As we embark upon the holiday season, I am both joyful and reflective. As many of you already know my personal motto is “your attitude determines your altitude.” For me, the foundation of a great attitude is an attitude of gratitude. People ask me all of the time, “Jeff, how are you?” What they will often hear from me is “I’m blessed to have it as well as I have it and I have it pretty well recognizing that there’s room for plenty of improvement but appreciating conditions for being as well as they are.”

In the spirit of gratitude and thankfulness, as I pen the final column for the year, I want to thank the Chamber board of directors as well as our hard-working Chamber Manager, Lisa Martinengo, for all that they have done this year. To all of the businesses and merchants who belong to the Chamber, we appreciate and value your membership.

In my youth and adulthood I spent a lot of time around the Baptist church and when the good sisters were offering thanks related to some situation, program or event, they’d often start off by saying “I don’t want to start calling names because I might forget someone, and if I do, charge to my head and not...”

City Manager Karen Pinkos and Mayor Rochelle Pardue-Okimoto

By Chris Treadway

El Cerrito faces significant fiscal challenges that it must start addressing as soon as possible, the mayor and city manager said in a talk at the Chamber of Commerce luncheon November 19th.

But the economic outlook, while bad, is not as dire as portrayed in a study released last month by the California State Auditor, they stressed.

The study of “fiscally challenged” cities at high-risk put El Cerrito as No. 7 statewide among 471 cities ranked, and No. 1 in the Bay Area — ahead of Richmond and Oakland.

The study cited liquidity issues, low reserves and past and future pension obligations among the city’s red-flag categories.

“We have been dealing with this issue since I was elected (in 2016) and it’s only gone in the wrong direction,” Mayor Rochelle Pardue-Okimoto said. “I accept the criticism that we have not acted quickly enough to bring you the situation. But what I will say is that, considering they were using old data, there are some things that have been done that are significant.”

She cited voter approval last November for a measure that made El Cerrito a charter city able to enact a real estate transfer tax. She also noted the study’s low score for not funding health benefits of retired city employees.

The transfer tax “is going to make the city about $2 million a year, sometimes maybe more, sometimes maybe less depending on real estate sales in the city,” Pardue-Okimoto said. “That’s a significant chunk of money when you’re talking about a $50 million budget and all of a sudden you have $2 million of new revenue.”

Chamber of Commerce Holiday Lunch

Wednesday, Dec. 18 · Noon

Fajita Bar with Beef, Chicken, Veggies + all fixings
Black Beans, Green Rice
Salad with Mango Dressing
Flan
Agua Fresca and soft drinks
Raffle Prizes & Silent Auction

Tickets: $44
www.ElCerritoChamber.org
510-705-1202

Los Moles Beer Garden
6120 Potrero Ave. · El Cerrito
Yes, it’s a real word. I was asked by a reader about the above column head. [palaver] One definition read: *talk unproductively and at length.* Wow. That really sums up my scribbles here! But I appreciate all you *Byline* readers and always welcome your comments.

**Crab is back.** That delectable crustacean is being offered by the El Cerrito Recreation Department (*aka* the “Dept. of Fun,” per our city manager) at their annual *crab feed* on Friday, January 24, 2020. Also included with generous helpings of crab: garlic bread, salad, pasta, and dessert, plus a no-host bar and a big raffle.

Save $10 and purchase tickets through December 20th at $50 each. Buy them at the Community Center on Moeser Lane.

**The Nutcracker** at City Hall! Well, that has piqued my interest if only to see how this holiday classic fits into the El Cerrito city council chambers. Thursday, Dec. 12th, at 1 p.m. RSVP: 510-559-7677.

**The blues.** El Cerrito’s world famous *Down Home Music Store* has a 2020 calendar for sale featuring classic blues artwork plus a CD. Visit the store: 10341 San Pablo Avenue. Call 510-525-2129.

'Tis the season. For pie! I walk past the *Nation’s* bakery every day and by mid-November activity is in high gear. Truckloads of bakery supplies come in and pallets of pies and cheesecake go out to the various *Nation’s* stores. 24-7.

At the other end of town *Fatapple’s* is doing their part for holiday desserts with seasonal cookies and their delicious pies. It dawned on me that baking in El Cerrito creates a number of jobs especially around Christmas time. Eat pie; it’s good for El Cerrito’s economy and tastes good too.

**Now that’s palaver!** See you right here next year. Happy holidays.

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**Holiday Lights Brighten San Pablo Avenue**

*By John C. Stashik*

When Paul Fadelli wrote an article in the August *Byline* titled “Light Up El Cerrito” it was far from a done deal. But things quickly came together. The idea became reality.

The Chamber quickly supported holiday lighting along the San Pablo Avenue “theater block” and backed it with a financial commitment. The City of El Cerrito was very supportive, immediately surveying the infrastructure and contacting their public works consultants.

With lighting installed and turned on, the Chamber hosted an event at Elevation 66 on November 21st to mark the occasion. Merchants on the block and the general public love this festive holiday look. (Some want it up all year!) Appreciation goes to many people. Electrical connections are provided by Pic-n-Pac Liquors, Turnabout Thrift Shop, Elevation 66 Brewing Company, and Pastime Ace Hardware.

City Manager Karen Pinkos was an early supporter. Public Works Director Yvetteh Ortiz and her colleagues Chris Avila and Gerardo Avila handled the nuts and bolts of installation.

Boots on the ground troops visiting merchants included council member Paul Fadelli, and Chamber president Jeffrey Wright, manager Lisa Martinengo, and yours truly.

Enjoy. It could mark the start of a new tradition.
December’s a Mixed Month for Musings

By Lisa Martinengo

The El Cerrito Chamber of Commerce is happy to invite you to the Holiday Fundraising Lunch party of 2019!

Join us at Los Moles Beer Garden, El Cerrito’s premier Mexican restaurant, on Wednesday, December 18th, from noon until 2 o’clock, for a friendly time of socializing and strengthening the Chamber’s resources.

The ticket price of $44 includes a fabulous full fajita bar with meat, seafood and veggies, all the condiments, tortillas and side dishes you expect from authentic Mexican cuisine!

Non-alcoholic drinks, agua fresca, salad, and flan are also included.

Raffle and auction gift items are being requested from members now, and this is always a very fun afternoon of socializing and building the Chamber’s resources. Please see other article in this issue for more information on the fabulous lunch event or our website: www.elcerritochamber.org

El Cerrito is a great little city and you can help keep it that way when you shop, eat, drink, and buy with our local services and merchants! Happy and calm holiday wishes to all!

To donate a product or a service gift certificate, call us at 510-705-1202 or email: info@elcerritochamber.org. Your business name will be announced and published to show your generous support.

We’ll likely have both silent auction and an energetic live auction for the high value items.

El Cerrito Fire Department will be on hand to collect any Toys for Tots, so bring a toy to donate.

So, get into your holiday spirit with the El Cerrito Chamber and show your support for the programs and activities we do to assist our members.

Mail checks to P.O. Box 1014, El Cerrito, CA 94530, or go to the website event page and look for the PayPal link: www.elcerritochamber.org.

The views expressed here are the author’s and do not necessarily represent those of the Chamber board. Email: l.martinengo@elcerritochamber.org; cell: 510-778-5883.

Combine Friends, Fajitas and Fundraising!

By Lisa Martinengo

December’s a Mixed Month for Musings

BYLINE

Page 3

Regency Lights Up

By John C. Stashik

On the preceding page is a story about installing festive holiday lighting on San Pablo Avenue between Fairmount and Central. But you’ve probably noticed El Cerrito Plaza is fully decorated and aglow with Christmas lights too.

Props go to Regency Centers, owners of the Plaza, for stepping up and making our “downtown” look like a downtown!

Council member Paul Fadelli also had a hand in this by communicating with Regency.

$15.37/hr. Minimum

Effective January 1, 2020, the minimum wage for all workers within the city of El Cerrito will be $15.37 per hour. This is an increase from the current $15.00 hourly rate.

Employers are required to post the official El Cerrito Wage Bulletin at work sites. That document is available from the City of El Cerrito or the Chamber of Commerce.

For more information, contact the City of El Cerrito at (510) 215-4318 or email wages@ci.el-cerrito.ca.us, or call the Chamber office.
By Neal Zimmerman

If you’ve worked in multiple careers during your life (by choice or not), you can probably understand and appreciate Mark Porter’s multi-faceted career trajectory.

Mark grew up near Bakersfield in a small town called Pumpkin Center. Everybody had a different kind of farm. Beef farm, hog farm, goat farm, sheep farm. Some grew corn. Mark’s family had a dairy farm. Lots of people worked in the oil fields, his aunt and uncle operated a cotton gin for years, and his grandparents operated a flea market with a livestock auction. Farming was going to be Mark’s future until he took an accounting class in high school and realized the farm wasn’t making any money.

Mark was always a motivated individual so a change in direction became a priority. “I always knew that I had to do something to get something.” When asked whether he grew up middle class, Mark replied, “Probably no class. We would trade a cow to fix our truck. We actually lost the farm twice and eventually sold it. I learned a lot of lessons there.”

Real estate became Mark’s second career objective. Mark was at Sacramento State learning to be a real estate appraiser following the steps of his mother. His uncle was a general contractor and real estate broker. Mark’s financial planner convinced him to drop out of college and get his real estate license. “I began selling FHA foreclosures and became one of the top FHA foreclosure salespeople in Sacramento County from 1992 to 1997.” But the FHA foreclosures dried up and that was Mark’s expertise. What to do?

Mark spotted an ad in the paper that read, “Have fun — make money.” Mark responded and career #3 began. He went out to the address in Sacramento and it was a Chevys Fresh Mex restaurant. Mark started at Store #7 and worked that summer. At his layoff meeting, Chevys vice president surprised him. They had looked at Mark’s sales numbers, recognized his leadership skills and wanted him to open stores and teach others how to be successful at Chevys.

He offered Mark a great salary and benefit package, and he went on to open 38 stores for Chevys in Florida, New Jersey, Colorado, Reno, some remodels in California. “I was home about two months a year and boy, was it fun!”

Then the 9/11 attacks happened and Chevys stopped opening restaurants. They offered Mark the Vallejo store and he grabbed it because it was close to home. At that time, he was a renter in El Cerrito near Lexington and Blake and lived here for about nine years.

Today, his fourth career is where he is making the biggest positive impact on people’s lives. Mark is an Associate Vice President with Ameriprise Financial, a diversified financial services company providing financial planning, products and services, including wealth management, asset management, insurance, annuities, and estate planning.

How does Mark help his clients? “The main thing is for people to take a look at their goals and where they want to end up,” he explained. “And then ask, what are you doing now to make that happen? It’s real simple. I’m here to help you achieve your goals, more efficiently and quicker than doing it alone. My goals are not important at all.”

Mark became an El Cerrito Chamber of Commerce member earlier this year, and is definitely engaged with our community. If you have concerns about your financial future and security, don’t hesitate to give Mark a call to discuss ways he and his experienced team can support you.

Contact Mark Porter at Porter, Ritchie & Associates by phone: 415-743-9886 or email: mark.a.porter@ampf.com.
She said her priority is putting the transfer tax funds toward the city’s reserve fund, as well as disaster preparation and prevention.

The report erroneously assumed El Cerrito pays toward the health benefits of retirees and docked it for not having a funding mechanism. “We don’t offer that to our employees,” she said.

Factoring in those two areas might have led to a yellow-flag, rather than a red-flag ranking, she said.

The budget process in recent years has been “overly optimistic” in projecting revenue and deciding appropriate expenditures, Pardue-Okimoto said. “We need a more specific plan” based on “revenue now coming into the city and not on what we anticipate revenue to be in the future.”

Pinkos agreed that while there were legitimate criticisms, some of the report’s conclusions were inaccurate. “I found out about the auditor’s report when a reporter called,” she said. “I don’t feel we had a chance to tell our side of the story. I’m sure all the other cities feel that way too.”

Pinkos has detailed her response to the report in an October 31st letter to the community (http://el-cerrito.org/DocumentCenter/View/13203/CM-Update-103119-Special).

A consultant has been hired to start a new strategic planning process that will start in January and “engage with the community on what our priorities are,” Pinkos said. “Staff is doing a real deep dive into the budget. This is reality time for all of us,” she said. “We can’t do this alone.”

**Health Care Mandate Effective Jan. 1**

I t’s the law. A new mandate takes effect on January 1, 2020, requiring all Californians to have qualifying health insurance coverage throughout the year or face financial penalties at tax time.

Under the new mandate, those who fail to maintain qualifying health insurance coverage could face a financial penalty unless they qualify for an exemption.

A taxpayer without coverage will be subject to a penalty of $695 per adult in the household and $347.50 for each dependent child or 2.5% of household income, whichever is greater.

To avoid the penalty, California residents need to have qualifying health insurance for themselves, their spouse or domestic partner, and their dependents for each month beginning January 1, 2020.

Open enrollment to sign up for coverage will run until January 31, 2020.

M.A. Hays Co., Inc., with over a century of insurance service, can answer your questions and help you stay compliant and avoid tax penalties. Their office is at 232 Broadway in Richmond. Call 510-235-0353; or mahays.com.

Most important, everyone wins when we all have health care protection.
The advertisers on this card delivered their message to over 14,000 homes and businesses in El Cerrito, Richmond Annex and East Richmond Heights.

Email: ads@elcerritochamber.org for more information.
to my heart.” With that sentiment in mind, I want to give extra thanks to board member Sonja Givens-Thomas, executive director of El Cerrito Royale, for graciously allowing the Chamber to hold our monthly lunch meetings at her lovely facility. I also want to thank Aissia Ashoori from the City of El Cerrito for serving so effectively as the Chamber board secretary and working closely with city staff and making it possible for us to hold our regular monthly board meetings at City Hall.

From my perspective the Chamber has had good interaction with City Manager Karen Pinkos as well as the various department heads such as Community Development Director Melanie Mintz. I also want to thank Mayor Rochelle Pardue-Okimoto and the entire city council for being supportive of the Chamber and our interaction with city staff. A huge thank you to board member and treasurer John Stashik who not only keeps the financial reports flowing but who also plays a major role in putting the excellent Byline newsletter together every month.

The El Cerrito Chamber of Commerce is the official sponsor of the Farmers Market at El Cerrito Plaza. However, the credit for that highly successful market is greatly because of Jean Thompson and we appreciate and thank her for her decades of efficient and effective management. Chris Treadway, we appreciate you too, for capturing many of our events as well as other topics of interest, in pictures and in prose. Thank you Chris.

We are winding down 2019 and 2020 will bring us some new rules and laws. In 2019 El Cerrito city staff spent a considerable amount of time, energy, and effort addressing the issue of tenant protections. Some community members, groups and organizations wanted the city to take a very aggressive posture on the issue of tenant protections while other community members and groups wanted to take a measured approach and validate the local market conditions with facts.

The net result was the implementation of a mandatory rental registry in El Cerrito requiring rental property owners to provide the city with specific information so that the city will have factual data pertaining to the rental market.

Effective January 1, 2020 the Tenant Protection Act of 2019, a statewide rent cap law, goes into effect. In general it limits rent increases to 5% plus inflation (CPI) with the combined two not to exceed 10%. The second part of the law includes Just Cause for Eviction provisions. There are exemptions for non-corporate owned single-family homes, condominiums, owner occupied duplexes and housing that has been issued a certificate of occupancy within the previous 15 years. The new statewide rules do not preempt existing local rent control laws. The existing local rent control laws in cities such as Berkeley, Richmond, San Francisco, etc., supersede the new state rules.

In El Cerrito we now have the rental registry already in place, and new statewide rules that will apply. It is my hope that the greater community as well as outside groups will not further burden our city staff and our city council on the issue of tenant protections so that they can direct their energy and full attention towards more pressing matters.

During this holiday season let’s enjoy the festivities, admire the bright lights illuminating the plaza, as well as portions of San Pablo and Fairmont Avenues, support our local merchants and let our city be a great beacon that will shine brilliantly for generations to come. Happy holidays!

Irish Coffee Special

Capitol Corridor trains are offering a holiday cocktail special: Irish Coffee! Get this hot, festive favorite in the café car throughout the entire month of December for only $5. Cheers!

Capitol Corridor operates frequent service between San Jose, the East Bay, and Sacramento. BART is a valued Chamber member and manages the service for the CC Joint Powers Authority.

NEW MEMBER

CATCHFOOT + RUN
Digital Marketing & Branding Consultancy
1529 Norvell St., El Cerrito 94530
415-939-4114
www.catchfootandrun.com
Bring a Toy to the December Lunch.

El Cerrito Fire will be collecting donations.

Lunch information on page 1

The Calendar

Dec. 3  City Council meets, City Hall, 7 p.m.
Dec. 17 City Council meets, City Hall, 7 p.m.
Dec. 18 Chamber holiday luncheon. Details on pages 1 and 3.
Jan. 21 Chamber installation luncheon.

Chamber Officers & Staff
President Jeffrey Wright, Wright Realtors
Vice President Nic Tang, Red Oak Realty
Secretary Aissia Ashoori, City of El Cerrito
Treasurer John C. Stashik, Premier Graphics
Byline Editor Lisa Martinengo
Byline Correspondent Chris Treadway

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www.elcerritochamber.org

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