firefighters. The Local Agency Formation Commission should decide this spring what will become of the Cayucos Fire District and the fire department.
October

Calling it a matter of risk management, the Morro Bay City Council settled on the South Bay Site for its new wastewater treatment plant and recycling facility. On a double meeting day over some 6 total hours, the Council heard from business leaders, activist residents, environmental groups, and got a persuasive argument from the project staff and consultants. In the end, the Council chose the South Bay Site, which was the most expensive site to date of the many potential sites seriously considered, but the site with the least resistance.

Local high school students and residents celebrated an historic day on Oct. 6, with the grand opening of the new swimming pool and aquatics facility at Morro Bay High School.

With hundreds of citizens and kids on hand, school officials thanked the voters for approving Measure D in 2014, which paid for this new pool, as well as remodeled classrooms, tennis courts, a new all weather track (a project that broke ground in December), a new auto shop, and a new science and technology center (begun Dec. 21 for $3.4 million, contractor is ACME Const., Inc.) — just at MBHS.

“Our adventure of change and progress is just beginning,” said MBHS Principal Kyle Pruitt. School Superintendent Dr. Eric Prater summed it up for everyone. “Isn’t this pool absolutely beautiful!?” he said to a round of raucous applause.

Morro Bay High’s Audrey McClish won her third straight Los Padres League Cross Country Championship Nov. 1, and the Girls’ Varsity Team ran away with the LPL Championship for the first time since 2011, with all five scoring runners making either First or Second Team All-LPL.

A junior, McClish proved once again to be the best in the LPL. Emily Donahue of Santa Ynez was second and Morro Bay’s Analise Dempsey was third. The team qualified for the CIF Div. 4 Southern Section Meet and finished sixth in their Prelims heat and qualified for the Div. 4 Finals where they finished 12th out of 24 teams, the best finish for the girls team since 2011. McClish was eighth overall, earned All-CIF honors and qualified for the State Meet as an individual, where she finished 16th in Div. 4, posting the third fastest time ever for a Morro Bay High girl runner.

As for the team, McClish and Dempsey were First Team All-LPL, and Adrienne Frere, Mailani McKelvey, and Scout Biddleman — the teams only senior — made Second Team All-LPL.

Bank of America announced to its customers that it would close the Morro Bay branch after nearly 70 years in business locally. Customers of the branch, located at 390 Morro Bay Blvd., were notified by mail that the branch would close on Feb. 6, 2018. B of A has had a presence in Morro Bay since 1949. The impending closure raises interesting possibilities with regards to its possible reuse or redevelopment. The bank building is zoned commercial, however, the rear parking lot is R-4, which means nearly anything can be built on it. At least one local motel owner has expressed interest in the property for a new motel.

County Supervisors searched far and wide but ultimately decided to hire someone down the hall as the new County Administrative Officer. Supervisors promoted Public Works Director, Wade Horton, to the CAO job, replacing Dan Buckshi who left for Walnut Creek. Horton, who came to the County from the City of SLO, got a base salary of $223,900 with benefits — medical insurance, retirement and more — totaling $107,800, according to the County Administrative Office.

The Morro Bay City Council hired a new city manager, Scott Collins, and a new finance director, Jennifer Callaway Schrantz, within a week of each other. Both started in the first week of November.

The Cayucos Fire Department’s troubles went from smoldering to a flare up, after the Fire District Board found out they don’t have enough qualified people to respond to fire calls every day.

What it meant was that on days when they didn’t have a fire engineer on duty they would be unable to respond to fire calls and would have to rely on Cal Fire and Morro Bay Fire for help, according to Cayucos Fire District Board Member Steve Beightler. Their interim fire chief told the Board that they don’t have enough “operators” to cover the city full time and that it would probably be sometime in mid-November before they could get more people hired and up to speed. The department’s medical aid capabilities were not affected.

Sheriff Ian Parkinson hired Dr. Joyce M. Carter, MD, as the County’s first ever, full-time forensic pathologist, coming to the Central Coast from her previous job as chief medical examiner of Harris County, Texas. That’s the greater Houston Area, which was in the after-throes of being ravaged by Hurricane Harvey was as Dr. Carter started work in SLO County on Sept. 11. She took over for the County’s embattled former, contract, medical examiner, Dr. Gary Walter, who had an extremely tough year or so after he was involved in a DUI collision while en route to the County Morgue to conduct an autopsy.

November

A somewhat contrite County budget office admitted to making a nearly $10 million mistake in the County’s revenue projections for next fiscal year that take the budget from black to red ink. County officials said instead of an estimated $3 million to $5 million surplus, their corrected figures estimate a $2.8 million to $4.8 million deficit in FY 2018-19; at the worst case scenario, that means a $9.8 million difference.

Morro Bay will once again venture into the world of medical marijuana after the City Council approved an ordinance that would allow two medical pot dispensaries to open in specific commercial zones in the city. The lengthy ordinance (No. 612 of the muni code) restricts the way a person can grow his or her allowed six plants (muni code) restricts the way a person can grow his or her allowed six plants under Proposition 64, passed in November 2016, the law that legalized the evil weed beyond its medical uses and legalized it to simply party with. Morro Bay becomes just the second local city so far to allow dispensaries, though the others had OK’d medicinal weed delivery services. It’s Morro Bay’s second foray into the medical cannabis world, and the first since the 2006 raid of the previous dispensary to open here, Compassionate Caregivers.
December

The Morro Bay City Council let one of the major consultant contracts — for $1.35 million to Water Works Engineering Design Services — in its efforts to build a new sewer treatment plant, one that residents cautioned against but the Council decided unanimously was a necessary next step to keep the project moving. Water Works will design the facilities needed to convey raw sewage from the current Atascadero Road plant out to the new plant site at the terminus of South Bay Boulevard. Critics chided the City Council for moving too soon, when they should have first found out if the Coastal Commission was going to allow any of the new facilities to be built west of Hwy 1. Which has apparently become the dividing line of what is in danger from coastal hazards and what is safe.

County Health Agency Director, Jeff Hamm, turned in his retirement papers effective in April. “It has been my great honor to serve the people of San Luis Obispo County for 36 years and lead the Health Agency for 11 years,” Hamm said in a statement, “but I’m looking forward to retirement and the next phase of my life. Our community is facing a growing number of health care system challenges and I agree with the Board that the Health Agency needs a fresh perspective to address them.” Among the nagging issues in 2017 concerned the County’s mental health services, particularly with regards to men and women who are incarcerated in the County Jails.

The Los Osos CSD Board approved setting up a system to manage the so-called, “Los Osos Low Income Assistance Fund,” some $169,000 provided by the National Estuary Program. Meanwhile, the County is also working on an enforcement program for the more than 100 that simply haven’t done anything. “As of October 2017, reads the report from County Deputy Public Works Director, Mark Hutchinson, “approximately 95-percent of the required connections have been made, leaving 245 properties unconnected. Of that number, 74 are awaiting connection through the County’s low-income connection program and 55 properties have active permits. Subtracting leaves 116 properties as the focus of this action [2.8% of required connections].” The folks who have done nothing can expect to start hearing from the County Code Enforcement Office sometime in the spring, after Supervisors approve the enforcement plan.

Also on the Los Osos sewer front, residents struggling with paying their share of the project will get some help after County Supervisors approved a $7.5 million assistance program authorized by the State Legislature. The “Low-Income User Fee Offset Program,” which was authorized under Assembly Bill 1125, introduced by former Assemblyman, Katcho Achadjian will help people with paying their monthly bills.

Morro Bay City Administrators had a mea culpa moment, admitting that a sizable mistake was made in accounting for funds for the sewer fund. “Reports provided to Council that was added to the council agenda, said, “Reports provided to Council and the public in July 2017 regarding cash balance for the sewer fund were overstated. In July 2017, the reported balance of the projected FY 2016/17 year-end cash balance was estimated to be $8.3 million, a cumulative overstatement amount of $2.6 million. This amount is balanced against other funds for the sewer fund.”
The Coast News takes a look back at 2017, a year where public access piers were closed for repairs in two beach towns, the drought lessened, public art was front and center, some city leaders retired while others took to the helm, and recreational marijuana was legalized.

January

January saw the implementation of new traffic laws aimed at keeping Californians safer. One of the most prominent was Assembly Bill 1785, mandating drivers keep wireless electronic devices mounted in vehicles while in use and to not require more than a few finger taps or swipes to interact with at a time. The law prohibits holding a cell phone while talking on the speaker function and using the palm or wrist on the wheel.

More than two years after it closed, the Avila Beach Pier remained closed to the public throughout 2017. The Port San Luis Harbor District, which received ownership of the Pier in 1984, is exploring fundraising options to rehabilitate or replace the iconic structure.

Anita Shower was named the Pismo Beach Chamber of Commerce Person of the Year. Shower not only enjoys being active in the community, she feels that it is a responsibility. “Service was always a big deal especially in high school,” said Shower. “We had an advisor who believed that you were on this Earth to serve.”

The Kon Tiki Inn was chosen the Pismo Beach Chamber of Commerce Business of the Year. In her speech during the awards ceremony, presenter Effie McDermott recognized the establishment for its continued success.

The Arroyo Grande Community Hospital unveiled what they’re calling a “Legacy Garden” in the space between the facility’s main entrance and their Emergency Room. A ceremony was held Jan. 26, for the project, which offers a public art exhibit, pavilion and benches recognizing the names of donors. Montisa Phelan Lopez, the hospital’s vice president of philanthropy, said they were now $3.5 million into an initiative to raise $5 million for a remodeled and expanded ER, new quarters for their MRI and a space for “acute rehabilitation.” The facilities for physical rehabilitation would not only aid patients of the hospital’s noted work in joint replacement but also those recovering from strokes and injuries associated with aging.
The District Attorney’s Office filed two felony charges against former Grover Beach police officer Alex Paul Geiger alleging that he failed to maintain control of a dangerous animal on December 13, 2016 that led to the death of 64-year-old David W. Fear and serious bodily injury to 86-year-old Betty J. Long.

Following heavy rains, a variety of mushrooms thrive in our local oak forests. They magically appear from one day until the next, some as small as a dime and many others the size of your hand or, as in this case, hands. Our oaks are a perfect home for the Jack-O’Lantern Mushroom. Sometimes mistaken for the edible Chanterelle Mushroom, the Jack-O’Lantern Mushroom, while not lethal, is poisonous and will produce hallucinations.

Arroyo Grande Mayor Jim was investigated for an alleged Brown Act violation in which he was accused of passing along closed session information related to his role on the South County Sanitation District. He was ultimately cleared of the allegations in an independent investigation.

Avila beach unveiled its first-ever public art exhibit, celebrating two lifeguard towers painted with murals. “Port San Luis Harbor District is thrilled to have this artwork on our lifeguard towers,” said Andrea Lueker, harbor manager, noting she had started her lifeguard career on the Central Coast. “It’s an honor not only to have the artwork there, but to honor the profession of lifeguarding.” Tower 1 tells the story of Avila’s colorful past. Artist Colleen Gnos studied old photos loaned out from past residents, delved into people’s memories and reached into her own family’s history to express the many changes that the community has been through over the years.

The new head football coach at Arroyo Grande High School is a familiar face to most players and fans of the Eagles. Michael Hartman, 39, took over as head football coach for Tom Goossen, who retired after coaching for 43 years, 10 of which were as head coach. “They made a great decision,” Goossen said about hiring Hartman. “Mike is hard working, dedicated, great with kids, and positive for our school.” Hartman has coached at Arroyo Grande High School for the past 5 years serving as the assistant football coach. Because he has been a part of the Eagles’ staff, Hartman is hoping for an easy adjustment for the team.

Folks in several parts of South County went without power during a lineup of storms that took out trees and power lines. The good news was that Lopez Lake was reported at 50% full on Feb. 20. More rain was expected that weekend.

The Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area (SVRA) closed temporarily due to weather and reservations were canceled through Feb. 20. Recent storm activity, hazardous Arroyo Grande Creek conditions, and anticipated storms led to the closure, according to a news release from the Oceano Dunes District. The Oso Flaco Lake Natural Area in the SVRA and the North Beach Campground also closed for a time. Park access and additional closures will be elevated based upon protection of resources and concerns for public safety.
March

Pismo Beach closed its famed pier for a $8.78 million renovation, which is expected to be complete by 2019. “Our pier, while heavily used, is tired and damaged,” said City Manager Jim Lewis. “The sections that are 93-years-old are certainly showing their age. Had we not moved forward with this project today our pier would continue to deteriorate and be closed during almost any storm event, during any period of high swell, and we would be unable to use it for events.” The pier consists of:
- 382 timber piles,
- 115 steel piles,
- A 60,100 square foot deck with 2,840 ft. of guard railing,
- A cantilevered fishing deck,
- And four diamond pedestrian decks, along with utility and trunk lines, some of which normally support the bait shack and an information kiosk.

The anticipated multi-million-dollar sale of Camp Arroyo Grande fell through, leaving the future of the 132-year-old Methodist Camp property and its breathtaking views overlooking the Village of Arroyo Grande in question. The 29-acre property was put up for sale last year by the California-Pacific Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church (Cal-Pac).

For three years staff at Lopez Continuation High School in Arroyo Grande have been, if not taking the edge off that transition, at least giving students the tools to cope with life after high school. Through their Capstone program the traditional march towards graduation is augmented with a focus on actual life skills and the beginning of an exploration of careers. The program, scheduled out for a two-year span, but sometimes compressed for students who transfer into the school with a deadline looming, has significantly increased graduation rates, said Principal Jennifer Bowen. On March 9 students came into a classroom one by one to face a panel of their teachers, and community members who volunteer their time, to hear the student’s presentations on what they’d learned.

Matthew Ashton was sworn in as the new Chief Harbor Patrol officer. Ashton brings 13 years of experience on the water to the lead position. He started his career in the United States Coast Guard (USCG), upon leaving active duty his rank was assistant engineering petty officer. He was looking into career options and leaning toward the military when he decided to go with the Coast Guard. Ashton said he felt that the skills learned in the USCG would transfer easier to civilian life. He spent 8 years of active duty and was last stationed in Morro Bay. After leaving active, duty Ashton was offered a position on the San Luis Harbor Patrol. He is still a USCG reservist.
April

Arroyo Grande High School won a countywide track meet in May. Although most events are individual efforts, their points added up to a big win at the 43rd Annual Elks San Luis Obispo County Track Meet at Cuesta College. AGHS finished first in the team scoring in both the boys and girls competitions; Paso Robles was second, and SLO HS third.

The 2nd Annual Arroyo Grande Spring Fun and Family Tea Party was held at the Women’s Center. Attendees enjoyed finger sandwiches, tea, cookies, pies, and entertainment including face painters and appearances by the Easter Bunny.

Officials from Pacific Gas & Electric and the Economic Vitality Corporation began making the rounds to community groups to discuss the impact of the impending closure of the Diablo Nuclear Power Plant in 2025. Mike Manchak, CEO of the EVC, said the Diablo closure could exacerbate economic challenges in the County, including housing and tax revenue. The EVC plans to have proposals from firms capable of performing the study reviewed by late April. The actual study would come some time in the summer with the next step being a second round of proposals to develop a strategy.

The Clark Center for the Performing Arts and Lucia Mar School District unveiled the statue ‘Rehearsal’ on March 27 in front of the Clark Center in Arroyo Grande.

The ceremony honored artist Nell Bannister Scruggs as well as her family, the donors who commissioned the statue, Don and Teri Ernst. Scruggs is a native of Asheville, North Carolina, with work in galleries on the East Coast, but her local “larger than life” installations include the ‘Oh Great Spirit’ statue at the corner of Prado and South Higuera in the City of San Luis Obispo.

The City of Arroyo Grande got ready for a new city manager to start May 1, marking their fourth in as many years, depending if one counts interims and duplicates. James A. Bergman, an Arroyo Grande resident, past city employee and current head of the SLO County Planning and Building Department, was selected for the job officially March 28 at the city council meeting. Bergman was previously planning manager for the city but left for a higher position in California’s “North Bay” City of Windsor in Sonoma County before moving ‘closer to home’ to return for another promotion in SLO County.
The Pismo Beach Pier is for sale, at least pieces of it. The City of Pismo Beach is selling 60,000 square feet of salvaged wood from the pier in an effort to raise funds for the structure’s rehabilitation, as well as to share a bit of history for those interested. After several inquiries from citizens concerning what the city planned on doing with the removed wood, officials decided to make the pieces available for purchase. Ben Fine, director of public works and city engineer for Pismo Beach, said that there is no official estimate on the amount of money the fundraiser may yield, but half a million would be a pleasing result.

The Arroyo Grande Police Department investigated a shooting that occurred on the 1400 block of El Camino Real. Police responded to what was reported as an assault shortly after 9 a.m. on April 13. “When officers arrived they found a victim with a single gunshot wound to his abdomen,” said Cmdr. Mike Martinez. The victim was transported to the emergency room at Sierra Vista where he underwent surgery. At this time the victim’s name has not been released.

“The suspects involved in this had fled the area, so we developed a process to try to search the area,” Martinez said. California Highway Patrol air support, along with K-9 Units, were deployed during the search. None of the suspects have been identified or apprehended at this time. Investigators are unsure of how many people were involved.

Progress on a decades old community dream to connect the City of San Luis Obispo’s bike route network to the Avila Beach Bob Jones Trail—and by extension to bike corridors in Shell Beach and Pismo Beach—got a bit closer May 9. Over the last several years that progress has been measured in bureaucratic hurdles overcome inside County government; but a major physical link at the border of the City of San Luis Obispo was finished in 2014 with a City-to-Sea Bike Trail extension. That project installed a bridge completing the Class 1 bikeway from Prado Road and the Water Resource Reclamation Facility to Los Osos Valley Road and with the addition of repainted bike lanes at the LOVR / Highway 101 interchange last year the links are in place for City commuters.

Some of the most interesting models from the early years of motoring made their way up the coast to Arroyo Grande on a trip from Santa Maria on May 4. Photographer Herb Shoebridge caught up with the group of pre-1916 horseless carriages at a stop over in the Village of Arroyo Grande, while members of the group had lunch and toured the South County Historical Society buildings in Heritage Square.
Tourists’ love of the Pismo Pier might have given Mayor Ed Waage quite the thrill when discussing the $7.6 million in contracts to rebuild the core of City’s economic engine in March, but that love for a landmark won’t pay next year’s bills. The 2018 proposed budget came up $3.1 million short when discussed at the City Council’s special budget meeting on May 18. That’s a total of $35.8 million in revenues and $38.9 million in outgoing expenses.

After years in the works, a new public art installation, designed with the whole world in mind, graces the on-campus entrance to Arroyo Grande High School. The 11-foot-tall sculpture, “Arboring Our Root of Diversity,” represents the globe in place of the branches that would crown an oak tree. The tree’s roots wrap around a pedestal emblazoned with the values the artists hope students will embrace, Unity while maintaining Individuality, Diversity and more.

June

County animal control officers investigated a case of animal abuse involving pet snakes, apparently left to die in a storage unit. According to Dr. Eric Anderson, the head of County Animal Services, they responded May 24 to a report of snakes found in a storage unit of a facility on Grand Avenue in Arroyo Grande. “Upon arrival,” Dr. Anderson said in a news release, “officers found 42 ball pythons in plastic storage containers stacked within one of the facility’s storage units. Of the snakes recovered by the officers, 22 were dead and in various stages of decomposition.”

KYXZ-LP “Excellent Radio” has had a rebirth on the dial at 107.9 FM nearly 20 years after the former “gorilla” station went off the air. Low watt broadcasters reaching a radius of approximately 3.5 miles have a long history of serving small communities with local voices and culture, but in 1978 the Federal Communications Commission started cracking down on an increasingly crowded dial. Not everyone who found themselves operating an unsanctioned station chose to shutdown however, giving rise to so called pirate or gorilla radio. In the year 2000 the FCC backpedalled, recognizing the value of local broadcasts, but the licenses weren’t exactly easy to come by.

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Local Boy Scout volunteers were honored for their service at the Camino Real District recognition dinner held in San Luis Obispo. Over 70 scouts and scouters were on hand to thank those “who have been of exemplary service to the scouting youth in our area.” The “District Award of Merit” — the highest award that a Scout District can present to a local volunteer leader — was given to Nate Maas and Jarret Prichard. Maas was a long time scoutmaster of Troop 308 and Prichard was cub master of Pack 13 and is now scoutmaster of Troop 489. Other award winners were: Jessica Lorance (Woodbadge beads and Rookie Leader of the Year); Tamie Johns (Volunteer of the Year); Austin Werland (Boy Scout of the Year); Lucas Alley (Rookie Boy Scout of the Year); Kevin Farage and Brian Hall (Boy Scout Leaders of the Year); Ian Campbell (Rookie Cub master of the Year); and Rubin Ruiz (Committee Member of the Year).

A local softball league that’s been a refuge for girls age 6 to 18 for nearly a decade is looking for a new home field. Tim Holt, manager of the nonprofit High Tide and Rip Tide Softball club based out of Pismo Beach, said they were saddened and disappointed to be leaving the field adjoining Arroyo Grande’s Hope Church on Oak Park Boulevard. That’s not least because he and volunteers spent countless hours building up a practice facility for the girls there, not to mention all the materials. For the moment the league’s teams are having practice sessions split between Nipomo High School and Grover Elementary.

A bit of history rolled through town during the annual Vintage Trailer Rally held at the Pismo Coast Village RV Resort. The look at the past draws crowds during the open house open to the public.

The Bob Jones trailhead, which sits nestled next to the 101, received an additional camera to aid in the fight against crime. The first camera was installed about a month ago, and though it has caught images of suspects there were still areas that failed to be in its range. The new camera will hopefully make up the difference. “The first one can’t do the complete job, but you can kind of get a good overall view,” Commander Jim Voge of the San Luis Obispo Sheriff Department, “but there are some blind spots, so we wanted to place a second one.” The cameras are digital recorders and can be accessed remotely via a computer, tablet or smart phone. The parking lot, located on Ontario Road next to the Avila Beach Dr. Highway 101 exit, has been host to a series of “smash and grab” burglaries; about three or four a month. Perpetrators shatter windows of parked cars and pilfer their belongings. Voge said that there are several reasons why more of these types of crimes occur at this particular parking lot. “Bob Jones is kind of like a perfect storm for criminals,” he said, “because they can get down there quickly because of the highway and just leave there quickly too.”
July

After four years on the job, Arroyo Grande High School Principal Conan Bowers returned to teaching elementary school, he told staff and the Lucia Mar Unified School District Board in mid-July. The Board held a special meeting July 18 to appoint a replacement, after an abbreviated internal search process. Dan Neff was named as the new Principal of Arroyo Grande High School set to take over when students return from summer break.

CowParade San Luis Obispo County raised over a quarter million dollars for charity, the organizers announced in July. The public art and charity event, held from September 2016 through May 2017, raised $250,653 for more than 40 local nonprofits, “making the campaign an enormous success as both a cultural milestone and a public service,” according to a news release. CowParade SLO County started with 101 plain white fiberglass cow sculptures. Each was adopted by a sponsoring business or agency and decorated by an artist or team of artists using everything from simple paints to mosaics and even a few complete reconstructions of the original sculpture (going from four legs to standing on two legs).

Just as the planners had hoped when they “broke ground” on the Pismo Pier refurbishment back in March, the “First Diamond” of the structure was ready to go for Independence Day. Although open to a select few for a day - as the platform for the $25 a ticket VIP viewing section for the evening fireworks display and the Pismo Beach Police Command Post—the Pier now remains closed as the entrance to a construction site.

If visitors or City of Pismo Beach workers find certain sections of the Dinosaur Caves Park or sidewalks and paths of Shell Beach particularly spotless this week, there’s one group of locals to thank. After an hour of scouring their neighborhoods, most of the 30 folks participating reconvened with their “finds” at the relatively new frozen yogurt shop on the strip, JOY, where some of the delicacies are named for the dogs that walk by with their people every day.
August brought closure to the family of Pfc. George Bernard Murray, a soldier lost in battle 74 years ago. Murray was laid to rest shortly before noon on Aug. 18 at the Arroyo Grande Cemetery. The ceremony featured honor guards from throughout the Central Coast, veterans of all ages and service branches, a flyover of World War II vintage aircraft and at least 80 flag bearers. Murray was killed just two weeks after his 20th birthday in one of the bloodiest battles of the Pacific Campaign, fighting to secure the tiny island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll.

City of Arroyo Grande City Manager Jim Bergman recommended the appointment of Police Department Commander Beau D. Pryor as the City’s new Chief of Police. Cmdr. Pryor has been a Police Officer for the City of Arroyo Grande for the past 23 years. Widely seen as former Chief Steven Annibali’s protégé, Cmdr. Pryor spent years in a wide variety of department roles.

The Central Coast experienced about a 65% eclipse in August. Although much of the area was fogged in or overcast, if you went high enough into the mountains or far enough inland, the view was perfect. The eclipse was the first total eclipse to cross the United States since 1979. If you missed this eclipse, don’t worry, the next one over the United States will be in 2024.

Marshall Williams is the latest owner and has big plans for the local hangout. The tiny coffee shop went through an expansion phase 10 years ago, when a wall that separated two parts of the building was knocked down. The Bean now has two front doors and no longer has that cramped feeling that plagued it for years. Williams plans to expand the shop even further with a hooded grill and an ‘L’ shaped counter where people can sit and watch the short-order cook work.

Science for girls returned in Arroyo Grande. Tosha Punches, co-founder and director of the STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math) Camp for Girls, being held for the fourth year in Arroyo Grande, said the main difficulty in getting, or indeed, keeping young women on track for a career in the hard sciences is what they absorb in their teenage years. “Our goal is to expose [camp attendees] to women in STEM careers,” said Punches. "Women in the world that do things every day that [the girls] may not have thought of before.”
October

The approval of the Bridge Street Bridge Project by the Arroyo Grande City Council was one of the rare moments in government that seemed to make everyone involved happy. “I appreciate all of the hard work that’s gone into this plan,” said Councilwoman Barbara Harmon, who served on advisory and community bodies concerning the bridge. She called the lengthy approval process to start an environmental report and eventual restoration of the structural elements on the beloved local landmark an illustration of why things can take so long in local government, but added that she was very happy with the outcome.

The City of Grover Beach decided on which two entities would be allowed to go forward with plans to open medicinal marijuana dispensaries within their municipal borders. The number was moved down from four in previous decisions and exactly a dozen applications came in to be judged in a tiered rating system devised by City staff. A day after their coastal brethren approved the sites for “brick and mortar” locations, the Arroyo Grande City Council approved an ordinance that allows for three permits to deliver medicinal and, in 2018, non-medicinal cannabis, within the City limits. Only one medicinal marijuana delivery permit was active at the time.

Rail enthusiasts were all aboard the festivities during the annual Central Coast Railroad Festival featuring educational and recreational activities for the whole family. The festival takes place throughout California.

Pooches and their human companions had a barking good time at the annual Best in Shell Amateur Dog Show. A boy named Max took home the highest honor of Best in Show as chosen by the audience. Other activities included a costume contest, stupid dog trick, owner and dog look-alike and more. The event was put on by the Shell Beach Improvement Group, and funds went to help SLO County animal rescues.

September

The ECOSLO Coast Clean Up Day mobilized thousands of Central Coast residents along 30 sites Sept. 16 joining folks around the world and across the sea in getting garbage off their own beaches. Pirate’s Cove, recently in the news as a much-neglected County Park that failed to garner any additional funds at a Sept. 5 County Board of Supervisors meeting, was a good poster child site for the clean up effort. There, volunteer “Site Capt.” Gene Quayle estimated that they took about 1,000 pounds of trash out of the trails and parking lot with around 50 volunteers.

San Luis Obispo and Pismo Beach firefighters lined the Dolliver St. overpass as a procession of public safety personnel travelled along Highway 101 in honor of Santa Lucia District Forest Service Battalion Chief Gary Helming of Pismo Beach. Helming was killed Aug. 31 in a vehicle accident when another driver’s vehicle blew a tire and ran into his pickup on Highway 41. Helming was returning from an assignment on the Railroad Fire burning near Yosemite National Park. He was 47-years-old.

Helming began his career with the Forest Service 22 years ago. He is survived by a wife and three children.
November

The Grover Beach City Council introduced a measure with a 4-1 vote that would double the monthly stipend for council members. The proposed pay raise would increase the stipend for the directly elected mayor to $750 a month, while council members would get $600 a month. None of the pay raises would immediately benefit the current council until December 2018 after the next municipal election. Grover Beach leaders are the lowest paid among San Luis Obispo County city officials at $300 a month currently. Grover Beach has a larger population than Pismo Beach and Morro Bay, as well as a slightly larger annual budget at $37 million. Yet, council members for Pismo Beach and Morro Bay are paid at least $200 more a month than Grover Beach.

More than 100 wounded military veterans and their supporters passed through SLO County to the flag waving cheers of school kids during the 2017 United Healthcare California Challenge. The vets rode 450 miles, from San Francisco to Los Angeles, including a trek from San Simeon to Pismo Beach via Cambria, Cayucos and Morro Bay.

Members of the public were treated to dinner and a show at the 34th annual Thanksgiving dinner put on by the Pismo Beach Police Officers Association Nov. 22. Tables filled up quickly at the festively decorated Veterans Memorial Hall. Patrons grabbed plates of Thanksgiving dinner and chose from a selection of desserts. Members of the police officers association spent many hours preparing for the big day, which included more than 2,000 pounds of turkey, 1,500 pounds of potatoes, 35 cases of stuffing, 20 cases of broccoli and 10 cases of cranberry sauce.

December

Teens and tech go hand in hand. But 16-year-old Hailey Barneich didn’t realize how useful that natural pairing could be for older generations until her own grandma started asking for help navigating the digital world this summer. “It was just simple things, like sending a video by text message,” she said. “I talked to my friends and they said it was super common in their family as well.” Hailey saw an opportunity to offer support on a larger scale by hosting a workshop for less-than-tech savvy adults in the 5 Cities area. With the help of her mom—Arroyo Grande City Councilmember Kristen Barneich—Hailey has organized a free, 1 ½ hour workshop.

San Luis Obispo Auditor-Controller Jim Erb had as many questions for attendees as he had answers during his open house discussion on a cannabis taxation ordinance he plans to present to the Board of Supervisors Jan. 9. Sitting on the dais with members of his staff, Erb outlined options he thinks the board needs to consider when contemplating a tax on production, manufacture, and transportation and retail sales of marijuana. He encouraged citizens to speak freely with their insights on the fledgling industry. Citing low estimates from consultants, Erb said the county could see $2-5 million a year in taxes from the cannabis sector. The tax ordinance he will propose next year would not designate how the money should be spent. The money would be added to the county general fund and used as directed by the Board of Supervisors.

A half-dozen protestors representing the 5 Cities chapter of Indivisible Guide—a progressive political advocacy organization—held signs in an early December demonstration at the corner of Grand Avenue and Oak Park Boulevard in Grover Beach. Their political messages drew cheers, honks and jeers from passers by. Cheryl Storton said the group is non-partisan and seeks to protect the nation’s democracy from the Trump Administration.
More than 50 people braved the chilly air Dec. 11 to attend a candlelight vigil in the Village of Arroyo Grande to remember Foxy, a young, grey fox euthanized last month by federal wildlife officials. The informal gathering was made up of men, women and children who shared memories of their Foxy sightings. Some brought their dogs that had played with Foxy. Marissa is a local resident who came to remember Foxy. She wore a fox sweatshirt and brought her dogs Bandit and Wizard. She said she has a video of Bandit playing with Foxy. Other attendees also shared stories of their interactions with the playful fox.

The Lucia Mar Unified School District hosted a Career Technical Education (CTE) Expo at the Oceano Community Center. California Assemblyman Jordan Cunningham, gave a talk after touring booths with student work from Nipomo High School, Arroyo Grande High School, Mesa Middle School and others. The Lucia Mar Foundation for Innovation co-hosted with the intent of bringing community and industry leaders into volunteer or mentor positions. “Our goal is to get folks to talk with the students and see what they're capable of,” said Garin Sinclair, board president for the Foundation, “Tech-Ed [technical education] is compatible with college track classes, with AP [Advanced Placement] classes too, but we want to give these students opportunities outside of the debt that comes with college student loans.”

A citywide survey commissioned by the Grover Beach City Council last spring helped confirm what local officials suspected were top concerns: roads and homelessness. The survey was conducted Oct. 2-12, when residents were contacted by phone or completed the survey online. The sample size included 395 men and women, ranging in age between 18 and 68+. The survey questions were developed by Godbe Research and Mayor John Shoals and Mayor Pro Tem Mariam Shah. Residents were asked a variety of questions about citywide issues, including road conditions, homelessness, police and fire services, the courtesy of city staff and if residents were “satisfied” how the city was providing services. Sixty-one percent of those polled said they were “very satisfied” and another 19.3 percent said they were “somewhat satisfied.”

New storefronts for massage, tattoos and other “personal services” were temporarily banned by the Pismo Beach City Council at a recent meeting. The moratorium went into effect immediately for a 45-day period with an option to extend that ban for another 10 months and 15 days as city staff studies the matter. City Manager James Lewis told that council that recent inquiries were made at the city that were “not consistent” with the council’s vision for the city. He brought the urgency ordinance to the council to stop new shops for opening or existing shops from moving or expanding in their current locations.

Grover Beach officials began exploring funding options to help pay for water system repairs that are bubbling up at more than double earlier estimates. The city initially budgeted about $250,000 a year for water system repair and upgrades as part of Measure K-14 road construction improvements throughout the city. That was increased to $427,550 this year because of the pace of road construction. But construction on roads and other incidents are revealing a bigger, more expensive problem. So far this year, the bill has come to about $700,000.

The Arroyo Grande Rotary Club presented donations to the Arroyo Grande and Nipomo high schools’ music programs; net proceeds from the Club’s 2016 Christmas Sing-Along show. The show netted some $700, which was split between the two schools’ programs ($350 each).
San Luis Obispo had a news-filled 2017 and the SLO City News was busy covering the major stories for our readers. Here's a recap of the top stories we covered in 2017.

**January**

The last San Luis Obispo City Council had instructed staffers to come back with some info leading to an ordinance prepared to reduce the use of disposable plastic bottles in the City in 2016. On Jan. 3 they held a study session to address the matter. A lot happened the previous year and staff ended up needing to shuffle some more pressing matters and asking for a little more guidance in the intervening months. It took them another 10 to resolve the issue.

Initial estimates for the Women's March around Downtown San Luis Obispo on Jan. 21 were for 5,000 participants, and organizers, City staff and law enforcement agencies from all over the County made plans accordingly. As the date of President Donald J. Trump’s inauguration approached, interest in the Women’s March on Washington, and the more than 600-partner events worldwide, grew. The list of would-be marchers in SLO climbed from 7,000 people, the number used in official City estimates, to 8,000 signed up. The SLO Women’s March was roughly equivalent to, if not 1,000 people larger than, the nearest similar event in Santa Barbara.

The “Alt-Right” movement leader Milo Yiannopoulos drew a crowd of around 500 at the Cal Poly University’s Spanos Theatre as a stop on his “Dangerous Faggot” tour. The last item, coupled with protesters burning the Confederate Stars and Bars along with a Nazi Swastika flag, saw an overwhelming law enforcement preparation for an underwhelming number of protesters set the stage for a week of local headlines. The comedian W. Kamau Bell entertained an audience of 1,200 at the Cal Poly PAC with his show, “The W. Kamau Bell Curve: Ending Racism in about an Hour.” A year later and racism is still very much on the public stage, but Yiannopoulos is not. He came under fire later in the year for remarks seen to endorse pedophilia.
Happy New Year!

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February

A proposed public art installation to commemorate the 1903 visit by President Theodore Roosevelt to SLO gained a little bit more life. For anyone who wasn’t around 115 years ago, it was one of two visits paid to SLO by a U.S. President. He came to town on the train, as part of his “Great Loop” through the Western U.S., no small feat in those days. Long time Central Coast local, and sculptor, Paula Zima returned to SLO from her new home in New Mexico, bringing with her a miniature of the bronze Roosevelt proposed for Mitchell Park. She displayed the materials during an event Sunday at the SLO Senior Center, adjoining the park. Ironically, as one of Pres. Roosevelt’s lasting contributions to pop culture, include the “Teddy Bear,” Zima’s other local public works also include bears, two Bridge Bears grace the entrances to Los Osos.

A joint proposal concerning the future of Pacific Gas and Electric Company’s Diablo Canyon Power Plant continued its path through the State’s review process. Reviews and replies to written responses on the agreement were submitted to the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC) for consideration. Under the established review schedule, groups participating had until Jan. 27 to submit responses to the CPUC. PG&E and the joint proposal parties will replied by March 17. Designed to phase out PG&E’s production of nuclear power in California by 2025, the agreement hit a roadblock before the end of the year with a CPUC Judge declaring it unfair to PG&E ratepayers.

Two San Luis Obispo based tech companies officially joined forces, to the surprise of no one who has seen the teams working together over the last two decades. Digital West Networks Inc. acquired Norcast Telecom Networks in November 2016 but made the official announcement in late January. The companies are merging offices in the first week of February. The acquisition forms what Digital West’s staff are calling, “the Central Coast’s single largest business infrastructure provider.” Each company had roughly 30 employees and a range of local commercial customers of all sizes as well as some foreign data service clients. Tim Williams remains CEO of the newly integrated company with Jeff Buckingham becoming the president and Chief Client Officer. The pair split private ownership in the firm with Buckingham as the minority partner.

March

Some unpleasant news, that at least some members of the public knew was coming, emerged with the City of San Luis Obispo’s 2016-17 Mid-Year Budget Review and their General Fund Five Year Forecast. The forecast projects a structural budget shortfall of over $5 million by 2021-22, in part, City staff reports, due to lower than projected tax revenues, but largely as a result of the City pension costs scheduled to increase from $10.7 million in the current fiscal year to $19.1 million over the next five years. It is also something the City’s new City Manager has begun to face for 2018, but that’s breaking the timeline.

The San Luis Obispo County Planning Commission held eight hearings in 2016 to consider the application by Phillips 66 to build a rail depot for up to 150 tanker car trains through the county each year. On March 13 and 14 the Board of Supervisors was called upon for an appeal hearing of the Planning Commission’s 3-2 denial of that plan, and many of the same local residents, anti-oil protestors and elected officials from the rail corridor North and South, including Los Angeles, Sacramento, Davis, Berkeley, Oakland, and San Jose...
The San Luis Obispo City Council went into a closed-door meeting the morning of April 10, to discuss, among other things, a Public Employee Performance Evaluation of City Manager Katie Lichtig and “Public Employee Discipline/Dismissal/Release Pursuant to Government Code § 54957(b)(1).” Also on the proverbial chopping block was SLO City Fire Chief Garret Olson, although a hearing regarding his future with the City was carried out separately with Public Works Director Daryl Grigsby, as the Acting Appointing Authority for similar disciplinary proceedings. At issue were formal complaints filed against the pair by members of the SLO City Fire Department alleging violations of the City’s policies against sexual harassment and conduct unbecoming officials of their station.

San Luis Obispo County, the Integrated Waste Management Authority (IWMA), Oasis Design Associates and San Luis Garbage held a groundbreaking for a “Kompogas” Anaerobic Digestion Plant. The facility will turn organic waste into energy and has been slated for the site on Santa Fe Road for almost 2 years, with a minor delay in approval coming after an appeal from nearby property owners in August 2016. The SLO County Board of Supervisors, the members of which also sit on the IWMA board, unanimously approved the plant. In preparation for the project, last year IWMA instituted changes to the way they handle food waste versus other trash. A food scrap pail was distributed to more than 50,000 County residents, with the contents to be added to green waste pick up and sorted out of the normal land-fill waste stream.

April

SLO County’s new Women’s Jail got a grand unveiling March 27 and started housing female inmates that week. County Sheriff Ian Parkinson invited local media to a preview tour of the nearly $41 million, expanded and modern lockup. With locks that cost about $1,000 each, and an increased jail population after the statewide “realignment” that sent low level offenders to County lock up to serve their sentences, the department was at pains to cut some costs wherever possible in other amenities.

May

Progress on a decades old community dream to connect the City of San Luis Obispo’s bike route network to the Avila Beach Bob Jones Trail - and by extension to bike corridors in Shell Beach and Pismo Beach - got a bit closer May 9. Over the last several years that progress has been measured in bureaucratic hurdles overcome inside County government; but a major physical link at the border of the City of San Luis Obispo was finished in 2014 with a City-to-Sea Bike Trail extension. That project installed a bridge completing the Class I bikeway from Prado Road and the Water Resource Reclamation Facility to Los Osos Valley Road and with the addition of repainted bike lanes at the LOVR/Highway 101 interchange last year the links are in place for City commuters. On Feb. 24, 2015 the SLO County Board of Supervisors gave the green light for an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) on the 4.5-mile extension from the Octagon Barn to the Ontario Road parking lot and trail header to Avila Beach. However, at the Board of Supervisors May 9, 2017 meeting they were able to loosen up some funds from an unexpected source, $557,700 from the separate and postponed Avila-to-Harford Pier Pathway. Shaun Cooper, Senior Park Planner with the County explained that the Avila to Hartford project isn’t dead, but there are extra issues, especially regarding parking in the area that have set it back.
One of the advantages of a small town is getting to know people. Even in a small town, one of the last people most folks want to have an up close and personal encounter with are the Police. "We don't always have the most favorable interactions on the job," said SLO PD Lt. Bill Proll diplomatically as the Police Lieutenant, a 30 year veteran of the force, launched a new program, "Coffee with a Cop" on May 12. He hung out for several hours at the Blackhorse Espresso & Bakery on Los Osos Valley Road to enact the public outreach formula made popular in other cities. To blast one stereotype out of the water, Lt. Proll did not have doughnuts with his coffee. Cuisine and personal biography weren't the type of questions on the minds of citizens that gathered at the table however.

June

A rental inspection program that was a feather in the cap for outgoing members of the previous SLO City Council in December 2016, was officially repealed by their successors April 20, a month after being served with a petition signed by 15 percent of the SLO electorate. That petition, containing language for a repeal and replace ordinance, is the cause of a planned Aug. 22 special election, with only one item, set to cost the City some $160,000 to carry out. After some debate over wording on May 16, the approved ballot question was set to ask: "Shall an ordinance be adopted to replace former Chapter 15.10 of the San Luis Obispo Municipal Code, entitled 'Rental Housing Inspection' (repealed by City Council Ordinance 1632, effective April 20, 2017), with new Chapter 15.10 to be entitled 'Non-Discrimination in Housing?'" Even the slight change in wording from the original initiative, which emphasized that it was to repeal the ordinance, drew condemnation from long time thorns in the side of City Government, SLO-based attorney, Stew Jenkins, and political activist and resident, Kevin Rice. Backers of that petition would later lose at the ballot box.

"The County Health Agency's Drug and Alcohol Services should resume its concentrated efforts to develop a residential detox service in the County to serve its Medi-Cal and less financially able citizens," stated recommendation #1 of the San Luis Obispo County Grand Jury 2016-2017 Report on Detox Services. According to the report, dealing with services available to people trying to get off drugs in the area, not much had improved in the last four years. In July 2014 SLO County Drug and Alcohol Services started a new program to help alcoholics and those in withdrawal from methamphetamines to detox. "The medical consequences of alcohol detox are quite risky for long term users," Jeff Hamm, SLO County Health Agency director told the SLO City News at the time. "People don't understand the importance of clinical intervention. 'Cold Turkey' is not easy."

City of San Luis Obispo Mayor Heidi Harmon started visiting the various neighborhood districts of the City on a touring schedule of walks with residents. Aside from hearing the concerns of her traveling companions for the hour, she said she was also hoping to promote exercise generally. The first taking place June 13 in the South Broad Street Corridor, the portion of Highway 227 under the City's purview. Their residents told her, to paraphrase their colorful alliteration, that it was a death sentence to attempt to cross the street at the wrong time of day.
Year In Review

2017

July

While the Ringling Bros. Circus has taken down its big top for the last time, Circus Vargas is still going strong. The traveling show hoisted its tents on Madonna Rd. SLO in June. Now in its forty-fifth year of entertaining, the roving band of entertainers has managed to increase ticket sales while others flounder in this age of handheld screens and embattled activism. Katya Quiroga who produces and co-owns Circus Vargas with her husband, Nelson, said that the news of Ringling Bros. was a heartfelt loss. “We were shocked and disappointed,” said Katya, “I think when a part of the circus industry goes down and a part of the Americana culture ‘disappears,’ it hurts everybody... I think it’s a great loss for the American people, because [they] don’t get to experience this type of wholesome family entertainment as much anymore.”

On July 13 the unique unicycle juggling pair Mark Wilder and Jonathan Nowaczyk made their debut on the national stage on ABC’s re-rebooted Gong Show. And on July 20 mechanical engineer and musician Doug Groshart popped up on ABC’s long running favorite Jeopardy.  With the Central Coast’s proximity to Los Angeles production studios, familiar faces have been known to pop up from time to time, usually on CBS’s daytime game shows. This group though required a degree of specialized skills, knowledge and intrepidity. Interestingly enough this crop are all performers in their own rights. Fresh off the prerecorded television performance, they were already a presence at the California Mid-State Fair by the time ratings came in.

In the midst of a review of their deal to Close Diablo Canyon, PG&E announced that Edward (Ed) D. Halpin a Senior Vice President and their Chief Nuclear Officer (CNO) would retire at the end of the 2017. Halpin, a 35-year veteran of the energy industry, gave notice of his intention to retire effective December 31. The company’s announcement said it gave them, “appropriate time to ensure an effective transition period.” “Ed has done an outstanding job leading our nuclear and power generation operations and helping us provide customers with one of the cleanest energy portfolios in the nation,” said PG&E Corporation Chief Executive Officer and President Geisha Williams.

The bell at Mission San Luis Obispo de Tolosa sounded off time for services, weddings and funerals. On July 1, with a speaker’s podium set on the Mission steps, the more than 100 people gathered in the plaza below were well aware of the fleeting passage of time. Attendees at the ‘Rally to Save Carrizo Plain National Monument’ knew they only had until July 10 for their voices to be officially heard by the Trump administration’s Department of the Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke.

Marcus Carloni had already been with the City of San Luis Obispo for seven years, but unless members of the public are watching City Council and Planning Commission meetings like a hawk, they may not have seen his work. On June 20, his new role with the City got a very public launch on the steps of City Hall with speeches from Mayor Heidi Harmon and Councilwoman Andy Pease introducing the concept of Net Zero Energy Day on the summer solstice and Carloni as the City’s new Sustainability Coordinator.
August

The City of San Luis Obispo bumped up their interim finance director to a permanent position reporting to the City Manager, but that top job wouldn’t be Katie Lichtig’s much longer. Xenia Bradford was appointed to the permanent finance director position announced July 26 with a salary of $138,502 a year to manage a department-operating budget of $2.2 million. Lichtig announced that she would be leaving the City of SLO effective Sept. 28 to begin a new role as Chief Operating Officer/Assistant City Manager in Santa Monica.

San Luis Obispo Police sought a suspected prowler who might also be a thief. According to Lt. Bill Proll on Aug. 11 police were given a surveillance video from a front porch camera of a home in the area of San Luis Drive and Upper Monterey Street. “The suspect in the video walks up to the front door at 3:45 a.m.,” Lt. Proll said, “and uses his cell phone light to look around. The suspect is only on the porch for a few seconds and then he leaves the residence. The suspect is described as a white male in his 20s wearing a T-shirt with what looks to be a panda on it. He is also carrying a backpack.”

If supporters of the Carrizo Plains National Monument thought they might be able to breath a sigh of relief after making their voices heard last month, Violet Cavanaugh, vice-chairwoman of the Northern Chumash Tribe, has something to say. “It’s so needed for housing and new of relief after making their voices heard last month, Violet Cavanaugh, vice-chairwoman of the Northern Chumash Tribe, has something to say. “It’s so

Outshine The Darkness peaceful candlelight vigil and a rally in SLO’s Mission Plaza in San Luis Obispo. The event was to show solidarity with Charlottesville, Va. and the recent act of domestic terrorism where one person was killed and more than a dozen injured when a vehicle plowed into a crowd of people protesting white nationalists and neo-Nazis marching. The event raised $5,925 for Black Lives Matter Charlottesville, the C-ville Victim Relief Fund, and Congregation Beth Israel.

September

A touching memorial service took place at SLO’s Fire Station #1 on Sept. 11 dedicated to those who lost their lives as a result of three coordinated terrorist acts some 16 years ago. As is becoming traditional since the dedication of the permanent monument at the firehouse, the service culminated in a rose ceremony in which members of the community placed white roses on an I-beam salvaged from the World Trade Center wreckage. In the years that the steel has been exposed to the elements in SLO, rust has streaked the concrete display platform, but the wear of time is not as obvious as the marks left on the day that it fell back to Earth. The permanent memorial around the 1,500-pound beam consists of 403 metal posts in a semi-circle both red and blue, representing the 403 emergency workers who died in the attack on the World Trade Center in New York on September 11, 2001. A special guest at this year’s event was Robert Booth, a volunteer fire fighter who was at ground zero in the aftermath of the attack and has kept his FDNY hat from that day with him all these years. His group was credited with finding some 10 people in the rubble. The ceremony featured bagpipes, student singers from San Luis Coastal Unified School District, artwork by 5th graders, and the reading of a poem that won an 8th-grade writing contest.

With the City of SLO committed to building inward and upward to address needs for housing and new office space, the administrative folks over at City...
Trans District 5 were happy to have their relatively new building on South Higuera Street lauded as an example of desirable redevelopment. On Aug. 30 they held a, “LEED Celebration and Tour” of the Midway Building at 22885 S. Higuera St. Disregarding for a moment the Pacific island theme, the spot was so named because it is the shiny new-looking building halfway between their other SLO yards. It also houses the employees moved over from the Atoll Business Center on Laurel Lane. The new facility was recently certified as Gold under the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system. The points based system was devised by the United States Green Building Council (USGBC) to, “evaluate the environmental performance of a building and encourage market transformation towards sustainable design.”

Local nonprofit organization Bike SLO County got their hands on 30-brand new kids’ bikes during a Bike-Build-a-Thon, August 23. Trek Bicycle and local bike shop Foothill Cycler assembled the fleet for a ribbon cutting ceremony, with the bikes set to be used to teach bike safety and skills to elementary school children throughout SLO County, including students at three elementary schools which have been identified as serving disadvantaged communities; Oceano Elementary, Nipomo Elementary and Lillian Larsen Elementary in San Miguel. These three schools were identified in SLO Regional Rideshare’s On-Bike Education Grant funded by the Caltrans Active Transportation Program Cycle 2. “Bike SLO County is the implementing contractor for SLO Regional Rideshare’s Safe Routes to School program to provide inclusive classroom and on-bike safety and skills education to elementary school children throughout SLO County over a three-year pilot program” said Bike SLO County Executive Director Mike Bennett in a news release.

San Luis Obispo police took special note of Breast Cancer Awareness Month, donning pink badges throughout the month of October. The gesture was in support of breast cancer survivors and breast cancer support organizations, according to a news release from the SLO Police Officers Association (SLOPOA). Police also awarded three honorary “Survivor Badges” to local cancer survivors, and sold lapel pins to raise money for breast cancer support groups.

On Oct. 8, the SLO City Farm held it’s first Annual Fall Harvest Festival at the Calle Joaquin Agricultural Reserve. Off the beaten path at 1221 Calle Joaquin in SLO, behind the Madonna Shopping Center, the farm has been managed by the nonprofit Central Coast Grown [CCG] for the last three years. But, it has taken them awhile to smooth out the property’s rough edges and get programs in place. Steven Marx, CCG Board President, explains that, “we have a lot of, “trial and error at the farm and in the organization,” in the time since signing a 20 year lease with the City, but they’re now in a position to welcome the public out to their own land.” Educational programs have been ongoing with gardens and co-operative classes from nearby Pacific Beach Continuation High School. As well there was a grand opening celebration and fair at the site three years ago. In general though, Marx said, members of the public haven’t been out at the farm on a daily basis.

City of SLO City Manager Katie Lichtig departed San Luis Obispo after eight years. California’s particular brand of chartered city offers a unique blend of mayors independently elected from the rest of their council, and of city managers that have tremendous power to shape events but which serve at the will of the entire elected body. That’s a tad different from other areas of government, in which a permanent staff may serve removed from direct appointments, or more at the pleasure of a single elected official and in the organization,” in the case of bureaucracy. Lichtig set the stage for her replacement Derrick Johnson having groomed him for the role over the last two years.
Seven Sisters Brewing held its Grand Opening with owner and brewer Steven Van Middlesworth doubling as a balloon artist to set the atmosphere in the child and dog friendly hangout. In the complex of businesses behind Trader Joe’s and Food For Less, off Tank Farm Road, the new brewery took several months to open after renovations and permit wrangling with the City of SLO. That’s work Middlesworth handled largely by himself. They’ve blended some naturalistic elements into the industrial building that used to house a furniture store and have themed most of their offerings off of the Seven Sister “Morros” stretching out to sea. Those are also artistically represented in a wall-long mural dominating the tasting room interior. Due to building occupancy constraints, hours heading into 2018 will be 5 p.m. - 10 p.m. on Tuesday-Friday and 2 p.m. - 10 p.m. on weekends.

At the bottom of the world, about 850 miles from the South Pole, a group of scientists used to the temperate Mediterranean climate of the Central Coast kept warm at their research base. Team B-030, a collection of scientists with, according to their own description, “a passion for understanding how animals survive in the environments in which they live,” are about a month into their stay, depending on delays. When the SLO City News reached Cal Poly Biology Professor Heather Liwanag, the team’s principal investigator, on Oct. 9 they were still assembling team members and getting ready to spend 10 weeks focusing their lives around a group of Weddell seal pups. Liwanag took some of her down time around a group of Weddell seal pups. Liwanag took some of her down time for an e-mail postcard and Q&A from McMurdo Station, the primary U.S. run research base and largest population center on the continent, established in 1956.

Derek Johnson had been on the job barely 10 days as the City of SLO’s new city manager when he sat down for half an hour to discuss what he’s planning to do about the City’s $148 million public employee pension debt. While the first meeting between a newly appointed City leader and a local journalist usually focuses more on goals that led one to apply for the job, or a little taste of personality for the public, the rising pension costs that had loomed in some corner of public consciousness for several years now took on the aura of a crisis with the start of the month.

**November**

A somewhat contrite County budget office admitted to making a nearly $10 million mistake in the 2017-18 County revenue projections that take the budget from black to red ink. County officials said instead of an estimated $3 million to $5 million surplus their new fi gures estimate a $2.8 million to $4.8 million deﬁcit in FY 2018-19; at the worst case scenario, that means a $9.8 million difference. The fallout and other options will be explored in the new year, along with a myriad of marijuana tax related items.

The long time on the ﬁrst story to kick off 2016 came to fruition in November. Visitors and residents in the City of SLO now have only until March 2018 to blissfully ignore the status of plastic drinking straws inside or outside their restaurant provided beverages or to get a plastic bottle of water at the Thursday Farmers Market. On Nov. 7 the City Council gave ﬁnal unanimous passage to a pair of ordinances designed to cut down on the City’s plastic waste footprint. Council and staff justiﬁed branching out for another set of product regulations - a follow up to a ban on sale of expanded polystyrene - under the auspices of their Climate Action Major City Goal for 2017-19. While certainly an environmentally minded approach, it remains unclear how encouraging patrons at dine-in establishments not to get a plastic straw, or restricting water bottle sales on City property and sponsored events will impact carbon emissions.

The grand re-opening of Sinsheimer Park Playground brought out the child in kids and adults alike as a couple of council members and city manager took their turns slicing down one of the features of the $1.1 million park renovation. City ofﬁcials helped community members celebrate with a ribbon cutting and hot dogs, giving thanks to the men and women who made it happen, including the tax payers of San Luis Obispo.

The Cal Poly Loggers won ﬁrst place at the Cal Conclave collegiate logging competition held at Cal Poly Nov. 4. Bioresource and agricultural engineering junior Will Kraemer emerged as the top male competitor, winning the title “Bull of the Woods.” Intercollegiate teams of coed students regularly take part in the events, which test traditional forestry ﬁeld skills. For the Cal Conclave, Humboldt State University, UC Berkeley and Northern Arizona University sent their “Jacks and Jills” to the Central Coast. Events included tree climbing, power saw work, single and double buck with cross cut saws, and an obstacle pole.

Drivers on Los Osos Valley and Madonna roads got some relief from the construction delays and lane closures, at least during the day, as work on the multi-million dollar maintenance project shifted to nights. Work on the repaving of two of SLO’s busiest roads is 80-percent completed, and the City announced that work will shift to 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. for the next few weeks, as 4-month project wraps up. It was expected to be done sometime in mid-November, according to a City news release. The project is repaving and sealing LOVR and the Hwy 101 overpass.
December

As 2017 draws to a close, the New Year will usher in new rules regarding recreational use of cannabis and an expanded, industrialized production of medical marijuana throughout San Luis Obispo County. For much of the past year, communities throughout the county have been preparing for these changes and weighing their own regulations to govern how, when and where cannabis will take a more prominent space in the marketplace. And where cannabis will take a more prominent space in the marketplace.

An early morning vehicle crash in San Luis Obispo sparked a house fire that left three Cal Poly students homeless. The female driver of a bakery van reportedly fell asleep at the wheel and crashed into a building. Power lines fell, creating a blaze in a historic home on adjacent Morro Street. Student resident Sergio Cois said the crash woke them up and they noticed fire coming from their gas meter. There were four people in the house when the fire ignited and they all escaped without injury. PG&E crewmen worked to restore power as the area was blocked off to traffic through the morning hours. The students were covered in soot as they salvaged their personal possessions from the charred home and piled everything on the sidewalk “We planned to stay here through some of the holiday,” Cois said as a friend wiped soot off of a collection of bongs. “But we’re just going to pack up and go home.”

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I’ve never been big on New Years resolutions, but it’s hard to argue against the fact that the New Year does present an opportunity for a fresh start or new direction. Last year was a great one for Simply Clear Marketing & Media. We grew as a team, we expanded and refined our product offerings, and revenues were up significantly. Our Event division celebrated its 70th expo overall and the 10th anniversary of our Inspired Health Expo, the Digital division grew two-fold, and our publishing division launched the County’s first business specific news product—SloCountyBusinessMatters.com. This year is poised to be more of the same for the event and digital divisions but the publishing division is going in a new direction with one of its products. The SLO City News will cease to exist in its current form as we move more aggressively, spending more time and resources, into building on the momentum of SloCountyBusinessMatters.com. In addition to our other 3 newspapers and 3 magazines, our current staff continues to work hard to publish county specific business news daily on our website, generating content and designing for 3 weekly emails, and compiling the best of the month into a robust and polished digital business magazine. As far as covering community news, we still plan to include the city of San Luis Obispo but with an eye on business, covering a lot of the same events and happenings through a business angle. Of course The Bay News, Coast News and Avila News will be moving forward in there same great format providing micro-local news on an every other week basis.

Like the microclimates that define the local industry, the emerging cannabis industry is taking shape differently in each region of the county.

San Luis Obispo City Council voted to move forward with the city participating in a “Community Choice Energy” or CCE Program, to further help residents and businesses combat climate change. A CCE Program “could enable investments in new, renewable energy projects to reduce green house gas emissions,” reads a news release from the City. The program is a new way for people to buy energy that comes from climate-friendly sources, like hydroelectric, solar and wind, through the City Administration.

A new count, conducted last January, showed the number of homeless people in San Luis Obispo County had dropped, and the County is claiming that shows its efforts to combat homelessness are working, despite the lack of available, let alone affordable housing continuing to grow. SLO County’s homeless population dropped by 26 percent, according to the County, since the last census completed in 2015. Also, the number of homeless military veterans dropped by 38 percent over the same time period, according to the “2017 Homeless Census Survey and Report.”

Philanthropist, B. Wayne Hughes, Jr., pledged to match all donations made to the Food Bank Coalition of SLO County now through Dec. 31, up to $20,000 the agency announced. “The Hughes Charitable Foundation is pleased to provide matching funds that will feed hungry families in SLO County,” said Molly Cooney, executive director of the Hughes Charitable Foundation. “It is the Hughes Charitable Foundation’s hope that this gift will encourage others in the community to give and multiply their impact on the lives of locals in need.”

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I t's that time of the year to reflect and look back. I am amazed at all the new and fantastic eateries that have emerged currently and wanted to give them a shout out. Here are my Top 10 new restaurants (new being the past 24 months) that have tantalized and brought me back to try more.

Please check them out over 2018 and support these hard-working chefs.

Blue Moon in Avila Beach.
At its culinary helm is Chef Jose Dahan the genius behind Et Vola, that left our sandy shores for Europe but has now returned. The children's menu is as alluring as the main, including potato chip encrusted chicken with a magical ranch that had a hint of Dijon.

The chocolate moose and ice cream sandwich combo was a rich, thick chocolate in black shot glasses melted as the fresh raspberry on top. Pistachio and vanilla ice cream was sandwiched between a chocolate brownie and dusted with cocoa powder.

The country pâté is a mixture of cooked duck liver and fat then minced into a spreadable paste. This was encrusted with herbs and served with sliced cornichons and grilled baguette slices.

The salad was an organic red quinoa salad with red and yellow peppers alongside cranberries and roasted pepitas. The steak tartare with cornichons and grilled baguette was the favorite, along with the grilled flat iron steak, ordered rare with peppercorns and a cognac sauce laid over gratin Dauphinois (fancy potatoes au gratin), which was the pinnacle of dinning.

This impeccably prepared steak with the comfort of sliced potatoes and Gruyere cheese was surmountable and delectable.

At Blue Moon Over Avila, you get a rotating menu of seasonal and signature dishes along with imported beer and wine selections designed to impress and satisfy the most discriminating tastes. Blue Moon Over Avila is located at 460 Front St., in Avila Beach.

Somm's Kitchen in Paso Robles.
Somm's Kitchen brings sommelier Ian Adamo’s love of place, culture, and tradition experienced at the center of a beautiful, curved granite counter. The goal each night is to share edible ideas that evoke a sense of place, culture, and tradition accented with a bit of whimsy.

The first item that caught my eye and palette was the tortilla Española, a specialty tapa from Spain with potatoes, onion, and eggs. The simplicity was brilliant. Next, we tried the gambas al ajillo, shrimp with a garlic sauce and the pâté de Campagne, this simple turrine was served with cornichons and mustard and sliced rustic bread.

After we went for the charcuterie and cheese platters with a variety of ingredients including smoked duck with cherries, coppa dolce with hazelnuts and a foie gras torchon with pistachios and orange.

I would recommend this be a go-to place to impress foodies. Somm’s Kitchen is located at 849 13th St., in Paso Robles.

Vegetable Butcher in San Luis Obispo.
The Dona Dias de la Mortes greets you outside; the inside is an open kitchen with a taco bar, classic bar, and distinctive seating options.

The Tennessee hot fried chicken taco with jalapeño poppy slaw, gold pea shoots, and radish was first. Adding the smoky ancho rojo sauce to beef up the spice heat made it eccentric.

The ancho chocolate turkey mole taco with a habiscus pickled red onion, lime cream, and toasted sesame had a subtlety and beauty that caused yummy sounds. The jeweled sweet potato and corn taco with pomegranate, flower petals, avocado and a vegan cashew cream, was dripped with carrot habañero salsa for heat.

The Guajillo pork taco with jalapeño picked pineapple, red Fresno chili, and Tabasco fried shallots, was magnificent placing a new touch on classic carnitas. Dessert was market fruit sliced and placed on yogurt with a saffron caramel sauce and toasted coconut.

The best and unique dish is the forbidden sesame cauliflower. Brilliant and delicious with heirloom cauliflower stalks fried with a Korean crumble and served over black forbidden rice with gold pea shoots to cool the fire. They were not too hot, but an unflawed blending of creative flavors.

The Vegetable Butcher is located at 712 Marsh St., in San Luis Obispo.

The Garden Mediterranean in Santa Maria.
Open just the beginning of December 2017 after two years in the building process; this fantastic new eatery is both a passion project and a family undertaking.

The inside is stunning in detail and comfort, but the food coming out of the kitchen is even better. This is Mediterranean food with a Syrian flare all recipes handed down from generations. The set menu is the way to try everything. The appetizers were an assemblage of Hummus, babghanouj, abneh, assorted cheeses, warak enab, tabouli, falafel, kibbeh, and fatayer.

This type of meal is meant to be shared and spent time with, so we did. The hummus is sprinkled with fresh chickpeas and the flavor both savory and sweet. Scooping it up with a fresh hot pita and adding some taboul (mixed parsley, onions and garlic) is one of my favorite dishes.

The baba ghanouj, a dish of cooked eggplant mixed with tahini (made from sesame seeds), olive oil and various seasonings, was whimsical. The abneh is a yogurt that is used to soften the spicy flavors and add a warming texture.

The warak enab was stuffed grape leaves with a tad less vinegary than the smoky ancho rojo sauce to beef up the spice heat made it eccentric.

The best and unique dish is the forbidden sesame cauliflower. Brilliant and delicious with heirloom cauliflower stalks fried with a Korean crumble and served over black forbidden rice with gold pea shoots to cool the fire. They were not too hot, but an unflawed blending of creative flavors.

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Mason Bar Restaurant in Arroyo Grande.
While I loved the hipster vibe of the bar (and would eat the smoked pork tacos daily — though they are now only served at lunch), the new Mason Restaurant gives off a cozy and romantic atmosphere with creative food coming from the kitchen.

We sat by the fireplace and ordered...
romantic atmosphere with creative food coming from the kitchen.

We sat by the fireplace and ordered the crispy pork belly with a potato apple latke, molasses whiskey glaze, and preserved red cabbage. I am a freak for Brussels sprouts these days, and Mason’s does them up splendidly with a drizzle of balsamic vinegar and feta cheese. But the best of comfort and extravagance is the lobster corn dogs made with cold water, tail meat, carnival batter, Creole remoulade that is hot and sweet and perfect. I am also a bit crazed for the Szechuan smoked ribs with a gojuchang honey glaze, and scallion crumbs. Simple and elegant are the 1650 Degree Shishito peppers fried up with Moroccan lemon preserves, chili peppers, avocado, and cilantro aioli. Mason Bar and Restaurant is located at 307 E Branch St., in Arroyo Grande.

7 Kitchenette in Templeton.

The perfect brunch spot with food so good, I could eat there every day. Cr’A Monsieur is go-to; a croque-monsieur is a baked or fried boiled ham and cheese sandwich. The dish originated in French cafés and bars as a quick snack.

A Croque Madame is a version of the dish topped with a fried egg with country bread, ham and Gruyere cheese with a perfectly cooked egg on top and is my favorite sandwich in the world.

The best pancakes anywhere in the known universe is the ricotta pancakes filled with Dragon Spring Farm blueberries and a hint of Meyer lemon smothered in Grade A maple syrup. They are renowned around the country and have been featured in many foodie magazines and blogs, and worth every accolade.

My favorite was the turkey bahn mi, with country pork pâté, pickled carrots, cucumber, and herbs, with a house Sriracha mayo. Gary liked the pork short rib burrito — a huge flour tortilla stuffed with savory pork, accompanied by avocado, cabbage, cowboy pinto beans, and a delectable fruit salsa. The most memorable was the slow roasted lamb dip sandwich with pimiento goat cheese and sweet caramelized onions. This sandwich was a classic French dip’s big American brother on flavor steroids. The Kitchenette is located at 105 South Main St., in Templeton.

8 Mint+Craft in San Luis Obispo.

The fast-casual menu of Mint+Craft sources high-quality local ingredients for breakfast and lunch, cassoulet-inspired dinner dishes, fresh deli goods, pastries, and meals made to go or enjoyed on the open-air patio.

The salade nicoise is as pleasing to the eye as the taste buds; a beautiful combination of green beans, potatoes, cherry tomatoes, onion-caper relish, dukkah crusted and seared rare albacore, soft boiled egg, and house marinated olives.

Sitting outside on the patio with a crisp Gewürztraminer wine, you are instantly transported to the City of Lights. The delectable Monte Cristo with an egg battered brioche, stuffed with baked ham, Swiss cheese, Dijon, micro mustard sprouts, with a bottle of crisp rosé this is flawlessness.

The Saigon sandwich with spicy pickles, fresh herbs, nuoc mam (a Vietnamese fish sauce), sambal (shrimp paste), aioli on a Cubano roll, while with the market vegetable cassoulet, a warm, inspired clay pot of heirloom bean and market vegetable stew, with seasoned breadcrumbs.

The sandwich is spicy and dense, the perfect amount of pork belly for a savory and tart combination. Try is with the roasted white beets, pecan and goat cheese salad.

Mint+Craft Café is an exceptional choice for lunch in Downtown SLO, and it has an assortment of grab-and-go items, such as non-alcoholic beverages, local cheeses, fresh produce, and packaged snacks, as well as wine and beer. Mint+Craft Café and Mercantile is located at 848 Monterey St., in San Luis Obispo.

Oyster Loft in Pismo Beach.

Sitting at the bar and watching the culinary maestro create was a nice added touch to enlighten our senses. With eight different raw oyster varieties to choose from, we started with a half dozen Kumamoto.

Served with a charred lemon, shaved horseradish, and a mignonette sauce, these little gems of the sea awoke my palette and delighted my senses.

Next, we choose Eastern oysters from Rhode Island that were large and creamy. We added limes, Tabasco, and love to each one, as we slurped them down. Then we tried Grassly Bar from Morro Bay that were smaller with a delicate finish. They were served with Hush Harbor rustic bread with an infused garlic olive oil that was a perfect pairing for our seashell feast.

We moved on the tuna poke tacos with fresh Ahi, is stuffed into a wonton crisp and they added daikon noodles, cucumber, red onion, cilantro, eel sauce, and Sriracha. It was a symphony of flavors and textures.

Then we tried the albacore ceviche with freshly sliced and garlic encrusted albacore tuna, micro cucumber pico de gallo, and onion-fried aioli, sitting on a swirl of cilantro gazpacho. Bravo and amazing.

We chatted with Chef Cody about what would be our next adventure, and he suggested the tuna poke tower. This is a cylindrical fish feast with diced yellowfin tuna, avocado, cucumber noodles, miso mayo, cilantro oil, golden tempura flakes, red radish, daikon sprouts resting on wonton chips was a delight, and a must try for everyone.

Thinking there was no way to top this, we tried the scallop carpaccio with thinly sliced sashimi grade Hokkaido scallops, shaved radish, daikon sprouts, garlic mousse, daikon, Fresno red pepper, red onion, and cilantro. It was subtle and so perfect, I nearly wept. The Oyster Loft is located at 101 Pomeroy Ave., in Pismo Beach.
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