

The hometown  
newspaper for  
Menlo Park,  
Atherton,  
Portola Valley  
and Woodside.

# The Almanac

PHONE: 854-2626 ■ VOL. XXXIII, NO. 28 ■ March 18, 1998 ■ 50c

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### MENLO PARK

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### EDITORIAL

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### FOOD & DRINK

New kitchens bring  
Sunset magazine's  
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## Floods of '98

What have we learned from the deluge that triggered landslides and  
flooded homes? The search for solutions begins. *See Page 12*

## Woodside road-repair idea: match funds from residents

By BARBARA WOOD

Since Woodside voters won't tax themselves to fix the town's deteriorating roads, Woodside Town Council member Clifford Greyson has come up with a unique idea for stretching the town's limited funds: let neighbors raise half the money to fix their own streets.

Mr. Greyson's plan, presented at the March 10 Town Council meeting, would actually go further than fixing potholes. The proposed Woodside Public Works Matching Funds Program would also make it possible to add private donations to town funds to pay for projects such as drainage improvements, sewer extensions and water supply expansions.

In September 1997, Woodside voters, by a margin of nearly three to one, defeated a proposed utility tax. The tax would have funded \$4 million in road work, which a 1995 study said the town's roads need. Since then the town has been scrambling to find another way to pay for the roads.

Council members expressed support for Mr. Greyson's idea

and asked Town Manager Susan George to return with a more detailed proposal. Ms. George said she should have a report for the council in April.

Mr. Greyson's plan calls for neighborhood groups to come up with projects which then could be approved by the town if found to make a "major contribution to public welfare." He suggested the town would match neighborhood-raised money dollar for dollar up to a \$50,000 maximum, with \$125,000 in town money allocated in the first year. The town would manage the projects and help the neighbors with financing, if requested, by creating assessment districts or issuing bonds.

Participation by neighbors would be voluntary and Mr. Greyson suggested a cap on individual contributions and a minimum involvement of five donors for each project.

Mr. Greyson said the plan would assure that town money is spent on projects with neighborhood support. "Nothing speaks like a pocketbook," he said.

If such a plan is adopted, one of the first applicants may be the residents of West Glen Way. Be-

fore Mr. Greyson had even presented his plan, former councilman and mayor Robert Susk asked the town to consider repairing West Glen Way, with the residents of the street providing part of the money.

"It's a disaster," he said of the road. "It's sink holes, just pure deterioration, disintegration."

Mr. Greyson's proposal came after Town Manager George presented the semi-annual report on the town's 45 miles of public roads.

In her report, Ms. George recommended that the town's annual spending on road projects include at least \$125,000 in general fund money, funds that are not specifically earmarked for any project.

Over the past five years the town has never spent more than \$50,000 a year in general fund money on the roads. Other road funding comes from state funds, state and federal grants, and the road-impact fees paid on Woodside building projects.

Ms. George also suggested that any general fund money left over at the end of a budget year go to the road program. A similar strategy was used for early payoff of the town's short-term debt.

The council put off a vote on the report's spending proposals until it can further consider Mr. Greyson's matching plan.

## Portola Valley may allow parking at Ford Field

By MARION SOFTKY

If it stays reasonably dry between now and April 18, the people coming for the opening day of Little League can use a temporary parking lot at Dorothy Ford Park, since the regular parking lot is still likely to be mostly covered with mud moved from the slides on upper Alpine Road.

If there is much more rain and the field is too wet, the Little League will have to work out some kind of shuttle to get kids and families and friends to the game.

The Portola Valley Town Council decided March 11 to allow use of the park for parking so long as it is temporary and can be restored to its natural state. But no paving or rock, if the ground is too wet, members insisted. "No gray rock. We'd have to say no," said Mayor Gary Nielsen.

The town will fence the parking area to keep people and cars off sensitive areas of the park. It will also post no parking signs on Alpine Road and Westridge Drive.

In other storm-related news, Town Administrator Alex McIntyre announced that the Federal Highway Administration will pay

the full cost of repairing the slide on Portola Road near the Woodside boundary within 180 days.

FHWA officials also toured upper Alpine Road where a mile of road has been closed due to some 30 slides. "They were impressed," Mr. McIntyre said.

It is still too early to know the full damage and cost of repairing upper Alpine Road, said Town Engineer Betty Irvine. The town has retained engineering consultants Wilsey and Ham to work with geologists and prepare cost estimates to fix the road.

The town is hoping that the FHWA will come through with 88 percent of the money needed.

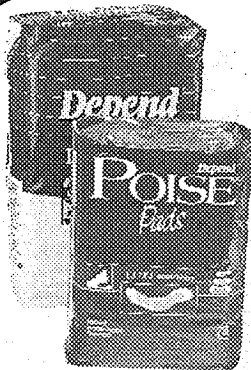
Several residents of Portola Valley and Vista Verde, above the slides, urged the council to speed up the process, particularly since fire season is approaching, and access is important for fire trucks.

Don Lee, spokesman for the newly formed Committee to Save Alpine Road, asked to be included in the town's decision process. "We would like to have input on the size of restoration," he said.

Mayor Nielsen promised to hold a community meeting when more information is available.

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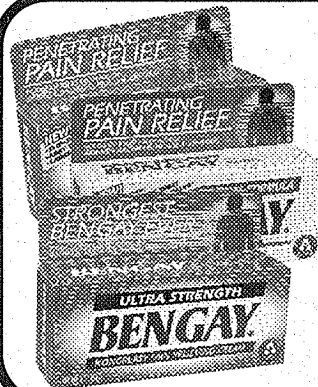
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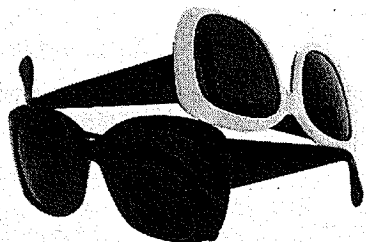
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## Cover story

# Storms of '98

(Continued from previous page)

fall data since 1925, reported a record 18.51 inches of rain in February. By contrast, the National Weather Service measured 12.40 inches of rain in Redwood City, where 3.26 inches is average for February. In Skylonda, the California Division of Forestry recorded 18.21 inches.

"Rainfall varies a lot from ridge to valley and from ridge to ridge. It's complicated and ragged and dynamic," said Ray Wilson of the U.S. Geological Survey.

Mr. Johnson, who has monitored the creek inch by inch for 10 years, re-emphasized that most of the water that flows through Menlo Park and Palo Alto originates upstream. "Our watershed is so large and so undeveloped that development and paving have not made that much difference," he said. "Most of the water that falls on Menlo Park and Palo Alto flows away from the creek."

Nevertheless, the storm of Feb. 2-3 generated the largest runoff ever recorded for San Francisco Creek, Dr. Howell said. The monitoring station at the Stanford golf course recorded 7,100 cubic feet per second rushing toward the Bay. By contrast, the previous largest flood, in 1955, had flows of 5,560; the 1982 El Nino storm generated 5,220 cubic feet per second.

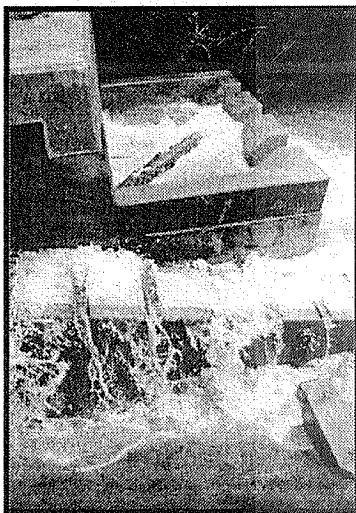


Photo by Laura Hester

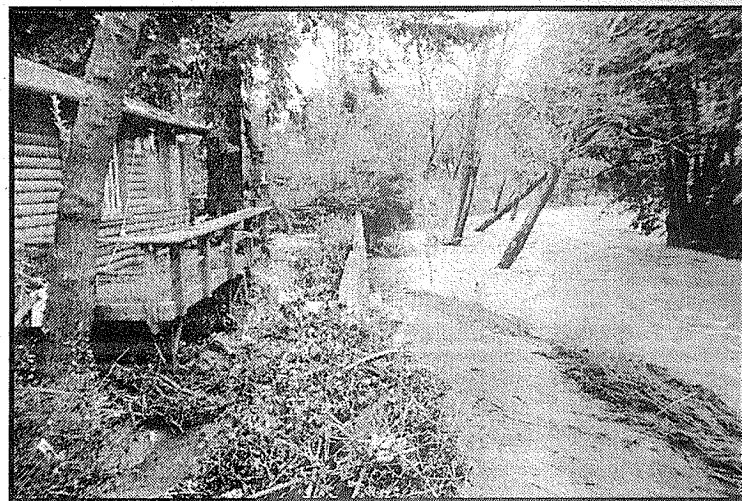


Photo by Joe Melena

## Long-range flood-control

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Road Diversion Conduit would pipe excess flood waters through a giant bypass pipe to be constructed beside or under Willow Road from Middlefield Road to Ravenswood Slough. This proposal, made by Menlo Park engineer John Lomax in the 1960s, became the preferred solution until it was abandoned when the Army Corps of Engineers dropped the project. Now it would require removal of multi-unit apartments in Belle Haven and relocating their tenants, in addition to other disruptions. Estimated cost: More than \$200 million.

Two other alternatives were

deemed infeasible in the report:

■ Deepening the channel between El Camino Real and U.S. 101, lining it with concrete and replacing the bridges at Middlefield Road and Pope Street is no longer acceptable. Local communities and environmental laws demand protection of habitat for threatened steelhead trout and other rare species.

■ Replacing the bridges at Middlefield Road and Pope Street would just move flooding problems downstream.

Mr. Johnson hopes that people will suggest new ideas to protect downstream communities during big floods. "We're going to explore new solutions," he said.

"Was that (record runoff) because we had so much rain, or because we had so much development that increased runoff," Dr. Howell queried.

"We've seen this as a nation," he continued. "The peak surges on rivers are larger now than they've ever been because of development."

## Damage upstream, downstream

Upstream and downstream communities face quite different problems resulting from the storm, except for properties backing on creeks, which often lost — and continue to lose — chunks of back yard, trees, and improvements to raging waters.

Apart from continued erosion, the damage in Menlo Park stopped when the waters that overflowed the banks in the Willows area receded, leaving residents of a dozen homes or more with a horrid mess

*Stanford's fish ladder, left, provides passage to steelhead trout in the still-natural creek, while a home, below, near Alpine Road shows damage from the raging torrent.*

to clean up.

By contrast, Palo Alto and East Palo Alto suffered far more flooding. In Palo Alto some 400 homes were flooded as overflowing water flowed downhill to lower areas near Embarcadero and Oregon Avenue. Early estimates of damage were \$1 million for Menlo Park, \$6 million for Palo Alto, and \$11 million for East Palo Alto.

Upstream in Woodside, Portola Valley, Skyline, and unincorporated areas, the major damage was from landslides. Flowing mud squished over some roads, chewed out chunks of others, and undercut four homes in Portola Valley. Caltrans crews have already started shoring up a slide that threatens Highway 84.

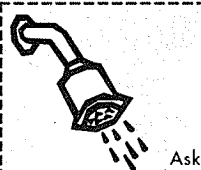
By far the most serious problems were caused by multiple failures of upper Alpine Road, which has been closed for a mile. As a result, some 300 families in unincorporated Vista Verde, upper Portola Valley and Los Trancos Woods have only a single outlet. Los Trancos Road is also vulnerable to being closed; it flooded during the storm and was partially undercut in a section that is in Palo Alto.

Some of the residents have formed a "Committee to Save Alpine Road," which is lobbying Portola Valley to search out funds to repair the road. "If the town fails to restore Alpine Road, this community will be seriously endangered and increasingly isolated," the committee wrote.

Otherwise, damage was less than might have been expected from a storm of that magnitude. Woodside, which suffered major damage during the 1982 El Nino, did fairly well "thus far," said Town Engineer Kent Dewell. "We've got March and April yet to run. I'm holding my breath a little," he added.

There is a slide on Patrol Court, and some \$200,000 of damage to public facilities, he said. There is also substantial damage to private property, although no homes have

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been red-tagged as uninhabitable.

Woodside Fire Chief Mike Fuge gave credit to the towns for holding down damage by clearing creeks and culverts before the winter rains so they could carry storm waters. "The towns did a real good job of preparing for El Nino," he said.

Portola Valley Town Planner George Mader noted that most of the failures took place on homes and roads that were built and approved by the county before the town incorporated in 1964 and developed much tighter regulations over building. "All I've seen appear to be legacies," he said. "I've seen no significant failures where the town approved (a project). Our review and inspection process is thorough."

### What next?

Residents and public agencies are dumping boulders in the creek, and taking other short-term measures to reduce damage from present and future flooding. The multi-million-dollar question is what — if anything — local communities are prepared to do to prepare for future floods of the magnitude of the recent overflow.

Menlo Park Fire District officials are talking with other agencies about better emergency warning and response. One idea is a joint operating center where emergency decision-makers can work together in one place. Another is an early-warning system, such as horns mounted in the creek, which would sound automatically when water rises above a certain level. "We need a mechanical system that doesn't rely on a human being," said Mr. Schapelhouman.

The city of Menlo Park recently purchased a \$35,000 community-notification computer system that can phone emergency recordings to 12 homes simultaneously. The system, called "The Communicator," could be used to send out flood warnings and evacuation orders and could be up and running by mid-April, said City Manager Jan Dolan.

Any long-term effort to reduce or prevent major flooding promises to be controversial, expensive and long in coming.

The CRMP reconnaissance report, due out by the end of the month, summarizes nine flood-control alternatives proposed over the last 40 years or so. These mostly cost upwards — in some cases way upwards — of \$100 million. Most have such serious consequences on the environment and people's property that it is hard to imagine their ever being built.

"Somebody's ox is going to be gored in each alternative," Mr. Johnson said. "There may be so much community opposition that we do nothing."

Menlo Park crews had already dumped boulders to protect the creek bank along Woodland Avenue when the big storm hit. A contractor is spraying concrete around the foundation of the Willow Place bike bridge to protect its foundation, said supervising engineer, Yaw Owusu. The bridge was temporarily closed but has reopened.

The current best way of stabilizing stream banks is big boulders, Mr. Johnson said. They stay in place, and slow down water more than concrete. "We encourage people to put soil and willow wands between the rocks so they will grow and slow down water," he added.

### Calling for help

For storm information or help, call:

- CRMP (Coordinated Resources and Management and Planning), 962-9876.
- FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency), 800-462-9029.
- National Flood Insurance Program, 800-CALL-FLOOD.
- San Mateo County Flood Control District, Public Works Department, 363-4100.
- Menlo Park, 858-3380.
- Atherton, 325-4457.
- Woodside, 851-6790.
- Portola Valley, 851-1700.
- Menlo Park Fire Protection District, 688-8400.
- Woodside Fire Protection District, 851-1594.

CRMP and the cities have other suggestions for protecting stream banks from erosion: replace exotic plants with appropriate natives for bank protection, habitat and shade; don't put structures that could fall in along the creek bank; and — above all — don't dump stuff into the creek. "Don't do anything that will impede the flow or produce debris," said Pat Showalter, executive director of CRMP.

Over the next months there will be numerous opportunities to participate in planning the future of the creek through the public process being initiated by Ms. Dolan and public workshops to be held by CRMP. "We're trying to get the community together to solve these problems," Mr. Johnson said.



Photo by Susan Thomas

## In the worst storms, there's Pat Dempsey, Portola Valley's unsung hero

**N**eed to dig out a landslide? You probably don't even need to call Pat Dempsey. He's likely already there, at 3 a.m. in the pouring rain with his tractor, helping out.

"He's just amazing," says Portola Valley Town Engineer Betty Irvine of the contractor who regularly helps the town and its residents dig out after storms. "He's out there before anyone else is. He's mobilizing crews to clean mudslides and repair drainage systems."

To Mr. Dempsey, who works out of Langley Hill Quarry off Skyline, it's all just in a day's — or night's — work. "I always go out in winter time to check the roads in town," he says.

The night of the big February storm, Mr. Dempsey was checking the lower part of upper Alpine Road and saw a small slide. It's just as well he left it un-

til morning; the thousands of tons of dirt that crashed down on the road could easily have killed him. "It took two days digging through so anyone could get out," he says.

Zelda Angus, who lives above that slide, also remembers that night, and is enormously grateful to Mr. Dempsey. "We were completely trapped in for a day until Pat — bless him, Pat — came," she recalls. "He worked all day to clear the road. Then at 7 o'clock in the pouring rain, he got to our house with his children."

The evidence of his digging — and nature's force — is there for all to see in the mountains of dirt rising at Ford and Rossotti fields.

Isn't this work dangerous? "You got to be careful," he replies. "In a way it's kind of exciting. You go out in the night and all the water is flowing."

The rest of the year Mr. Dempsey and his crews build septic systems in Woodside, Portola Valley and the county. His father, who opened Langley Hill Quarry about 1955, later started a septic tank business, which Pat took over in 1980. His brother, Mike, still runs the quarry.

Mr. Dempsey, who lives on Skyline with his wife Cathy and four children, attended school in Portola Valley. "I consider Portola Valley like my second home," he says.

Mr. Dempsey is very matter-of-fact about his contributions. "It's just something we do. It's a way to give back to the community," he says, then adds, "It's not me. It's my crew. They work their tails off."

Mrs. Irvine adds, "He should be Portola Valley's citizen of the year. When we're asleep in bed, he's out moving dirt."