



Class act: Pope Valley Farm Center will offer free art classes thanks to a grant from Arts Council Napa Valley. **N2**

On the rise: Demolition makes way for housing at old HHS campus. **N2**



Honored: Program taps Press head chef, commis for Bocuse d'Or. **N3**



SUNDAY

The Press Democrat

TWO-TIME WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 8, 2026 | VOICE OF SONOMA AND NAPA COUNTIES — AND THE NORTH BAY | PRESSDEMOCRAT.COM

Napa County edition

NAPA

Council OKs subdivision

Project at former vineyard site to bring homes, flood detention work to North Napa

By Edward Booth
EDWARD.BOOTH@PRESSDEMOCRAT.COM

A new 51-home subdivision is headed for a roughly 9.5-acre prop-

erty in North Napa, long home to Biale family vineyards that are now largely removed, with unanimous Napa City Council support.

The Zinfandel Subdivision project is set to bring homes ranging

between 1,004 and 2,362 square feet to the area, along with optional accessory dwelling units. The portion of the site that runs along the Salvador Channel in the south, about 2.26 acres, would be used for flood detention work along with a future bike path.

City officials say the infill project

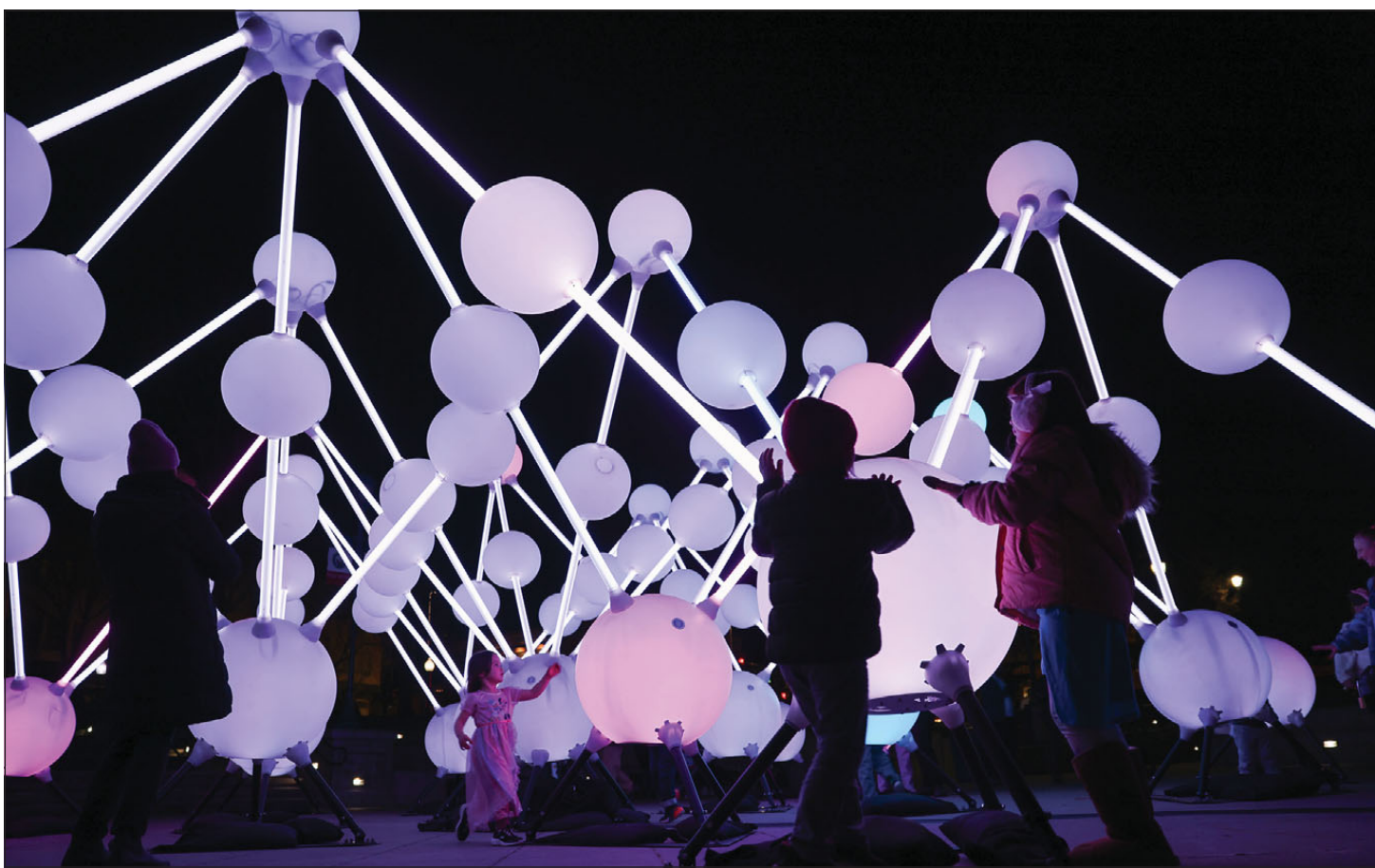
will also help to mitigate flooding in the area with terracing improvements and other upgrades the city worked on with the development team and the Napa County Flood Control and Water Conservation District.

Property owner Bob Biale explained at the council meeting

Tuesday, Feb. 3, that his family has owned the property for nearly a century, but he and his siblings decided that there was a need to sell some vineyard land nearly nine years ago to save the family's other vineyards, following the

See **HOMES** on Page N4

2026 Napa Lighted Art Festival fills downtown with color after dark



Children and adults explore "Affinity," by Amigo & Amigo in Veterans Park as part of the Napa Lighted Art Festival in Napa on Jan. 22. **PHOTOS BY CHRISTOPHER CHUNG — THE PRESS DEMOCRAT**

NAPA COUNTY

School district faces fiscal uncertainty

Serving 80 students, Howell Mountain may run out of money by 2028

By Tarini Mehta
TARINI.MEHTA@PRESSDEMOCRAT.COM

Howell Mountain Elementary School District, serving 80 students in Napa County's Angwin, may run out of cash by 2028 if it does not act urgently.

In a report filed in December, the school board certified its financial condition as "qualified," meaning it may not be able to meet its obligations for the current and next two fiscal years. To address the problem, the Napa County Office of Education has instructed the one-school, K-8 district to reserve the funds required to cover its commitments, prepare a cash flow analysis and submit a fiscal stabilization plan by March 15.

All other Napa County districts have received positive certifications, meaning they will be able to pay their bills for the current and next two years. Meanwhile, other districts in the region — including Santa Rosa City Schools and Rincon Valley Unified — are addressing large budget shortfalls that earned them a "negative" status. Declining enrollment, increased costs in staffing and special education, and loss of one-time funding available during the pandemic are some factors driving deficits in local school districts.

For Howell Mountain, increased costs for staffing and special education programs have raised expenses beyond the district's means, district leaders said. The last time Howell Mountain received a "qualified" status was a decade ago in the 2015-16 school year.

"We are working closely with NCOE to realign some of our priorities," Superintendent Joshua Munoz said in an email to The Press Democrat. "That way, we can stay on budget."

The district's first interim financial report shows that Howell Mountain anticipates its expenditures exceeding its revenues this school year, eroding its reserves from nearly \$1 million in 2024-25 to about \$600,000 in 2025-26. If deficit spending continues, the district projects that reserves will fall to \$200,000 in the 2026-27 school year.

Per state standards, the district's

See **HOWELL** on Page N2

SWITCHING ON THE GOOD VIBES

By Edward Booth
EDWARD.BOOTH@PRESSDEMOCRAT.COM

Napa's eighth annual Lighted Art Festival currently adorns the city's downtown in an array of art installations that come alive with lights and colors after dark. The walkable festival will continue to run through Feb. 15.

Each year the festival — funded by the Napa Tourism Improvement District, Napa Property Improvement District, and downtown businesses with a \$340,000 annual budget — features numerous lighted art installations spread through the downtown and along the city's riverfront. Currently, the art pieces are activated Sunday through Thursday from 6 to 9 p.m. and Friday to Saturday from 6 to 10 p.m. Works this year include "Roaming Gnomes"



Hendrix Lucero, 2, explores the "TrumpetFlowers," by artist Amigo & Amigo at the Napa Lighted Art Festival in Napa on Jan. 2.

See **FESTIVAL** on Page N4

November ballot measure to fund American Canyon park projects explored

By Edward Booth
EDWARD.BOOTH@PRESSDEMOCRAT.COM

American Canyon is figuring out whether to pursue a ballot measure in November that would bring in revenue for large-scale parks and recreation projects such as a community gymnasium or athletic fields.

The City Council on Jan. 20 approved

allocating \$110,000 to assess the community's interest in such a measure, with \$60,000 going to polling firm FM3 Research to carry out a survey of likely voters and \$50,000 for Tripepi Smith & Associates to conduct further outreach informed by the polling results.

The results are expected to return to the City Council at a meeting June 16, at which point the council will decide whether to move

forward with a measure.

Such a measure, should the city choose to send it to voters in November, would coincide with the city's updated Parks and Community Services Master Plan that's expected to be completed in June, according to city officials.

Deputy City Manager Alexandra Ikeda said

See **MEASURE** on Page N4

Read more Napa County news at Napa.PressDemocrat.com



Ment'or taps Press head chef, commis for Bocuse d'Or in France

Competition every 2 years considered "the Olympics" of the culinary world

By Elsa Cavazos
ELSA.CAVAZOS@
PRESSDEMOCRAT.COM

Chef Vincenzo Loseto and Commis Tyler Higson sat in the crowd with hopes but no expectations to be chosen to represent the country at the Bocuse d'Or in Lyon, France in 2027.

The competition is held every two years and is considered "the Olympics" of the culinary world. Two-dozen countries are selected to compete and each country's team is composed of one chef and one commis assistant.

The unveiling of Team USA 2027 took place at a commemorative ceremony on Jan. 25 at The Culinary Institute of America at Copia. The event highlighted various chefs who have competed from 2007 to 2025. "Each new team reflects the strength of Ment'or's mission and the future of American chefs on the global stage," said Chef Gavin Kaysen, Team USA President. "We are proud to stand behind Chef Loseto and Commis Higson as they begin their road to Lyon," he said.

Ment'or is a nonprofit foundation that aims to educate and inspire young culinary professionals by championing the diversity and creativity of the traditions and quality of cuisine in America. Ment'or is led by founders Chefs Daniel Boulud, Thomas Keller, Jérôme Bocuse and Gavin Kaysen as well as an esteemed Culinary Council of more than 60 renowned chefs.

During the event, past chefs who competed with team USA did a Q&A and

talked about their experiences. Chef Timothy Hollingsworth, who represented the team in 2009, said he competed out of peer pressure. "The chefs around me kept saying, 'Tim should do it,' and eventually I said yes," he said. "I had about three months to train while working full time at The French Laundry. There wasn't time to overthink — you just had to move."

For Chef Richard Rosendale, who competed in 2013, it was all about growth. "Early on, it's about medals. But over time, you realize it's about growth — learning discipline, organization, and preparation," Rosendale said.

Chef Thomas Keller emphasized the success is never just the chef but the entire team. He highlighted generations of commis, coaches and mentors, as well as influences such as Julia Child, Chuck Williams and even First Lady Jacqueline Kennedy. "Jacqueline Kennedy believed deeply in culture and education, and she understood that food was part of that cultural identity," Keller said.

Higson said they submitted the application in October. Loseto is 32 and Higson is 19. Loseto was part of a team in 2017 as an assistant but this time he will be the head chef.

"I originally started as a butcher and then went to culinary school," he said about his start which began as a teenager. For Higson, it was similar. He also started at 14 in Idaho, where he is from.

Both work with chef Philip Tessier at Michelin-starred Press restaurant. Tessier was



The unveiling of Team USA 2027 took place at a commemorative ceremony on Jan. 25 at The Culinary Institute of America at Copia. The event highlighted various chefs who have competed in the past from 2007 to 2025. In 2027, Chef Vincenzo Loseto and Commis Tyler Higson will represent Team USA. **CULINARY INSTITUTE OF AMERICA**

the first American chef to win silver at Bocuse d'Or.

Tessier believes in his team and his support is evident. "It's been a long road, long journey but it's exciting to see him have a dream come true," he said.

Loseto said he tried to "get his foot in the door as much as he could," but being chosen to compete feels "pretty surreal". His main tip: surround yourself with the right people and eventually "I guess it pays off and we are here today."

For Commis Higson it's a similar feeling. "Just pure excitement, I never thought I would be in this position,"

he said.

Tessier stressed this is an opportunity to inspire future generations and for others to get involved in young chefs competitions such as this one.

The reception for the event featured food stations from multiple chefs and restaurants in the Napa Valley area who showcased dishes for the chefs to try. Bouchon Bakery, Loveski Deli, Stateline Road Smokehouse and more were present.

Chef Darryl Bell from Stateline said this is a way of supporting each other. He was asked to do a food station and he said he was happy to do it. For him, he said, it was

a way of "nursing back" to the community he has received support from.

Chef Jade Mauricio Cunningham presented a Filipino dish and her partners Amparo and Eric Gonzales were in attendance. Eric said "to see how much pride and to know we can compete worldwide is amazing."

Liberty Wood, chef Loseto's girlfriend, was quickly embraced by her partner after he heard he was competing. Wood said even though chefs work really hard, it is who they surround themselves with who really see them.

"We're the ones going to bed every night while they're

still at work, cooking dinner by ourselves while they're still at work. You're making your own sacrifices, being with chefs,

But the motivation is very inspiring. I guess to be around somebody who wants something so bad," Wood said.

"Hug your partner. Love them, come home to them, be there for them.

You can do it all. You can have the life you want to live, you can pursue your dreams, but take care of the people around you. And it will all work out. If you're there for the people that you love, the rest will fall into place," she said.



The city of Napa is exploring whether to purchase a 1.25-acre downtown block that contains a former pump station, playground and skate park, pictured Feb. 3. **EDWARD BOOTH — THE PRESS DEMOCRAT**

Napa explores purchase of block, home to former pump station

The West Street site also holds a playground and skate park

By Edward Booth
EDWARD.BOOTH@
PRESSDEMOCRAT.COM

The city of Napa may purchase a 1.25-acre downtown block at 1210 West St. that holds a long-decommissioned Napa Sanitation District pump station, a playground and a skate park.

The Napa City Council directed city staff to begin preliminary discussions with the Napa Sanitation District about potentially buying the property at meeting Tuesday, Feb. 3. City staff will report back to the council about how those discussions go at a later date.

The sanitation district board — a five-person board that consists of a mix of two city of Napa elected officials,

one Napa County elected official and two appointed members — declared the property exempt surplus land in July 2024, after declaring in July 2008 that the parcel was unnecessary for any district use. Neal Harrison, the city's economic development manager, said at the meeting that city staff believe the property could bring benefits to the community and fit into council goals related to economic development or maintaining public spaces.

Harrison said in an email that price appraisals of the property and negotiations will come later in the process.

Council members at the meeting said they wanted to at least begin conversa-

tions with NapaSan about a possible sale. Council member Bernie Narvaez said it would be exciting if the city could make the site into something that better serves the community, but city leaders need to figure out whether that's financially viable first.

Council member Mary Luros, who sits on the NapaSan board, said that the district has been trying to figure out what to do with the property for a long time, and she thought the site could represent a great opportunity for the city. But she said she wanted to know more about what demolition of the pump station would cost and involve, and said she'd be interested in keeping the park that's currently there.

The city is also exploring the feasibility of build-

ing a new parking garage in the parking lot area across Pearl Street from the pump station site — known as "Lot X" — which is currently the temporary home of the Napa Farmers Market on Tuesdays and Saturdays. The council on Feb. 3 approved a \$223,195 contract with the San Francisco-based Walker Consultants to conduct a downtown parking structure feasibility study, with Lot X and the lot located behind the Goodman Library identified as two potential locations. That study will evaluate the sites, culminating in a recommended preferred site for City Council consideration at a later date, according to a staff report.

You can reach Staff Writer Edward Booth at 707-521-5281 or edward.booth@pressdemocrat.com.



Oxbow Public Market was named Large Business of the Year at the Napa Chamber of Commerce's 136th Annual Meeting and Awards Luncheon on Jan. 30. **ALVIN JORNADA — THE PRESS DEMOCRAT**

Napa chamber honors standout members, businesses at luncheon

By Elsa Cavazos
ELSA.CAVAZOS@
PRESSDEMOCRAT.COM

The Napa Chamber of Commerce recently recognized standout members and local businesses at its 136th Annual Meeting and Awards Luncheon.

About 400 people attended the event Jan. 30 at the Meritage Resort and Spa, where the chamber recognized individuals and organizations making an impact in the community.

Honorees for Small and Large Business, Sustainable Business, Community Benefit Organization, Spirit of Hospitality, and Ambassador of the year were nominated and selected by members of the community.

Oxbow Public Market was named Large Business of the Year, while Heritage Eats received Small Business of the Year. Domaine Carneros was honored as Sustainable Business of the Year for its long-standing commitment to responsible practices. Wine Down Media,

including KVYN/The Vine and KVON/MegaMix, was recognized as Distinguished Member of the Year, highlighting local media's role in telling Napa's stories and keeping the community connected.

Jeff Durham of Gentleman Farmer Wines received the Spirit of Hospitality award in recognition of his efforts to make all visitors feel welcome. Aldea Children & Family Services was named Community Benefit Organization of the Year, recognized for its ongoing work supporting children and families across the valley. Janise Dawson received Ambassador of the Year, honoring her role as an advocate within the chamber community.

The luncheon closed with the presentation of Citizen of the Year award, given posthumously to Paul William Hicks, recognizing years of leadership, service and dedication to Napa Valley.

Testimonials from the winners are available for viewing online at napachamber.com.