In This Issue

Jonata Bridge Completed!
New $1.7 Million Link Opened

County officials and Buellton City leaders gathered March 13 for a special ribbon cutting to celebrate the completion of the Jonata Park Road Bridge near Buellton. A caravan of antique Ford Model A cars and other classic automobiles drove across the bridge as part of the celebration.

See Bridge Opening, page 5

BROWN’S BAG
Springtime brings new budget, fiscal challenges

Putting together a balanced budget is never easy. Putting together one while in the middle of a slumping real estate market, coupled with decreased revenues and a national economic recession certainly adds a few more hurdles to the race.

The good news is we have a proposed balanced budget of about $759 million for the 2008-09 Fiscal Year. The proposed budget is about $5 million, or 0.66 percent, more than the 2007-08 Fiscal Year budget. No money is proposed to be set aside in the County’s Strategic Reserve, which has dropped down by about $10 million to $24 million due to transfers approved by the County Board of Supervisors to fund current year deficits by the Sheriff’s and Alcohol, Drug and Mental Health departments.

The document now goes before the Supervisors, and, by law, the Board must adopt a balanced budget to coincide with the start of our new fiscal year beginning July 1. Budget hearings are scheduled for June.

For many reasons, the past six months have been an especially challenging time and I want to thank everybody from all of our departments who helped put together this year’s budget document. Your efforts are appreciated and your contributions were noticed.

The budget is our guide for the fiscal year and is the most important document that we, as a

See Brown Bag, page 5
County Parks Crew

Wins Award for Courthouse Landscaping

Congratulations are due to the Parks Maintenance and Operations crew with the Santa Barbara County Parks Department for helping the department to win statewide recognition for their care and stewardship of the 4.6-acre landscaped grounds, including the famed Sunken Gardens, surrounding the beloved, historic County Courthouse in downtown Santa Barbara.

The award for park maintenance and operations was given in March by the District 8 region of the California Park and Recreation Society (CPRS), an organization representing more than 4,500 park professionals. Region 8 represents park agencies and professionals in Ventura, Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo counties.

The CPRS award specifically lauded the County Parks Department for adroitly balancing public access to the Sunken Gardens and other parts of the grounds while making these outdoor spaces available for community cultural events. This is the first time the department has won this award.

"Maintaining the grounds in exemplary fashion, while still accommodating an increasing number of events is the fundamental challenge for Santa Barbara County Parks as the steward of this priceless community resource," stated the award citation.

"County Parks has done an exceptional job in caring for these lush grounds while welcoming community events," added CPRS District 8 President Nancy Rapp.

Care of the landmark Courthouse grounds is in the capable hands of a crack team of landscape maintenance rangers led by Ranger Guilibaldo “Guily” Villasana. This team maintains not only the Courthouse grounds but also landscaping around the County’s Administration, Probation Department and Superior Court buildings. Park rangers Sherman Hansen, Mark Guy, Roy M. Rede, Francisco Ortiz and Brad Trumbull fill out the landscape team, under the overall supervision of Sue Spencer.

The Courthouse grounds date back to the late 1920s, and a Mediterranean planting plan devised by landscape architect Ralph Stevens. Many of those original trees and shrubs still thrive at the courthouse, and these have been judiciously augmented by complementary plantings over the ensuing decades.

Parks Director Dan Hernandez expressed pleasure at the recent recognition for the team’s efficient work that is enjoyed by thousands of people visiting the historic courthouse every year.

“Santa Barbarans already know what a treasure we have in the Sunken Gardens and the Courthouse grounds,” he said. “It is terrific for our talented landscape crew to be honored by our peers, and very well-deserved as they represent some of the best work we do.”
Retiree Medical Plans and Financial Reporting Requirements

This is the first in a series of occasional articles that will help County employees better understand the complexities of public sector employment, retirement systems, and how retirement pensions and other benefits are funded.

There’s a lot of talk going around these days about the retiree medical program – not just in Santa Barbara County, but up and down the state of California, and across the United States. Why is there so much focus on this issue? In the interest of keeping employees in the know, periodically this article will provide information that will help you better understand this complex issue.

If you read the newspapers or listen to the nightly news, it is probably no surprise to you that State and local governments are facing a myriad of complex retirement-related issues these days. Many of those issues are related to what is commonly referred to as OPEB (optional post employment benefits). OPEB encompasses retiree health care, retiree dental, and other optional post-employment benefits such as life insurance, prescriptions, long term disability, etc.

Why all the concern? Concern over OPEB was triggered by the collapse of several private-sector pension and retiree health plans, such as the Enron debacle. The Government Accounting Standards Board (GASB) found public pension and retiree health plans to be likewise vulnerable. GASB is an independent professional standard-setting body that serves as the primary source of “Generally Accepted Accounting Practices” for some 80,000 state and local entities throughout the United States. GASB’s mission is to establish and improve standards for state and local government in accounting and financial reporting.

Though GASB has no power to mandate compliance with these standards, most public sector employers choose to comply and some are actually required to do so by state or local statute. Most also comply with GASB in order to maintain good credit ratings in the municipal bond market. Due to all these factors, governments are usually expected to prepare financial statements in accordance with GASB standards including reporting the “unfunded actuarial accrued liabilities” going forward. This means that, whereas in the past public employers reported only the current year costs of those benefits for existing retirees, they must now account for the total long-term cost of those benefits over the active service life of benefiting employees as well as for existing retirees.

This has resulted in large unfunded liabilities for many public employers. Throughout the country, and specifically up and down the state of California, public employers are seeking strategies for addressing their unfunded liabilities including finding strategies for funding OPEB. One reason to adopt a sound financing strategy for OPEB benefits is that bond rating agencies and bond underwriters are paying close attention to how jurisdictions are managing their liabilities. A bond ratings downgrade, or not achieving an expected bond rating upgrade, can result in a higher interest rate for the public employer when the jurisdiction must borrow money through the issuance of bonds. This can cause extreme pressure on the allocation of financial resources for government services.

Government has a wide spectrum of options to consider for managing OPEB liabilities ranging from fully funding them to redesigning the benefit structure. After reviewing all the issues, public employers need to develop approaches that help them manage future costs and the associated liabilities. These kinds of financial decisions are hard for any employer, but public organizations like the County of Santa Barbara must also work with labor through any change process. Though there are no current changes to the retiree medical program, the County must find the means to manage its total compensation package in a fiscally responsible manner and there are many creative solutions for achieving this.

Many public employers are finding that small changes can yield considerable improvements. Rethinking and modernizing OPEB, improving Medicare coordination, capitalizing on opportunities for more cost-effective purchasing, and considering plan design changes can all help manage the costs of providing OPEB and minimizing unfunded liabilities. Should changes be considered, the County works with labor organizations to explore options for addressing these and other significant issues.
Cute, cuddly kittens are sure hard to resist. Those purring little balls of fur beckon us to hold them and love them. But, trouble is, those kittens can grow up to become frisky, active cats that like to make even more little kittens. Responsible pet owners usually do the right thing by having their house cats spayed or neutered, but it's a different story for the County's "feral" or wild, undomesticated cats.

Each year, hundreds of abandoned, wild or unwanted kittens and cats show up at the County's Animal Shelters in Santa Maria, Lompoc and Santa Barbara, managed by the Animal Services Division of the Public Health Department. This puts a big strain on County money, staff, volunteer time and resources to house and care for them. Unfortunately, in many cases, the animals that are too sick or otherwise unable to be adopted are euthanized, said Stacy Crump, Community Outreach Coordinator for Animal Services.

Feral cats are a big contributor to this challenging problem. Wary and wily, these wild cats usually reproduce unchecked. Enter Animal Services' Crump and Tuesday Cool, Animal Services' Registered Veterinary Technician, who together have now organized two "Spay Days" so far this year, in January and March.

Working with area veterinarians and volunteer organizations, this Animal Services duo, along with their boss, Jan Glick, Animal Services Director, have helped to spay or neuter 126 feral cats this year.

While the veterinarians and their technicians donate their time; the volunteer organizations help to humanely trap the feral cats and Animal Services' provides support staff, space and supplies to conduct the Spay Day events, Crump said.

By being proactive in spaying or neutering the feral cats, Animal Services is making smart choices about how to use its limited resources by cutting down on the feral cats' abilities to reproduce, which, in turn, lessens the impact that an otherwise burgeoning feral cat population can have on the County's Animal Services Division.

“Spay days help us reduce our costs, make us more efficient and allow us to better use our limited resources,” Crump said.

Once the operation is completed, the feral cats are kept on site until they recover. Although a few might be adopted out as "outdoor barn cats" most are too wild to ever be a house cat and are returned to areas near where they were trapped to live out their lives in the wild, she said. Volunteer caretakers agree to feed and monitor the cats on an ongoing basis.

In January, 74 feral cats were spayed or neutered and in March, volunteer veterinarians were able to work on 52 other feral cats, Crump said.

The county wishes to thank Catalyst for Cats and V.I.V.A. (Volunteers for InterValley Animals) and the many shelter volunteers for helping to trap the wild kitties and to the following veterinarians and their staff for their help:

- Dr. Lowell Novy of Valley Veterinary Clinic in Simi Valley.
- Dr. Ron Faoro of St. Francis Pet Clinic in Santa Barbara
- Dr. Brenda Forsythe of the Orcutt Veterinary Hospital in Santa Maria
- Dr. Scott Smith of the Animal Medical Clinic in Carpinteria

County Animal Services continues to plan ongoing efforts to help combat the birth of hundreds of unwanted feral kittens each year and the next Spay Day is planned for June 8. If you want to help, contact Animal Services’ Crump at (805) 934-6981.
The new bridge is on Jonata Park Road, about three miles north of State Highway 246 near the City of Buellton.

County Public Works Department staff joined Third District Supervisor Brooks Firestone, along with Buellton city officials, representatives of the California Highway Patrol and the Santa Barbara County Association of Governments for the ribbon cutting ceremony to wave the antique cars across the bridge.

The $1.7 million bridge construction project was completed earlier this year and funded with local Measure D funds and federal Highway Bridge Replacement money. The new bridge replaces one that was originally built in 1916 that had deteriorated over time and was identified as one of the County’s structurally deficient bridges before it was demolished and replaced.

The reinforced concrete bridge is about 96 feet long and almost 37 feet wide. The approach roadway was constructed of new concrete pavement to replicate the original historic “feel” of the roadway in recognition of the old bridge’s historic designation. In commemoration of the original bridge, the existing plaque embedded into the old concrete barrier rail was carefully removed to be restored, and will be presented to the Buellton Historic Society later this year.

Measure D funds played a significant role in making this project a reality, according to County Public Works Department Director Scott McGolpin. Approximately $200,000 of the $1.7 million project cost came from Measure D funds. The project is also part of the Department’s overall goal of customer service and accountability by maintaining safe bridges and roadways throughout the county, McGolpin said.

Antique Car Caravan Helps Celebrate Bridge Opening

County and Buellton city officials gathered along with antique car owners to celebrate the opening of the Jonata Park Road Bridge with a ribbon cutting and a special caravan parade of antique and vintage cars from the past.

More than anything else, however, the increased retirement costs and the contribution rates set by the Retirement Board had the most significant negative impacts on our budget this year. In addition, the state’s growing budget shortfall problems, currently estimated at about $20 billion, may also have a negative impact on the County as we learn how state officials try to balance California’s budget.

It won’t be easy, but these challenging times provide a unique opportunity to shine as individuals and as an organization. It’s also the right time for people to think about how we can better use technology and creative thinking to discover innovative ways of doing more with less. I hope that all of you will look around our workplace and think about how we can improve. Make sure your voice is heard.

As a County employee, your work practices cannot allow pollutants to enter storm drains. [40 CFR §122.26(b)]

Follow recommended practices; see Fact Sheets at www.sbprojectcleanwater.org/swmp.html

Report water pollution to Project Clean Water, Water Resources Division, Public Works Department, at ext. 3440

Staff training as appropriate
Why would a major global utility company spend $75,000 producing a half-hour PBS program about a Santa Barbara County building?

In 2005, Casa Nueva received an Award of High Honor from the Southern California Edison Company’s, Savings by Design Program. Until 2005, the competition did not have a category of High Honor, and the category was created in response to the merits of green features of Casa Nueva. Casa Nueva was the first building completed under a policy direction by the County to pursue green buildings.

The building and the award caught the attention of a PBS film crew. The crew began their work in November 2007 and completed the field work in January 2008. The completed piece is expected to air on a PBS station in the San Diego area to start, with other stations likely to air the piece later this year. Plans are to share the film with Edison to consider posting on its website.

Casa Nueva is special among county buildings because of how green it was designed and how efficient it operates. Green, or sustainable, office buildings are ones that meet the following three goals:

First, the building needs to be designed with the most efficient floor plan as possible and that the building itself be construction with readily available materials from local sources.

Second, the building systems need to be highly efficient in their use of resources and be placed on a managed control system.

Third, and most importantly, the users of the building need to be educated how to operate the building within its designed energy target.

Between 2000 and 2004, the County constructed 11 buildings with budgets ranging from $530,000 to $14,000,000, with an average per square foot construction cost of $230. Of these projects, Casa Nueva was the cheapest at a construction cost of $180 per square foot. The interesting thing is that many believe that to construct a green building will cost more than a non-green building. This is just not the case when the project team pursues a truly sustainable design track. Of those 11 buildings, six were designed to achieve some level of sustainability.

Employee education is key to the operation of Casa Nueva and this is being headed by the Air Pollution Control District so that the building systems are used or adjusted according to Standard Operating Procedures.

After an energy audit in early 2007, the building utility costs the county tax payers $0.91 per square foot per year. The average building that the County occupies costs $2.13—lots of room for savings. It will take all of us to make improvements. Each employee can help to reduce the cost of operating public facilities by turning lights off, turning their computers off at night, carpooling when traveling, taking alternative transportation to and from work and selecting office products made from recycled content—just to name a few simple steps that reduce cost and help the environment.
Employees Urged To “Curb Your Commute”

Do you live south of the City of Santa Barbara, perhaps in Ventura County or elsewhere, that requires you to drive up the 101 Freeway to get to work?

If so, you may need to “Curb Your Commute” as the much-anticipated 101 Freeway Corridor Improvement Project between Milpas Street and Hot Springs Road gets under way in a few months.

The four-year project begins this summer and will likely cause additional delays and traffic congestion on the 101 Freeway. Be smart and call (805) 963-SAVE (7283) to find out how to “Curb Your Commute” with carpools, vanpools, commuter bus alternatives and other ideas to make getting to work easier. Or, send an e-mail to info@trafficsolutions.info to request details. Online, go to www.sbroads.com

This is one of the largest freeway transportation projects in the history of Santa Barbara County that is also funded in part with Measure D money. The project calls for reconstructing two major interchanges, replacing six bridges, adding freeway lanes, building a new roundabout at Hot Springs Road and a new under crossing at Cacique Street.

The County of Santa Barbara is committed to the helping to make the “Curb Your Commute” program work. Employees can also call the County Human Resources Department at 568-2800 for more information about County commuting efforts.

Highway 101 Operational Improvements
Milpas St. to Hot Springs Rd. / Cabrillo Blvd.
Fact Sheet • May 2007

Project Overview
The Highway 101 Operational Improvements between Milpas Street and Hot Springs Road/Cabrillo Boulevard mark one of the largest projects undertaken by Caltrans in Santa Barbara County. The project construction costs are approximately $57 million and include the reconstruction of two major interchanges, six new or improved bridges, freeway widening, and improvements to local streets and circulation. The project’s main components are listed below, and the map shows the improvements colored to correspond to construction stages.

Construction is slated to begin in 2008 and will take 4 years; each construction stage is approximately 1 year in length. During construction, Highway 101 will have 2 lanes open in each direction during peak driving hours, and Milpas Street will have at least one lane open in each direction during peak driving hours.

The majority of construction will occur behind concrete barriers during daytime work hours; some nighttime lane closures will occur.

- Third southbound lane added between Milpas Street and Hot Springs Road/Cabrillo Boulevard
- Third northbound lane added between Salinas Street and Milpas Street
- Bridge replacement on Highway 101 at Milpas Street
- Northbound auxiliary lane added from Cabrillo Boulevard on-ramp to the Salinas Street off-ramp
- Cacique Street pedestrian, vehicle, and bike connection added between Milpas Street and Alisos Street (under Highway 101)
- Roundabout added at Cabrillo Boulevard/Hot Springs Road/Coast Village Road/Old Coast Highway for local circulation improvements
- Improved pedestrian/bicycle access under Highway 101 and along Old Coast Highway

For additional project information, please call: 1.888.SB ROADS (1.888.727.6237)
It’s a Busy “Year of Elections” for Clerk-Recorder-Assessor Employees

Call this the “Year of Elections” for the county employees at the Clerk-Recorder-Assessor Office.

After working their first-ever Presidential Primary in February and a special election in April for a Carpinteria-area sewer district, it’s off to the races for employees with a June Primary and then the big General Election in November to complete.

Considering that each election has its own set of deadlines for candidates or ballot initiative filings, and special schedules for printing ballots, sending out and receiving absentee ballot mailings, trainings for poll workers, voter registration deadlines, setting up and taking down polling places, “there’s barely enough time to catch your breath,” said Billie Alvarez, Chief Deputy Registrar of Voters in the Elections Division of the Clerk-Recorder-Assessor Office.

Alvarez, who has worked in the Elections Division since 1987 (for 21 of her 28 years as a County employee), said 2008 will be one of the busiest years ever for the Elections Division.

Busy, yes, but also more efficient and accountable too, she said, thanks in part to the office’s newest “staffer”—an Opex Corp. ballot envelope opening machine that can open and remove the voted ballot from several thousand (returned) ballot envelopes per hour.

“We’re the first in the state to use this machine in this capacity. It makes the process of opening ballots much faster and less labor intensive,” said Renee Bischof, Elections Division manager.

During the Presidential Primary in February, the Elections Division needed only five people instead of 20 people in the ballot processing room to open and flatten the returned ballots.

And with nearly a 75 percent return on about 98,000 Vote by Mail ballots that were mailed out, that’s a lot of ballots to open before they can even be counted, Bischof said. To operate the machine, an employee takes a stack of unopened ballots and places that stack at one end of the machine. In the blink of an eye, the envelopes are quickly fed into a conveyor belt system that zips open the envelope and removes the ballot for counting.

The machine may not be all that pretty to look at, but it sure gets the job done, which means the Elections Division can also reduce the time it takes to produce vote tallies for ballots voted by mail, an important aspect in today’s fast-paced world of elections.

The machine will be put through its paces again later this year for the June Primary and the General Election in November. The $80,000 machine was on a temporary lease to the county for use in the February Presidential Election. The February election acted as a test run to determine if the machine operated efficiently and was worth the investment of $80,000.

The envelope-opening machine passed the test of operating efficiently, reducing staff costs and expediting the counting of ballots. County Clerk-Recorder and Assessor Joe Holland and his elections team made the decision to purchase the envelope-opening machine.