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Heather Irwin helping raise pig from farm to table **D1**



Leave benefit sweetens vacation, retirement



Elected officials like **Rod Dole**, former Sonoma County auditor-controller, and administrators such as Santa Rosa City Manager **Kathy Millison**, both get extra leave as a benefit.

Elected officials, government managers can turn perk into profit

By **JEREMY HAY** and **BRETT WILKISON**

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Rohnert Park City Manager Gabe Gonzalez's contract outlines his base salary, \$165,000, his monthly car allowance of \$333 and that he "is expected to be available at all hours."

It also says he is entitled to all the bene-

fits of other management employees.

Those benefits include a little-known perk termed administrative leave that amounts to a guaranteed cash bonus or extra vacation.

The leave is essentially a bank of extra hours given to most upper-level public workers across Sonoma County — including elected county officials — that can be used to take more time off or, in some cases, be cashed in at year's end. In other instances, unused hours roll over each year and a certain amount can be cashed in at retirement.

INSIDE: Rohnert Park managers' leave pay trimmed to help bridge budget gap **A8**

When that happens, the results can be startling.

This year, five elected officials have retired and cashed in their hours.

Former county auditor-controller Rod Dole retired in May and cashed out leave hours for \$44,140, plus used additional time

TURN TO **BENEFIT**, PAGE A8

DEADLY TOLL: At least 8 people killed; 2 million without power

STORM'S PATH: Hurricane churns up coast, soaking Virginia on way to N.Y.

Massive Irene rolls in



The Press Democrat

Jere Melo in 2002.

Ft. Bragg ex-mayor reported shot

Witnesses say Melo stumbled on pot garden near Noyo River

By **CATHY BUSSEWITZ** and **GLENDA ANDERSON**

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Jere Melo, a city councilman and former mayor of Fort Bragg, was believed to have been shot and was missing Saturday after encountering a pot farm guard while checking on rugged timberland he manages, sources said.

A shooting occurred around 10:20 a.m. about 4 miles east of Fort Bragg on the remote terrain of a private timber company near the Noyo River, according to a release by the Mendocino County Sheriff's Office.

Officials identified the suspected gunman as Aaron Bassler, a transient from Fort Bragg, and said the SWAT team had been sent to the area to locate a victim.

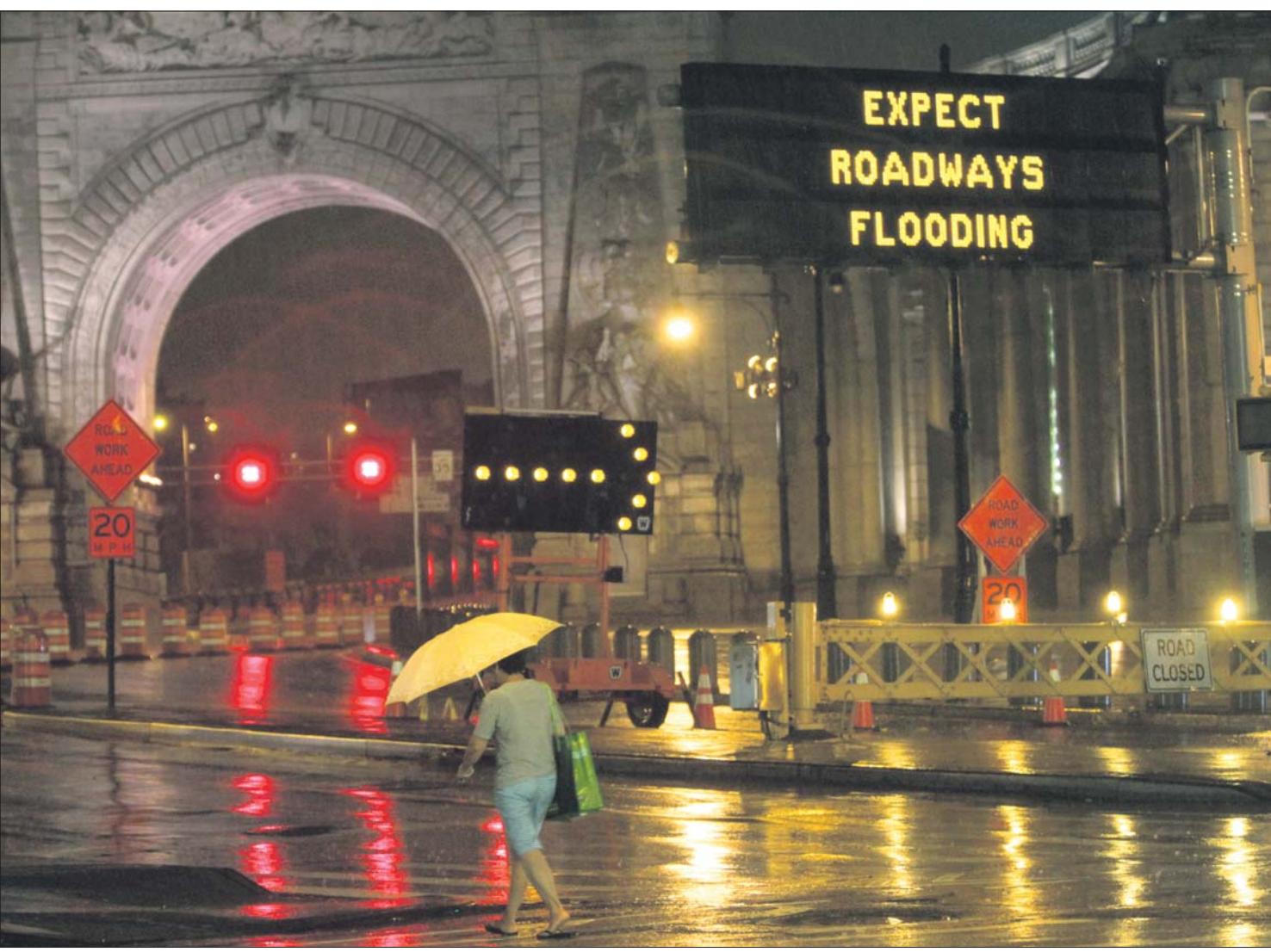
Sheriff Tom Allman would not comment further on the case late Saturday night.

Fort Bragg Councilman Dan Gjerde said he'd been notified by city officials that Melo had been shot, but that the Sheriff's Office had provided the city with little information.

A Skunk Train worker and a source close to the family gave a fuller picture of what unfolded.

Passengers aboard the historic train that was heading east, taking a scenic route to Northspur, heard seven or eight

TURN TO **FORT BRAGG**, PAGE A9



MARY ALTAFFER / Associated Press

A road sign warns of inclement weather caused by Hurricane Irene as a pedestrian crosses the street in front of the Manhattan bridge in Lower Manhattan on Saturday. The New York region girded for wind, rain, and flooding as the storm bore down Saturday night.

By **SAMANTHA GROSS** and **MITCH WEISS**

ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — A weakened but still dangerous Hurricane Irene shut down New York and menaced other cities more accustomed to snow than tropical storms as it steamed up the East Coast on Saturday, unloading a foot of rain on North Carolina and Virginia and knocking out power to nearly 1.9 million

homes and businesses. At least eight people were killed.

New York emptied its streets and subways and waited with an eerie quiet. Washington braced for the onslaught, too, as did Philadelphia, the New Jersey shore and the Boston metropolitan area.

Packing wind gusts of 115 mph, the hurricane had an enormous wingspan — 500 miles — and threatened a swath of the nation

TURN TO **IRENE**, PAGE A9



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE / Associated Press

People stand at the end of a street Saturday in Cape May, N.J., looking at a stormy Atlantic as Hurricane Irene arrives.

INSIDE: New York City shuts airports, subways, buses **A3**
ONLINE: See photos, updates at pressdemocrat.com

INSIDE

PITCHFORKS FLY, DOG BOLTS Suspect leads officers on memorable 114-mph chase near Hopland / **B1**



SANTA ROSA
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FORECAST, **B12**

Books	D6	LeBaron	B3
Business	E1	Lotto	A2
Classified	E5	Movies	D4
Crossword	E7	Rubino	C2
Forum	B7	Travel	D5

BREAKING BARRIERS, MAKING WINE



ROBIN HAMMOND / New York Times

SAMPLE TASTE: Ntsiki Biyela is winemaker at Stellekaya, a boutique winery in Stellenbosch, South Africa.

Black South African vintner finds success far from her roots

By **BARRY BEARAK**

NEW YORK TIMES

STELLENBOSCH, South Africa

When Ntsiki Biyela won a winemaking scholarship in 1998, she was certainly a curious choice.

She had grown up in the undulating hills of Zululand, living in a small village of huts and shacks. People tended their patches of pumpkins and corn. The only

alcohol they drank was homemade beer, a malt-fed brew that bubbled in old pots.

Indeed, Biyela had never even tasted wine, nor had anyone she knew. Her choice of study was a fluke. Although she had been a good student, none of her grant applications for college were approved until an airline, hoping to promote viticulture, offered to pay her way to study viticulture and oenology: grapes and wine. What was wine? the young woman wondered, guessing it was another name for cider.

She had never been outside the eastern province of KwaZulu Natal, but she boarded a bus and traveled across South

TURN TO **WINEMAKER**, PAGE A9

RP city chiefs lose leave pay in thrifty contract

Managers sacrifice to pare budget; union workers call their burden heavier

By **JEREMY HAY**
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

In July, as five months of contentious contract negotiations came to a close, Rohnert Park employee union leaders complained publicly that the city's managers weren't being asked to shoulder an equal share of concessions to help fill the budget deficit.

Angered, City Manager Gabe Gonzalez fired back in an email to all city employees. In it, he said cuts to managers and confidential employees' benefits equaled the pay cuts rank-and-file workers were being asked to take.

"I want to make clear that these reductions are all cash value to the city, no fluff," he said in a phrase that he underlined.

Gonzalez was referring chiefly to administrative leave hours. They are a bank of extra hours to be used for more time off. In Rohnert Park's case, they also can be cashed in at year's end. Only salaried workers who under federal labor law do not get paid overtime get the benefit.

Until July 1, Rohnert Park's top managers got 150 hours a year — or 18 and three-quarter days — that they could use for time off in addition to their four weeks of vacation. They could cash in any time they didn't use, up to 100 hours, at the end of the year.

Confidential employees received 60 hours a year that could be used, and they could sell back

to the city up to 50 unused hours.

"It was essentially a 5 percent bump by being able to sell those hours," Gonzalez said.

He spoke in the past tense because new contract terms that Gonzalez helped set and that took effect last month reduce the number of administrative leave hours.

The new arrangement grants 100 hours to managers, but limits the hours they can cash in to 25 a year; none carry over to the next year.

For the city's two exempt confidential employees, the benefit was cut to 50 hours total, and a limit of 20 that can be cashed in.

"It's a considerable amount (of savings) considering they are the city's highest-paid employees," Gonzalez said.

But union leaders say that because the cuts were to benefits,

they weren't the same as those their members took.

"The reality is it's above and beyond their 2,080 hours; our unit took pay cuts based on our 2,080 hours," said Angie Smith, president of the Rohnert Park Employees Association, referring to the sum of annual work hours based on a 40-hour workweek.

Her 28 members took a 6.25 percent pay cut and, overall, gave back 13 percent in combined salary and benefit cuts.

"They just don't get as much administrative leave," Smith said, referring to managers and confidential employees. "It's a bonus."

Gonzalez responded that the aim was to realize an equal percentage of savings from each bargaining unit, not necessarily to make the exact same cuts.

The changes bought the city's administrative leave plan into line with "the industry standard," Gonzalez said, and "is fair" given the demands on department heads.

"Most of our managers do work excess hours, they're here late, they stay for council meetings and other sessions," he said. "These are employees that typically don't work an 8-to-5 workweek."

On that point, at least, he has surprising support. Smith said she takes no issue with administrative leave, just how Gonzalez represented it as equivalent cuts.

"They do put in a lot of extra hours, it's not five or 10 hours, it could be an extra 15 to 20 hours," Smith said. "I'm sure they work way more than the hours a year that they get compensated for."

BENEFIT: Some managers justify administrative leave because of their long work hours

CONTINUED FROM PAGE A1

to boost his last year's salary and, as a result, his retirement pension.

County Supervisors Mike Kerns and Paul Kelley got \$50,232 and \$39,000 in cash respectively when they retired. They too cashed in additional hours that bumped up their pensions.

Neither Kerns nor Kelley returned calls seeking comment.

Even people who believe the extra-hours benefit is justifiable say it leads to major problems when the option to cash them in is managed poorly and when they are allowed to accrue toward retirement.

"I think the concept is a valid one, if it appropriately compensates someone who is not eligible for overtime and has to work a schedule that goes beyond what most people would consider a normal work-

day," said former Rohnert Park Mayor Tim Smith.

"But you have to clean it out so you don't have a mounting deficit," he said.

In Rohnert Park, administrative hours cannot be rolled over, but they can be cashed in at the end of the year. Last year, that cost the city \$62,000 in cash paid to 10 employees.

"We had a very luxurious package in terms of administrative leave," said Gonzalez. The policy was tightened this year.

Even when used only as vacation hours, the benefit adds up to extra time off that many would find enviable.

In Santa Rosa, for example, hours cannot be cashed in. Instead, at least 150 managers each took an average of two extra weeks off last year, on top of the two weeks or more of vacation time they get.

"Taxpayers are pretty generous providing that,"

said Fred Levin, executive director of the Sonoma County Taxpayers Association.

Administrative leave is widespread in public-sector managers' compensation, although how it is administered varies. Employees qualify for it if they are classified as "exempt," meaning that under federal labor law they are ineligible for overtime pay.

It is also commonly part of benefits for confidential employees, who are defined as those whose work involves personnel issues.

In Rohnert Park, Cotati and Sebastopol, where hours can be converted to cash, the total does not count toward state pension benefits that are based on earnings.

However, in county government, a portion of the value of cashed-in administrative hours does count toward the income calculations used to set retirement benefits.

Former Sheriff Bill Cogbill cashed out administrative leave when he retired that added \$18,567 to his final year's salary. That was used by the county to calculate his annual pension, which guaranteed him 90 percent of his top pay based on his more than 30 years in law enforcement.

Dole added \$19,994 to his last year's salary. For both Kerns and Kelley, accrued administrative hours increased their final year's pay by \$12,850.

About 440 county managers and department heads qualify for administrative hours that accrue at the rate of 2.3 hours every two weeks. They can cash in up to 80 hours annually or roll them over into a bank to be used later.

Elected officials do not get vacation time but qualify for more administrative leave hours per year. The county's four elected department heads — sheriff, district attorney, clerk-recorder-assessor and auditor-controller-treasurer-tax collector — accrue 2.95 hours every two weeks, while the five supervisors get 3.41 hours.

Both groups of county elected officials can cash in up to 160 hours a year. Unlike managers, there is no limit to the hours elected officials can bank, but only 200 hours can be applied to boost their final year's salary for retirement. For managers that number is 80 hours.

The system is one that needs to be revisited, while still preserving incentives for people to enter public service, Smith said.

"I don't think every benefit that a public employee has needs to be stripped away, but I think they need to be looked at closely," he said. "The key is, do you still need that package to attract top talent?"

Bonuses are a staple of private industry, especially among larger companies — which generally pay executives more than their public-sector counterparts — but they are structured very differently.

"Typically there is no guaranteed minimum bonus," said Radhakrishnan Gopalan, assistant professor of finance at Olin Business School at Washington University in St. Louis.

"Usually bonus is linked to performance, and for top executives especially there is no minimum guarantee," said Gopalan, who co-authored a 2011 study that surveyed executive

compensation packages at 1,500 U.S. companies.

Public officials say the administrative hours benefit is a fair deal for people who are expected to work as much as necessary to meet their responsibilities, even if that extends beyond a 40-hour workweek.

"They're salaried employees, so they work as long as it takes to get the job done," said Linda Kelly, city manager in Sonoma, where managers, including Kelly, are given 80 hours a year they can use for time off. But those hours cannot be cashed in.

Administrators note they often use less vacation time than they are given. Santa Rosa City Manager Kathy Millison, who gets five weeks of vacation a year, said she used 16.5 hours of administrative leave last year and "lost" 86 leftover hours.

She used just two days of her vacation time, she said.

"It's been a busy year," Millison said in an email.

In Santa Rosa, managers get 80 hours of administrative leave that they also lose if they don't use it through the year. Unused hours cannot be cashed in.

"It's a benefit for managers, it's not a bonus," said Fran Elm, the city's Human Resources Director.

Petaluma managers get 80 hours a year of administrative leave and can cash in a maximum of 40. Sebastopol has the same plan.

In Cotati, City Manager Dianne Thompson gets 28.5 vacation days a year and 120 hours of administrative leave, potentially giving her 44 days off a year. She can cash in up to 80 administrative hours at year's end. Hours she doesn't cash in or use for time off accrue into a leave bank.

Thompson, the only Cotati employee to get administrative leave, notes that she doesn't receive sick time and says she uses less than her allotted yearly vacation time.

"It's really a 24/7 job and I tend to keep working when I'm on vacation," she said, adding that she and other staff in 2009 took voluntary pay cuts to help the city through its budget crisis.

Levin, though, said the benefit plans need to be changed to mirror the private sector, where boards of directors have the authority to assess whether targets were met and to determine bonus payouts.

"The council has to set defined goals, and then I have no problem with a bonus program," he said. "But to just give people what amounts to a bonus without any justification other than they work overtime — that's part of their job, they're managers."

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Obama: Time to rekindle 9/11 unity

ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama is calling on Americans to rekindle the spirit of unity that characterized the response to the Sept. 11 attacks. "It can be a lasting virtue," he said. "Not just on one day, but every day."

The president made his appeal during his weekly radio and Internet address, two weeks before the 10th anniversary of the al-Qaida plot that turned commercial jetliners into deadly weapons in New York, Pennsylvania and northern Virginia.

Obama plans to observe the anniversary with stops at ground zero, where the World Trade Center towers fell; at Shanksville, Pa., where one of the commandeered planes crashed; and at the Pentagon, which was also hit by a hijacked jetliner.

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