

The art show goes on

■ Despite budget woes, Petaluma Art Center shows continue into 2019. **PAGE C1**

Sports: Baseball season not far off
Casa, Petaluma in elite Boras Tournament. **PAGE B1**

Food: Dark beers for dark days of winter
Stouts, porters will keep you warm. **PAGE D1**



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■ CAMP FIRE VICTIMS ■

A home for the holidays



PHOTOS BY CRISSY PASCUAL / ARGUS-COURIER STAFF

Larry Prongos lost everything he owned except his cat in the Paradise fire. Thanks to PEP Housing he was able to move into an apartment in Petaluma on Christmas Eve. Larry is overcome with gratitude for all the things he was given in his new place.

Two who lost homes in Butte County fire rehoused in Petaluma on Christmas Eve

By **YUSEF BAIG**
ARGUS-COURIER STAFF

It was as if hell had taken over Paradise that morning. As Larry Prongos, 66, anxiously drove his car at a crawl down Elliot Road on Nov. 8, the two-lane thoroughfare had become four rows wide, filled with cars fleeing the record-setting death and destruction of the Camp Fire. Vehicles were plowing onto the road and colliding without care, he said. Flames as high as the towering trees above were burning on both sides of the motorway, forcing families to abandon their cars and take off on foot when the slow pace of traffic became unbearable. "I really thought we were going to be incinerated to death in our cars," said Prongos. There was no emergency alert or any official warning

that life-saving evacuations were needed. For the San Francisco native, it was the unusual wailing from his cat Leedo that prompted him to open the door, where he discovered flames at the end of his street. After hours of painstakingly inching through the Butte County town, driving past exploding propane tanks and the fiery remains of a foothill community that lost nearly 14,000 homes, Leedo stopped howling once they made it onto Skyway Road, the westward connector that thousands of residents used to escape to Chico. Another driver on Skyway that day was 76-year-old Emily Haiston, a Paradise resident of 21 years. She had been fixated on her radio that morning, she said, listening to updates until the firestorm reached Pentz Road on the



Mary Stompe, executive director of PEP Housing, helps decorate the apartment where Larry Prongos would be moving into on Christmas Eve. Members of the Rotary Club of Novato Sunrise Evening volunteered to set up and decorate the apartment.

eastern edge of the town and she made the decision to grab her three cats, Big Boy, Milo and Sammy, and flee. Prongos and Haiston are just two of the estimated 50,000 people that were displaced by the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California

history. With most of those victims struggling to find a home in a state that had already been marred by a housing crisis, Petaluma's PEP Housing is doing what it can to help. The nonprofit, which pro-

See Home, A4

2018 a year of transition for Petaluma

Big projects made headlines while bathtubs became unlikely divider

By **MATT BROWN**
ARGUS-COURIER STAFF

From a changed physical landscape with more housing projects under construction to a changed political landscape with a new city council and school board, Petaluma witnessed transformation in 2018. Fires again on the region's periphery served to unite the community while an unlikely divisive issue emerged in a bathtub public art installation. Several long simmering controversial projects cropped back up or found resolution in the past year, including a proposed Safeway gas station, a deal to operate Petaluma Valley Hospital, a Helen Putnam Park extension and a ribbon cutting for Tolay Park. A sex scandal that rocked the Petaluma Fire Department came to light this year, leading to swift disciplinary action. Meanwhile, the transportation network around Petaluma continued to benefit from funding increases. A look back at the top local stories of 2018:

Housing crisis persists despite progress

Several large scale housing projects were approved or broke ground in the past year, but Petaluma remained mired in a regional housing crisis. Rising rents and home prices combined with low vacancy

See Year, A5

City accused whistleblower of misconduct, embezzlement

Employee who raised issue with water tests allegedly misused funds

By **YUSEF BAIG**
ARGUS-COURIER STAFF

As Petaluma officials actively investigate the merits of a claim that the Public Works and Utilities Department mishandled positive bacterial tests from its water systems and wrongfully suspended a high-ranking employee, allegations of misconduct have swirled around the supposed whistleblower. Assistant Operations Manager Patrick Dirrane, 58, levied a series of wide-ranging accusations against city officials in an expansive claim filed on Dec. 3. In addition to what he perceives as discrimination, harassment and unjust retaliation, he also said he has been defamed by nearly two dozen city employees over the last six months. Dirrane, who was placed on administrative leave in February, did not respond to an interview request. He is seeking compensation in excess

See Water, A7

City offloading Klaas Theater

Polly Klaas Foundation to take over city-owned church building, renovate community theater

By **YUSEF BAIG**
ARGUS-COURIER STAFF

Polly Klaas wasn't the best student or a top athlete. Before her death 25 years ago, kidnapped and murdered by Richard Allen Davis in a wicked incident that put the eyes of the nation on Petaluma, the rambunctious 12-year-old excelled as a performer, and was a lover of song and dance. She aspired to act professionally and enjoyed being a part of school plays. To honor her memory and pay tribute

to her passions, the Polly Klaas Foundation is pursuing an agreement with the city to take ownership of the Polly Klaas Performing Arts Center, a forgotten downtown building located in a triangular block at the intersection of English, Post and Western streets. The Recreation, Music and Parks Commission last week pushed forward a recommendation for Petaluma City Council approval, supporting a transfer of the 107-year-old property once the nonprofit successfully completes a \$1.5 million fundraising campaign for renovations. "We feel the time has come to meet the

See Klaas, A3



A rendering of the remodeled Polly Klaas Community Theater.

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WEATHER

FORECAST

Today	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
60°/37°	61°/33°	57°/32°	55°/35°

RAINFALL

Dec. 19:	00.02 in.
Dec. 20:	00.00 in.
Dec. 21:	00.23 in.
Dec. 22:	00.00 in.

Dec. 23:	00.00 in.	Year to date (since
Dec. 24:	00.46 in.	Oct. 1):
Dec. 25:	00.00 in.	5.50 in.
Avg. to date:	9.01 in.	Last year to date:
		5.20 in.