

THE ISLAND

Alameda Times-Star

www.INSideBayArea.com

City editor (510) 208-6447

TUESDAY November 28, 2000

FasTrak system starts Wednesday on Bay Bridge

Users don't stop to pay tolls, but pay bill at end of month

By Sean Holstege
STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND — Starting Wednesday at 5 a.m. motorists can drive through the Bay Bridge toll plaza without stopping and fumbling for change.

Anyone who has bought a windshield transponder from Caltrans can use the so-called FasTrak system. It electronically takes tolls and mails a bill at the end of the month.

Bay Area commuters have been hungry for FasTrak, hoping it will let them breeze through toll plazas three times faster than normal.

The Bay Bridge becomes the latest in a series of bridges wired for FasTrak, as Caltrans fulfills its promise made in July to in-

stall the system throughout the Bay Area by New Year's Day. Next up: the Dumbarton Bridge on Dec. 20, followed by the San Mateo and Antioch bridges on Dec. 31.

But the start-up of FasTrak service on the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge and Benicia Bridge in the last month has been troubled.

Drivers and toll takers reported back-ups, not time savings.

Initially the confusion of navigating newly striped lanes was blamed. Since then, some Caltrans officials report, it has become clear that not enough people are using the system.

"It's slowed things down," said Jimmy Alonzo, toll lieutenant at the San Rafael Bridge. "This facility is really not designed

for a dedicated lane, but the big people in Sacramento said we had to (have one)."

"When you take away a lane that's dedicated, you have a backup," said Kenneth Pleasants, toll captain at Benicia Bridge. "There was a mandate to just get it done. I did not agree with it."

He and other Bay Area officials wanted every lane to be set up to handle FasTrak and regular tolls. FasTrak was envisioned — when it was launched way back in 1993 — as a convenience measure for motorists and a money saver for Caltrans.

But it has been touted as a congestion-relief measure, and Caltrans headquarters trumped locals, several Caltrans officials



Motorists at the Bay Bridge Toll Plaza will see a new series of signs denoting the FasTrak lanes. NICK LAMMERS — Staff

Please see **Tolls**, LOCAL-8



Alameda teacher seeks kids' 'gifts'

NEIL TAM has been a teacher in the Alameda Unified School District for over 30 years and has seen a lot of changes in those years, particularly in programs for handicapped students. Sharing the same passion of the late Jack Capon, Tam has dedicated himself to unlocking the doors of knowledge and self-fulfillment to the handicapped in the Alameda classrooms.

"It's been a struggle to establish programs for the handicapped in the Alameda schools because of budgets and staffing," said Tam. "But we prevailed."

"I believe every child has a special gift," said Tam, "and whether they have a disability or not, it is our job as teachers to find that gift, acknowledge it and help it to grow. It's focusing and finding the good points in a child, and then noticing that certain children are capable of doing things without effort and nurture those skills and gifts."

As a teacher, Tam has played a dual role in helping to develop and teach the physically challenged. "While I maintained my role as teacher, I also became a student and learned from them, especially children with Down's Syndrome," he said. "They are so loving and so accepting. That's a gift they have to give to others. They're very genuine."

Tam was born in Chicago, Ill., and at the age of 5 moved to San Francisco, where he attended public schools near his residence in Chinatown. He did his undergraduate work at San Jose State, receiving his bachelor's in Occupational Therapy. He was recruited into Special Education at San Francisco State University and received his master's in Special Education. He went a step further by gaining his administrative credentials from St. Mary's College.

He has two master's degrees — one in special education and one in administration, he said. Tam and his wife, Judy, have two sons: Austin, 21 and Christopher, 24, he said.

His wife is an interim director for Independent Television Services. The Tams moved from San Francisco to Alameda in 1975, one year before their oldest son was born. Tam's first teaching assignment was at Washington School in 1970 in Special Day classes. He then moved to Haight School under the same program. He later decided to teach trainable mentally retarded students at Mastick School.

Among his other talents, Tam is an innovator. After three years at Mastick School, he applied for a federal grant and started the first ever pre-school program for severely handicapped children at Mastick School. "This was a first for Alameda," he said.

Tam has realized one of his cherished goals — to be the principal of his own school. Miller School offered this opportunity when the base closed down. "This school presented a great challenge," he said. When the Navy weighed anchor, the population at Miller dropped from 500 to 70 students. Then it grew to about 170 students, and when the

Please see **Chandler**, LOCAL-8



In a Sunday performance titled "Jusat," by the Diamano Coura West African Dance Company, Mother Earth (above) gives birth to the children and nations of Africa. Jusat, which portrays the development of Africa, was performed at the Alice Arts Center. One of the five drummers (top) performs Sunday during "Jusat" at the Alice Arts Center. JENNAM WARD — Staff

SALUTING MOTHER EARTH

Suspect arrested in shooting

Shots wound motorist stopped at traffic light

By Cecily Burt
STAFF WRITER

BERKELEY — A Hayward man suspected of shooting a motorist near Longfellow Middle School last week has been arrested on charges of attempted murder, Berkeley police said.

Police arrested Jerrell Blasher, 27, at about 3 p.m. Saturday in front of his Hayward home. He is suspected of firing four shots at the driver of a car stopped at a traffic light at Sacramento and Ward streets the morning of Nov. 20, said Berkeley Police Lt. Russell Lopes.

NAACP chief focuses on membership

By Chauncey Bailey
STAFF WRITER

OAKLAND — The newly-elected president of the Oakland NAACP said Monday her top priority is getting a handle on the branch's true membership.

"We had a list of 2,000, but we really aren't sure how many members there are now... This has to get cleaned up," Andrea Ford Roberts said.

Roberts, a deputy city attorney for Oakland, said that for too long "many longtime members were not being kept informed" about meetings because they had not received mailings

The victim was struck twice — in the chest and left forearm. He was treated at Highland Hospital and released the following day, Lopes said.

"He's a lucky man," Lopes said. "He had a chest wound and left forearm (wound), which was actually the worst of his wounds."

Weapons violations

Blasher was in possession of a loaded gun at the time of his arrest, and his wife, Kimberly Blasher, 30, was also arrested for carrying a loaded and concealed gun in her purse, Lopes said.

Jerrell Blasher was charged Monday by the Alameda County District Attorney with attempted murder and being a felon in possession of a

firearm. Kimberly Blasher was charged with possession of a loaded, concealed weapon.

Investigators believe Blasher was also involved in a shooting that occurred in the 2700 block of Sacramento Street on Nov. 14, and another shooting a couple of days earlier in which no one was hit.

Backyard shooting

On Nov. 14 a man was in his backyard at about 11 p.m. when someone reached over the fence and shot at him, striking him once in the leg, Lopes said.

"We are thinking that the victim on (Nov. 20) was a case of mistaken identity," Lopes said. "He was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

being on the inside."

Roberts replaces Shannon Reeves, who had been the youngest person ever to serve as the local NAACP president. Reeves decided not to seek reelection to concentrate on "community economic development" through his nonprofit organization, the Freedom Fund.

However, Reeves had angered many local African Americans by becoming a high-profile Republican. Although the NAACP is nonpartisan, 90 percent of African Americans supported Vice President Al Gore, a Dem

Please see **NAACP**, LOCAL-8

Alameda council to 'Beltline' future

Open space initiative has 10% voter support

By Kristin Bender
STAFF WRITER

ALAMEDA — After more than two years of work, environmentalist Jean Sweeney has done all she can to preserve the Alameda Beltline Railroad Yard — 22 acres of northwestern land where singing meadowlarks and croaking vernal frogs meet hikers, bikers and children at play.

Now it's up to the City Council to decide whether to do with an initiative she wrote to preserve the land as open space. More than 10 percent of Alameda's registered voters signed petitions supporting the initiative, and the council at its Dec. 19 meeting can approve the measure or place it on the November 2002 election ballot.

The former Beltline and its extensions lie south of the Marina Village Business Park between Constitution Way, Sherman Street and Eagle and Atlantic avenues. Once home to a railroad track used by trains serving companies on the northern waterfront, the land provides a natural link between bike trails from the ferry and Alameda Point and those that lead over the Fruitvale Bridge to the BART station, supporters said.

"If you go and stand in the middle of it, you can see San Francisco one way and the Oakland hills the other way. It gives you (the illusion) of a much bigger space because of the vistas," said open space supporter Debra Arbuckle. "When the fireworks are going, on I go out there and watch them."

Because ownership of the land is tied up in lawsuits, the council by rezoning it from residential and industrial to open space could expose the city to massive lawsuits by a potential developer who reportedly offered \$10 million to \$22 million for the land, said Councilman Al DeWitt.

Open space groups such as Rails-to-Trails and the Trust for Public Land meanwhile have offered to help the city find funds to preserve the property.

In a Nov. 15 letter to the city, Kate Bickert, the California director of Rails-to-Trails, said: "Now more than ever before, there are significant amounts of state and federal money with which to initiate these projects."

Please see **Space**, LOCAL-4



Jean Sweeney and a group of volunteers gathered more than 4,000 signatures in an attempt to put an initiative on the ballot to save the Alameda Beltline Railroad Yard. The city is studying the fiscal impacts of such a move and will report back to the City Council next month. MICHAEL LUCIA

ense attorney, did not return calls seeking comment.

Fatal heater malfunction

Prattipati, 17, died Nov. 24, 1999 after the heater in her apartment at 2020 Bancroft Way malfunctioned. Her 15-year-old sister survived the gas exposure. Federal prosecutors say the girls were among many Reddy, 62, and his son, Vijay Kumar Lakireddy, smuggled into the United States for use as

death. Also named are the building's former owners and Caldwell-Roland Roofing Inc.

The roofing company made repairs at the apartment complex in the months before Prattipati's death. It is believed materials used by the company obstructed the heater vent.

The company's Dianne Roland declined to comment Monday, saying she had not yet seen the suit.

Space: Millions still in state park bond

Continued from LOCAL-1

"Rails-to-Trails can assist you in locating and applying for these funding sources," Bickert wrote. "Maintenance costs, which are often not covered by typical capital construction funding, can be funded by the Recreational Trails Fund, developer impact fees and Coastal Conservancy grants."

Garlen Capita, program manager with The Trust for Public Land in San Francisco, said more than \$747 million remains in a state park bond.

"We have also been very successful in funding a number of projects ranging from wetlands restoration and trails, to playground and park construction with philanthropic support. The specific grant that this project would qualify for would be based on the type of recreational facility that the rail yards will be transformed into," Capita wrote in separate letter.

The group will likely need all the help they can get.

"With all the trouble (Alameda) had getting money for a new library, I don't know how we are going to come up with \$20 million," DeWitt said.

But supporters of the open space plan seem determined to find a way to make it work.

"They talk about there being open space elsewhere in town, on the base, but that open space is paved and it is so dense," Arbuckle said. "Because we had the military here, every backyard, every garage has been turned into something. The thing about Jean is she has a huge heart and she runs from there. When she believes in something, she doesn't give up."

On average, Sweeney said, East Bay communities have 3.4 acres of parks and open space per 1,000 people. In Alameda, that ratio is about 1.3 acres per

person, she said.

Over the last five months, Sweeney and a group of volunteers walked door-to-door and gathered 4,034 signatures, of which 3,637 were found to be from qualified voters. This was the second time Sweeney has worked to get an initiative on the ballot. Last year's petition to save the property fell short by 500 signatures.

Sweeney started her effort to save the Beltline more than two years ago, after learning of a meeting to discuss the fate of the land. She and her husband Jim walked the Beltline and "fell in love" with it.

"We had lived here for 30 years and I said, 'We have a rail yard?' " she said. "It just didn't dawn on me that there was a rail yard. It's just drop-dead gorgeous. The meadowlarks were singing, there were vernal frogs croaking and you could hear the insects. Blackberries were in full bloom and it was so gorgeous. I just fell in love with it."

Two years ago, the property was optioned by developer Mike Valley with Sun Country in Pleasanton to build 150 to 200 homes. But the city also wants to buy the property based on a 1924 agreement it entered into with a group of railroads later named the Alameda Beltline.

The agreement states that if the city sold the Beltline, it could buy the property back with a year's notice and a sum equal to the original cost, plus the cost of any and all additional investments and extensions. The railroad sued to prevent the city's purchase, and the city counter-sued on the basis that the railroad would be breaking the old agreement. The suits are expected to be settled before a measure would go before voters.

510-522-8811
SINCE 1959 • Open 7 Days a Week

9790	89-87 Chevy 1/2 Ton PU, 69-91 Suburban	\$60.99
11690	99 and up Ford Super Duty PU	\$148.99
29070	83-89 Ford Bronco 11 & Ranger	\$139.99
29071	90-94 Ford Explorer, 90-97 Ranger	\$139.99
20990	69-87 Chevy 1/2 Ton PU, Suburban	\$77.99
27997	90-94 Ford Explorer, 90-97 Ranger	\$39.99

Coupon

Park Street Cafe & Eatery

Morning Special 6am-9am with this coupon

Bring a friend. Buy coffee for a friend & get a cup of coffee free from our coffee corner. All breads & pastries baked fresh on premises daily. Expires 1/02/01

1345 Park Street • Alameda 510-523-4191

BEST 2000

Annual Holiday Sale
Nov. 24th thru Dec. 24th

25% off all accessories, home decor and gifts

Store-wide discount on all floor model furniture

10%-40% discount from original price

PILLOW PARK PLAZA
1419 PARK STREET • 510-521-6227

Alameda Coin & Jewelry

ALAMEDA'S NEWEST JEWELRY STORE

Specializing in Custom Jewelry

- Estate Appraisals • Jewelry Repair
- Great Selection Of New & Used Gold Jewelry

10% OFF ALL SILVER JEWELRY WITH THIS AD
Offer Expires 12/31/00

1505 Park Street • Alameda, CA 94501
510-521-7922 Fax 510-521-4781
Hours: Tuesday-Saturday 9:30-5:30

Quick Communication Paging & Cellular

Alameda Cupcake

Cards • Bath & Body Care • Home Accents • Candles
Jewelry • Accessories • Toys & Plush... and just a lot of cool stuff

Gifts For Every Occasion, Every Budget and we'll WRAP 'EM for FREE!

1428 Park Street, Alameda (bet. Santa Clara & Central) tel. 523-8411
Mon. - Fri. 11 am - 7 pm
Sat. 10 am - 7 pm Sun. 12 noon - 6 pm

4048 Piedmont Avenue, CA (bet. Glen & 41st) tel. 952-2411
Mon. - Sat. 10 am - 6 pm
Sun. 10 am - 4 pm

HOLIDAY SALE!

GOLF

Pacific Sports Exchange
1526 Park Street in Alameda
749-9149

MacGregor-PRGR-Square Two-Tonki-KZG-Never Compromise-Carbite-Izzo

AVOID THE HOLIDAY CROWDS!
Save time and give

KAMAKURA Gift Certificates
Available in all denominations

Sure to please the most discriminating palate
A True Taste of Japan

Lunch Mon.-Sat. 11:30-2:30 Dinner Daily 5:00-10:00 PM

2549 Santa Clara Ave. Alameda 521-912

Happy Holidays

The staff of Designer's Closet wishes everyone a healthy happy holiday season

Designer's Closet
1338 Park Street
Alameda, CA 94501
(510) 769-0819