

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievance.”

First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

Opinion

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THUMBS UP THUMBS DOWN

Drug sweep at Palm Desert High School sends the right message



It's always disappointing when the Coachella Valley's youth are caught behaving badly. That's what happened Thursday when sheriff's deputies arrested 14 students at Palm Desert High School after an undercover investigation into on-campus drug sales. Warrants were out for another two students as well.

Detectives seized cocaine, ecstasy, marijuana and prescription drugs during the long-term investigation, Riverside County sheriff's officials reported.

But while it's unfortunate the students were involved in this activity, authorities performed a great community service in conducting the investigation and ensuing sweeps.

We're also glad there are many more students performing admirably at Palm Desert High and the valley's other schools.



JAY CALDERON THE DESERT SUN

A Desert Sands Unified School District patrol agent works security at Palm Desert High School after a drug bust on campus Thursday resulted in the arrest of 14 students.

LOOKING FORWARD TO A NEW YEAR



wesley ahlgren

Taking big steps to improve local business climate

As we prepare for the holidays and pause to reflect on the past year, the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership (CVEP) is eagerly looking ahead. During 2010, CVEP laid the groundwork for the Coachella Valley Economic Blueprint — a forward-thinking and actionable roadmap for achieving future economic success in the valley — and will continue to implement and build upon the plan in 2011.

CVEP has met or exceeded the blueprint's first-year-goals — and it already is paying dividends. Through our regionalism and economic diversification, we have paved the way for the valley's future economic gains. Next year, will see our aggressive pursuit of business-attraction strategies. This effort will be spearheaded by Thomas Flavin, CVEP's new president and chief executive officer. With nearly 40 years of progressive work in civic management, public/private business initiatives and marketing, Tom has the experience and global connections to realize the blueprint's goals.

Our ongoing challenge remains the housing market. Assessments of the valley's real estate industry conclude that it will remain a weak spot in 2011. Most analysts agree that until the industry improves, the nation will not have a full economic recovery. There are many issues facing the local housing and business real estate markets that will continue to have a direct and measurable impact on the valley's recovery — including fee increases, code changes, uncertainty in permitting, fewer financing options for individuals and businesses, and an ongoing high rate of foreclosures.

Local hiring on the upswing

Although it may be a while before the recession's grip on the national economy is fully loosened, CVEP remains optimistic about economic opportunities locally. We have received positive data from our just-completed 2010 business survey, conducted in collaboration with the County of Riverside and the nine desert cities, indicating cautious community confidence regarding local economic improvement in 2011. Nearly 50 percent of respondents are expecting the business climate to improve during the next 12 months, while 38 percent think it will remain the same and less than 12 percent expect it to worsen. Confirming the generally optimistic outlook, almost 60 percent of respondents said they will hire additional employees next year.

However, even with the good news of potential hires, there also are indicators that businesses have tightened operations and are accomplishing more with fewer resources. While government hires and government-funded projects that create new jobs are welcome, CVEP primarily is concerned with bolstering private-sector hiring — specifically, supporting small businesses that are the backbone of our regional economy. Among our most urgent goals are to make it possible for small businesses to hire more employees, and to attract new and emerging industries bringing skilled, high-paying sustainable jobs.

Courting overseas investors

Creating jobs in the valley means networking beyond our boundaries, and we are fortunate for being one of the few places in the world having all four renewable energy sectors: wind, solar, biomass and geothermal. In late November, I represented CVEP as part of a U.S. delegation on a trade mission to Europe, where we discussed renewable energy and clean technology opportunities in our region with dozens of companies and officials from the European Union. CVEP is following up with these interested international parties by inviting them to visit our beautiful desert.

It is integral to CVEP's mission to share the pleasures as well as the promise of the Coachella Valley — for both our near-term and future prosperity.

Wesley Ahlgren is the chief operating officer of the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership. He can be reached at wes@cvpep.com.

COMING TOMORROW:



EDITOR'S NOTE: Throughout December, leaders in the Coachella Valley will share what they are optimistic about in 2011.

Hail to the chiefs, Henry and Connor



A big thanks goes out to longtime Cathedral City Police Chief Stan Henry and his successor, Capt. Kevin Conner.

Henry was one of the three masterminds behind the city's first police department, which was established four months after discussions about creating such a department began on March 12, 1984.

The department was born July 1, 1984, with 22 officers and operated in a 5,000-square-foot building at 68-625 Perez Road. Henry, 55, was promoted to lieutenant in 1988, then captain in 1989. He became chief in October 1995.

In retirement, the chief plans to spend time with his family and teach more often at College of the Desert, where he's instructed students in its administration of justice classes and public safety academy.

Conner's also been with Cathedral City police since 1984. "I want to maintain, if not step up to, a more aggressive approach to combating some of the criminal elements we have out there."

Go to mydesert.com/opinion to hear the farewell to Chief Stan Henry that was broadcast on the police radio on his last day.

Bono Mack lands chairwoman seat



Congratulations to Palm Springs Rep. Mary Bono Mack, who is California's highest ranking Republican woman in Congress and has been



selected to serve as the chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing and Trade.

"To be selected to serve on the Energy & Commerce Committee and hold a gavel is a tremendous honor," said Bono Mack, who becomes the first Republican woman to do so.

Bono Mack will now be involved in focusing on federal spending at agencies such as the Department of Commerce and Federal Trade Commission.

Nestande moves up into a party leadership role



Congratulations to Palm Desert Assemblyman Brian Nestande, who was tapped to be the Assembly

Republican's caucus chairman, making him the No. 2 leader for the minority party.



It marks the first time in more than a decade that a desert lawmaker has served in the key Assembly leadership position.

As caucus chairman, Nestande will run the meetings where Assembly Republicans determine their positions on legislation and policies.

He also will communicate with GOP leaders throughout the state on key legislative issues.

"We need to have a collaborative effort amongst Republicans so that everyone feels they are part of crafting our plan," Nestande said of his new role.

"It's important for members to feel like they are included in part of the process."



Make plans to save lives when you die

We never know when our time will end on this Earth.

But we can make sure that when the time comes, we potentially can help someone else stick around by signing up to donate an organ.

Quincy Greer, a 21-year-old College of the Desert student, wanted to become a doctor in order to help people.

And even though the La Quinta man died in a car accident in 2008, he still was able to help save people — seven actually — thanks to organ and tissue donations. Last week, his family was able to meet two of those who benefited from Greer's generosity.

In this valley that is home to so many charitable individuals, we urge everyone to consider signing up to become an organ donor if they aren't already. You never know who can you help.



JAY CALDERO THE DESERT SUN

Transplant recipients Debbie Morgan (left) and Julie Lyon (right) cry with Pamela Greer, mother of organ donator Quincy Greer.



How many liquor licenses are too many in Palm Springs?

Palm Springs definitely appears to have too many liquor-selling stores, bars, restaurants and hotels in certain locations.

But the city — already saddled with a high propensity for alcohol-related crashes — also appears wise in taking a closer look at areas that potentially have high concentrations of such businesses.

"I do not think this City Council, or any council, should be granting exceptions after exceptions, particularly if there is already a major problem in the area," said Alia Paula, in whose neighborhood alone there are 109 issued liquor licenses.

"I think the city should just say no."

We encourage officials to take this one proactive step further and re-examine the entire city and look for oversaturated clusters of liquor-selling businesses. And then determine a ceiling for such permits in each area. That way, the city won't have to make these decisions on a case-by-case basis.

Coming Sunday

The DREAM Act: Supporters say providing a path to citizenship for children of undocumented immigrants who plan to go to college or the military is the right thing to do. Opponents call it amnesty.



MYDESERTPOLL

Today's question

What kind of Christmas tree do you have this year?
Real, artificial or none?
To vote, go to mydesert.com/opinion

Friday's poll results

275 votes cast as of 5 p.m.
How would you classify drug use in Coachella Valley Schools?

4% **Minimal** **23.3%** **Average**
44.7% **Problem** **28%** **Crisis**

