

Inside — Wine truck crashes, slows Upvalley traffic



Weather watch
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Rain
Full report page D4

Napa Valley Register

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Wednesday, February 29, 2012

Year 149 • No. 194

YOUR BUSINESS — C1

NEWS — A6

SPORTS — B1

50 cents

SmartMeter opt-out sparks little Napa interest

Traditional meters now come with extra fees

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Californians who reject newer, wireless gas and electric meters can now ask for mechanical ones instead. But in Napa County and much of the state, the apparent response so far has been slight.

Since PG&E began this month offering customers the chance to remove SmartMeters from their homes and businesses, only 28 of about 93,000 customers in Napa County have taken up the offer, utility spokesman Greg Snapper last week.

As of last Wednesday, 6,377 PG&E customers statewide have requested the older mechanical meters.

That total includes both those seeking to keep existing analog meters and others asking for SmartMeters to be removed. PG&E has installed more than 8.8 million SmartMeters, with plans to raise that total to 10 million by midyear.

PG&E earlier predicted up to 150,000 customers would choose mechanical devices.

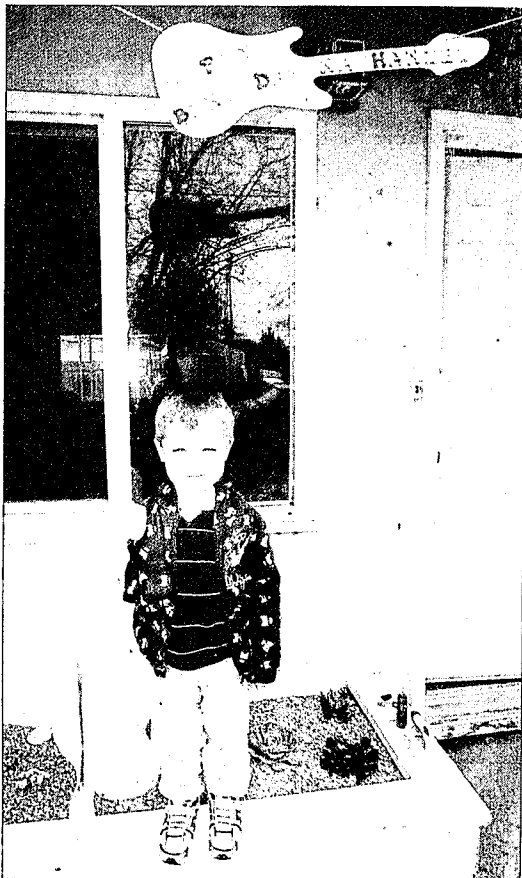
Customers wanting to keep or revert to a mechanical meter must pay PG&E \$75, plus \$10 a month. Low-income residents pay \$10 up front and \$5 monthly.

PG&E and other utilities in recent years have rolled out millions of SmartMeters, which use radio transmitters to relay power usage information and eliminate the need for employees to check individual meters.

But opponents and officials in several counties have protested their use, arguing the electromagneticism produced by the transmitters raises the risk of migraines, brain tumors and other conditions. PG&E has argued that

See METERS, Page A2

Four times the fun for local 'leaplings'



For the first time in his life, four-year-old Nathaniel Buyski of American Canyon will celebrate his birthday on the day he was born. He is a Leap Day baby born in 2008. According to his mother, Melissa, his birthday is usually celebrated on Feb. 28. J.L. Sonal/Register

Feb. 29 birthdays a source of ribbing

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Inside

Why do leap years exist?

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Rich Arnold, by the numbers, is either unusually youthful or merely young of heart.

The St. Helenan, a winemaker at Robert Mondavi Winery for 38 years, turns 60 today, but as a leap year baby he is celebrating his birthday for only the 15th time.

"It's definitely a birthday of notoriety; when the day comes around, people focus on that

day," he said last week, apparently good-natured about his distinction.

"It's definitely one of the most unusual days for having a birthday, other than maybe Christmas," Arnold said of Feb. 29. "Actually, I was sup-

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CalFire may bill landowner for cost of fire at Soda Canyon

Legal brush fire got 'out of hand,' official says

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CalFire is adding up receipts for last week's fire in the Soda Canyon area, a bill that may have to be paid by the party responsible for starting the blaze that devoured 200 acres of wild land.

The total cost to suppress the Soda Fire, which started Thursday afternoon and burned to Saturday morning, is unknown but CalFire Division Chief David Shew said the final total will be high.

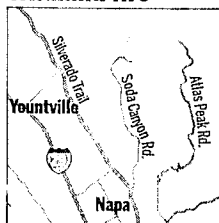
"We're all curious to know what it is," he said Tuesday afternoon. "It will be pretty pricey. The cost of having helicopters flying for days is costly."

At the height of the burn, which threatened three homes but damaged none, there were 200 firefighters on fire lines, Shew said. Crews from CalFire, Napa County Fire, and the city fire departments in American Canyon, Napa, St. Helena and Calistoga all participated. Two fire captains sustained minor injuries, one a twisted ankle and the other a back spasm.

A legal brush fire started by a property management company that was clearing land for a vineyard got out of control, causing the blaze, Shew said.

"This time of year, there is no requirement for an actual permit (to burn) because it's the

Wildland fire



Kelly Doren/Register

slideshow

See photos of the Soda Canyon fire at <http://j.mp/z4rNvz>

normal time of year we would see burns," Shew said. "We'd normally have rain."

The company had set up a perimeter around the fire using boulders, but wind likely carried sparks or embers past it, Shew said. He said he did not know the name of the company.

Once CalFire tallies the cost of suppression, the district attorney could seek reimbursement from the company responsible for the fire, Shew said.

"State law provides that anyone who is found responsible or accountable for a fire that damages property can be held liable for the cost of suppression," Shew said.

Shew said he and others at CalFire have been trying to remember another fire of this magnitude ever burning in February, but have come up short.

"This was pretty surprising to see this kind of fire activity this time of year," he said. "This means that the fuels are extremely dry."



Kate Torres, 11, records a song at the in-home studio of artist/producer Rudy Perez. Torres has been singing since she was 3 years old, coming home after church and surprising her mom Karla Torres with the lyrics she had memorized. Jorgen Gulliksen/Register

Social media amplify Napa fifth-grader's voice

Torres builds YouTube following

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Kate Torres' mother, Karla, remembers the first time she appreciated her daughter's desire to sing in the spotlight.

"We were at church and she just told me she was going to go up to the altar and sing. I said, 'What?' but she just went up and started



playvideo

See Kate Torres' video on the YouTube channel TheKateMusic, or at www.napavalleyregister.com

singing."

Kate is a soft-spoken fifth grader at Napa Valley Language Academy whose singing voice startles listeners with its power. She carries herself in a confident, yet unassuming fashion, and has a smile that lights up a room.

With her mother's enthusiastic support and the help of a local producer, 11-year-old Kate Torres has achieved budding acclaim on YouTube and Facebook.

Rudy Perez, a local artist and producer, has been helping Kate record a few songs, including hits by Adele, for free.

Perez, whose own music ranges from reggaeton to hip-hop to cumbiaton, has been able to use social media as a way of showcasing his

own talent. His music has been played on radio stations in San Francisco, Santa Rosa and San Jose, along with having appeared on Univision 14 KDTV.

"I have worked with kids who were about to drop out of school or were involved with drugs and gangs, but with Kate it is a lot easier and there is a lot less drama," Perez said.

Kate favors R&B songs, producing covers of hits by

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