

Local

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Top story | CHRISTMAS GIFT BUYING

It's a sensible season

Holiday shoppers being thoughtful about gift selection, spending

BY CHRISTINE L. PETERSON
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Bob Brown plans to indulge the kids this Christmas, but when it comes to him and his wife, he's keeping it simple. "Rather than going crazy with lots of gifts, that's how we're expressing ourselves to each other," Brown said while selecting stocking stuffers. The 57-year-old perused the displays at Bobbi's Hallmark, he said, because it's one of his wife's shopping "spots."

Brown had stopped at Sweet Surrender too, but then decided it was too early to buy cupcakes for Christmas and he'd take his wife there after the holiday.

Like Brown, many shoppers out in force Saturday were thoughtful — about spending within their budget and selecting just the right gifts for special people in their lives.

Kathy Thomas, 43, acknowledging she was a "little late this year," looked to buy for co-workers, neighbors and family. She had help from daughter Heather, 11, who pointed out items she liked, such as magnetic necklaces and Webkinz stuffed animals.

"I'm trying to do some little, Please see **SHOPPING** / B3



ASHLEY TOMASINI / THE CALIFORNIAN
Ashley Tomasini, a Kohl's floor associate, was in the Christmas mood, wearing her Santa hat Saturday during a big sales day for the store in the Rosedale area.

Bakersfield sees record rainfall for date

BY CHRISTINE L. PETERSON
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You may think you tromped through a lot of raindrops Saturday — and if you were outdoors, you'd be right.

Bakersfield set a record for Dec. 18 rainfall with at least 1.14 inches as of 7 p.m., more than triple the .30-inch record set in 1921, said Jim Bagnall, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Hanford. And the day wasn't even over.

That swift rain flooded downtown Bakersfield streets, taxing storm drains, pushing people to sweep water away from their businesses and even, in at least one case, lay down sandbags.

Name Your Price thrift store manager Chris Ott worked with general manager Walter Hines to put stuffed bags in front of their shop as the rain slammed down around 4 p.m.

They both expressed concern for the clothes in the shop.

Hines, who had just driven in from Frazier Park with a load of furniture for the store on Chester Avenue between 23rd and 24th streets, said he'd "never seen Chester this bad."

Ott said they called the fire department about the water, but were told there were so many emergencies that sandbags might be a good choice.

Turns out the previous tenants had left some at the back of the store.

The rain also led to reports of leaks in buildings, rocks in the roadway on Highway 223, traffic control on Union Avenue and flooding in Buttonwillow.

One lane of Highway 178 through the canyon was closed starting around 5:15 p.m. CalTrans reported rockslides, and the road was slated to be closed overnight.

A high-wind advisory was in effect Saturday night on Interstate 5 from the Los Angeles-Kern

Please see **RAINFALL** / B3

Furniture, home accessory stores seeking comeback

BY COURTENAY EDELHART
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The announcement that a new HomeGoods store is opening in Bakersfield next year is a shot in the arm for a sector that could really use one.

The fortunes of furniture and home accessory sales tend to rise and fall with the health of the real estate market, which needless to say has seen better days.

Locally and nationally, furniture and home fashion stores are dropping like flies.

McMahan's Furniture, Summer's Furniture, Taylor & Taylor and Linens N' Things are just a few of the recession's casualties.

But HomeGoods, a discount home fashions store owned by TJX Companies Inc. in Framingham, Mass., is tentatively scheduled to open Feb. 27 in a former Long's Drug Store at 5510 Stockdale Highway. That's almost immediately adjacent to Bed Bath & Beyond.

The opening is part of a larger plan to convert 91 A.J. Wright apparel stores into T.J. Maxx, Marshalls or HomeGoods stores and close the remaining 71 A.J. Wright locations, including the local one on Niles Street.

Spokeswoman Robyn Arvedon said TJX believes the HomeGoods brand can thrive even in a soft real estate market.

"Consumers are more value conscious than ever and are looking for shopping options that provide high quality brands and fashion for the home," she said in a statement issued last week. "We know that our new store will be a welcome addition to the local area because our outstanding prices allow shoppers to affordably update their homes without sacrificing quality or style."

Please see **HOME** / B3



CASEY CHRISTIE / THE CALIFORNIAN

Working for peanuts

The "It's a Charlie Brown Christmas" party honoring the late Aurelia Pena was held on Camino Primavera on Saturday night. The event featured Santa and the whole Peanuts gang. The photo above includes Pena's portrait on the right. Pena passed away in August 2009. She had 12 children, more than 30 grandchildren, 75 great-grandchildren and several great-great-grandchildren. The group, Aurelia's Angels, put the party on. Some of Pena's children have said they were once children who at one time needed a helping hand, so each year the family helps out another family in need with food, clothing and Christmas gifts. At right, Santa had his hands full with Faith Davis, left, and Aubree Aguirre, in her Woodstock outfit.



Lois Henry CALIFORNIAN COLUMNIST

New water board member shaking things up

If you weren't at the Kern County Water Agency board meeting Wednesday (how could you have missed it?) then you probably didn't notice the passing of an era.

It was Shafter farmer and longtime board member Fred Starrh's last meeting as director of the Agency's Division 1 after 28 years of service.

It's true that at 81 Starrh's not a young guy anymore and serving on the Agency takes a lot of energy, which he gave routinely.

But Starrh didn't step down. He was beaten, soundly, in the last election.

On election night I watched slack jawed as the numbers came in — 62 percent to 37 percent — for some guy named Ted Page.



Starrh

I say slack jawed because first, water board seats are hardly ever contested and second, who the heck was Ted Page and how was he getting such huge numbers?

Something was clearly afoot in Kern's ever stealthy water world.

OK, Page is not a complete unknown, having served on the Semitropic Water District board since 1983.

But, again, water board seats are usually about as sleepy as public utility district seats.

Unless, that is, constituents are upset over something. Hmmmm ... what could it be?

Here's a clue: The Rosedale-Rio Bravo Water

District, which is not in Division 1, threw its support behind Page with ads, signs and even a letter to the editor from board president Wes Selvidge. I asked General Manager Eric Averett what was up.

"Ted engaged Rosedale even before the issue of wells in the district going dry came up," he said. "We were impressed he took the time to work with us."

Uh huh. Leave it to Starrh himself to cut through the corporate palaver.

"They (Rosedale-Rio Bravo) felt I was antagonistic toward them, so they came out with ads that weren't helpful to me,"

Please see **HENRY** / B4



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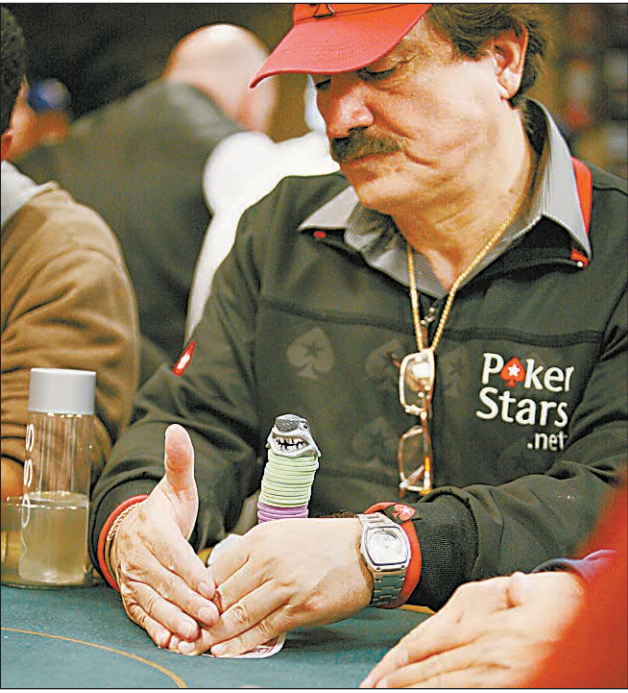
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CASEY CHRISTIE / THE CALIFORNIAN
Professional poker player Humberto Brenes of Costa Rica checks out his freshly dealt hand Saturday at the Golden West Casino on South Union Avenue. Brenes was among the players in the PokerStars Caribbean Adventure Series No Limit Hold 'Em Satellite Tournament.

Digest

Detectives were on their way to Rosamond at about 7:30 p.m. Saturday to investigate an in-custody death, according to a Kern County Sheriff's Department news release. No other information was available Saturday.
— *The Californian*

The AVOID the 18 Task Force conducted DUI and driver's license checkpoints on Calloway Drive on Friday night, according to a law enforcement news release. There were arrests for DUI, and citations were issued for driving without a license, driving on a sus-

pending or revoked license and vehicle code violations. A saturation patrol was also scheduled for Saturday.
— *The Californian*

FA probation/parole compliance check was conducted in Rosamond about 7 a.m. Friday. There were 16 arrests, of which 14 were for felony violations and two were for misdemeanors. The arrests were for narcotic violations, violations of terms of the parolees' parole agreement and warrant arrests.
— *Kern County Sheriff's Department*

Sound Off

Political cartoons strike a nerve

This feedback forum is designed to give readers an easy way to voice criticisms and compliments or ask questions about news coverage. Questions — which may be edited for space — are answered each Sunday by Executive Editor John Arthur.

Reader: On page 15 of the Monday, Nov. 29, newspaper the little political cartoon says "It's a small price to pay to see Obama fail." I mean, whether you voted for him or not, it's just hitting a little below the belt and one sided for a party. I don't like it.
— *Michael*

Arthur: Editorial Page Editor Robert Price responds:
Political cartoons are supposed to be one-sided. Their satirical take on current events is supposed to inspire an emotional reaction, be it laughter or outrage. That Nov. 29 cartoon, by Mike Keefe of the *Denver Post*, parodied Republican opposition to the New START treaty, suggesting political considerations are putting global security at risk.

The same day, we published a column by retired Lt. Gen. Dirk Jameson, former chief of staff of the U.S. Strategic Command, who expressed similar concerns.

We try to represent the entire political spectrum with our selection of cartoons, and I think we do a pretty good job.

Reader: I appreciate our newspaper being plastic wrapped; although it gives just some protection from rain. What is a bother is that the wrapper

seems to be a tad bit smaller than previous wrappers and when combined with the thinner sheets of paper now used, results in the top ends curled.

Would these curls be eliminated if the papers were inserted fold-end first? Thanks for answering one of life's ponderers.

— *Jon Crawford*

Arthur: Generally, reports **Circulation Director Michael Boody**, carriers will put the thinnest part of the paper in the bag first just because it makes for an easier fit when they are bagging hundreds of copies at a time.

Reader: When Herb Benham writes a column, the paper states, "These are the opinions of Herb Benham, not necessarily those of *The Californian*." Benham writes about himself: I did this, I did that, I went here. Since it's not news of interest to readers, why the disclaimer?

— *Lance Williams*

Arthur: I completely disagree that Herb's columns are "not news of interest to readers," because, in fact, Herb's column is one of our most popular features.

It's true, however, that many of his personal observations are not sharply political and thus don't really need the disclaimer that is on other columns.

However we like to use this with all our opinion writers and, as you know, Herb has many opinions!

Kudos: Here's a note about recent coverage of an abused dog:

Reader: I just wanted

John Arthur EXECUTIVE EDITOR

The *Californian* staff welcome your comments and suggestions. To offer your input by phone, please call 395-7649 and leave your comments in a voice-mail message or send an e-mail message to soundoff@bakersfield.com. Please be sure to include your phone number so we can call you if we need more information.



HENRY: Page downright cagey on Kern River

CONTINUED FROM B1

he said.

As chair of the Agency's water banking committee, Starrh did not agree that its Pioneer Project operations were damaging Rosedale-Rio Bravo's groundwater supplies. (Rosedale-Rio Bravo has since filed a lawsuit over the issue.)

"I didn't think they had the statistics to back it up," he said. "And that caused them to turn against me."

Oh yeah, AND Page's employer, John



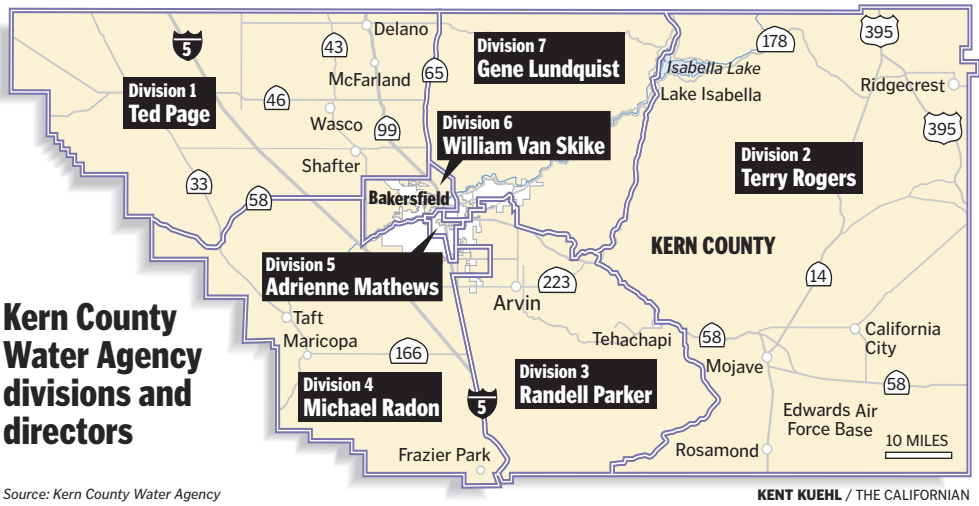
Vidovich who owns a large and growing westside farming operation called Sandridge Partners, has had a litigious relationship with the Starrh family.

The lawsuit, yes, over water, was resolved. But bad blood remained, Starrh said.

"He's a big grower in the area and wanted to see his person (Page) more involved in water."

As an aside, you may remember that Vidovich made headlines in 2009 when he sold 14,000 acre feet of water out of Kings County to the Mojave Water Agency in Southern California for \$73 million.

Page's bid for Starrh's seat had absolutely nothing to do with Vidovich, Page said.



Kern County Water Agency divisions and directors

Lois Henry online
Read archived columns by Lois Henry at Bakersfield.com/henry.

He does work for Sandridge as a consultant on special projects such as land acquisition, buying water and regulatory and legal issues, he said.

He said no one was more surprised when he won the Agency seat than he was, he said. He only entered the race after the person he had encouraged to run bowed out.

Why the zeal to unseat Starrh after all these years?

"I felt the board needed a new line of thinking," he said in a low-toned drawl. "For a lot of years, they've been focused on the big picture,

the delta. That's good and all. But we need the Agency to engage (his emphasis, not mine) locally."

That means building relationships, consensus and compromise instead of going to war over every disagreement.

And it means managing Kern's local assets for the betterment of all the member units rather than pinning all hope on a delta fix.

Even if a peripheral canal — or tunnel — to bring water around the Sacramento-San Joaquin delta were approved tomorrow it would take a decade to build. In the meantime, he said, local water issues need to be dealt with.

"The next 10 to 12 years will be crucial," Page said. Unemployment, he added, is at 20 percent in his district as a direct result of the loss of state water due to environmental restrictions on pumping water from the delta.

"Some areas of independent ag just, flat won't make it waiting on the delta."

So, lets look at some local issues.

What does he think of the Rosedale-Rio Bravo lawsuits against the Pioneer and Kern Water Bank projects? What about out-of-county sales of water from local districts? And where does he stand on the current fight over Kern River water that may be up for grabs?

While he had concerns about pumping by the Pioneer Project, he wouldn't say whether he thought the Agency was wrong in its dealings with Rosedale-Rio Bravo, only that "If there's a way to find a compromise that's always better than going to court."

As for out-of-county water sales or "exchanges," he said as long as a district was in a positive balance he didn't see a problem. (Semitropic, which has its own ground water bank, is an active participant in exchanges and other water wheeling throughout the state.)

He was downright cagey on the Kern River.

The Agency is also knee deep in litigation over the river along with several other ag districts. They have banded together to oppose the state's finding that there is water available on the river and the City of Bakersfield's quest to get that water to run down the river bed.

"What happens to the Kern River affects us all," was all he would say to my many and varied attempts to get a peek at his position on this issue.

Guess he learned a thing or two about playing his cards close to the vest in his 27 years on the Semitropic board.

He said he realizes going from Semitropic to the Agency is somewhat like making the leap from a local school board to the state legislature in terms of complexity, size, money and politics.

But he figures he'll hold his own.

"I'm not a rubber stamp kind of guy who'll accept whatever staff puts in front of me," he said. "I ask a lot of questions."

Excellent. Because I can't wait to hear some answers!

Opinions expressed in this column are those of Lois Henry, not The Bakersfield Californian. Her column appears Wednesdays and Sundays. Comment at <http://www.bakersfield.com>, call her at 395-7373 or e-mail lhenny@bakersfield.com

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