

The year's top 10 stories

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The ongoing misery of an economic slump, punctuated by home foreclosures and job losses, personal bankruptcies and government budget cuts and a setback for the SMART commuter train, dominated North Bay news in 2010.

Violence erupted in remote marijuana fields, tragedy struck four times in crosswalk collisions and Mother Nature dealt grape growers a losing hand.

But there was at least one joyful jolt to the year as the San Francisco's motley baseball crew proved to be Giants indeed, nailing down the World Series in five drama-packed games.

The region's top 10 stories of 2010 are:

1. Economic slump. Clem Carinalli's fall from financial grace was capped by approval of a \$194 million plan to repay creditors in November. But the prolonged slump claimed thousands more victims as lenders foreclosed on homes at a rate of almost 40 a week. Nearly 16 percent of homeowners were underwater, owing more on their mortgages than their property was worth. Bankruptcy filings continued at a record pace, and double-digit unemployment persisted for most of the year.

Construction remained moribund, and State Farm Insurance, with 450 employees, announced in November it was closing its Rohnert Park office and relocating to Bakersfield. Some analysts said that California employment will not return to 2007 levels until 2018.

2. World Series wonders. On opening day in April, long-suffering San Francisco Giants fans simply hoped their team would be competitive, and no one foresaw the season-ending euphoria of the team's first West Coast World Series title in 52 years.

A band of misfits and castoffs, bolstered by The Freak, The Beard and the Rally Thong, won 92 regular season games and tore through the playoffs, finally beating the formidable Texas Rangers in five World Series Games.

Waves of orange and black flooded downtown San Francisco in November as tens of thousands of fans celebrated the upbeat end to a season of torture. "They wanted to win as bad for you as they did for themselves," manager Bruce Bochy told the multitude.

3. Pro-business shift. Petaluma Councilman David Rabbitt defeated Petaluma Mayor and progressive candidate Pam Torliatt for a seat on the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors, while Scott Bartley and Jake Ours joined the Santa Rosa City Council, diluting the influence of the labor-environmental cadre on both bodies.

"It's a reflection of what people are looking for. The majority are looking for balance," Rabbitt said. Campaign signs for Ours and Bartley simply said: "Want jobs?"

In addition, Healdsburg City Councilman Mike McGuire won a surprisingly strong

victory over environmental candidate Debora Fudge, a Windsor City Councilwoman, to capture the north county supervisor's seat.

But the red tide that dominated national voting in November stopped at the Sierra, as Democrats won all five state constitutional offices, including governor and attorney general. Sen. Barbara Boxer staved off former CEO Carly Fiorina's challenge and North Coast Reps. Lynn Woolsey and Mike Thompson plowed, as usual, to new terms in Congress.

4. Build it. Sutter Health's plans for a new hospital, nearly a decade in the making, culminated with the supervisors' approval in August of a \$284million, 82-bed hospital to be built next to the Wells Fargo Center along Highway 101 north of Santa Rosa. Set to open in 2014, the facility replaces Sutter's aging campus on Chanate Road.

Overriding environmentalists' objections to two other big projects, the supervisors in December approved the Roblar Road rock quarry west of Cotati and the Dutra Materials asphalt plant on the Petaluma River. Both votes were 3-2, with outgoing Supervisors Paul Kelley and Mike Kerns favoring each.

The 70-acre quarry will produce 11 million cubic yards of construction-grade rock over 20 years; the 37-acre Dutra plant can produce 570,425 tons of asphalt and rock a year.

Also in December, the supervisors approved, with no nay votes, Syar Industries' mining operation that will take up to 350,000 tons of gravel a year from the Russian River near Geyserville.

5. Deadly crosswalks. More than 200 people attended a funeral for Calli Ann Murray, the curly haired 2-year-old killed in a Rohnert Park crosswalk collision Dec. 1. Her mother, Ling Murray, 40, sustained serious injuries when both were hit by a car driven by Kaitlyn Dunaway, 18, a Sonoma State University freshman who police say was using her cell phone at the time of the crash.

"I know many of you don't know what to say," the grieving father and husband, Jeff Murray, said during the service. "That's OK. We don't either."

Two other pedestrians were killed in crosswalks in January: Michelle Cordova, 15, a sophomore at Santa Rosa High School, on West College Avenue at Link Lane, less than 40yards from her home, and Elsie "Alice" Stefani, 82, on St. Helena's downtown Main Street.

Mark Mueller, a homeless man living on the streets of Guerneville, was killed in March near the intersection of Church and Main streets. A homeless woman walking with Mueller said he pushed her out of the way as a white van bore down on them, then she sat with him during his final moments.

"I held his hand. He smiled," Barbara Tirgett said. "And then he was gone."

6. Budget woes.

With tax revenue streams pinched by the economic slump, local officials cut jobs and services, closed schools and dipped into cash reserves to balance budgets in 2010, and were left facing more red ink next year.

Santa Rosa laid off dozens of workers and boosted park and recreation fees to get a \$313 million budget passed in June. The city secured voter approval of a quarter-cent sales tax increase in November and still faces a \$2.8 million deficit next year. Cotati and Rohnert Park also passed sales tax hikes to help their depleted budgets.

County supervisors scaled back services and shed 237 jobs — including at least 15 sheriff's deputy slots — in approving a \$1.18 billion budget in June. The cuts helped close a \$61.6million shortfall, but left a \$27 million deficit looming next year.

Santa Rosa City Schools cut \$5.6 million this year, eliminating three classroom days, boosting class sizes and reducing funding for arts and music programs. Trustees need to chop out \$2.7 million or more next year. Four public schools were closed this year around the county, and a fifth will shut in 2011.

7. Pot violence. Five suspected marijuana growers were killed in confrontations with law officers in four Northern California counties this summer, an unparalleled level of violence in the 20-year history of coordinated marijuana eradication efforts. "It's not the way it used to be," Mendocino County Sheriff's Lt. Rusty Noe said.

In Sonoma County, rural resident Gary Gillette said he packs a .44-magnum pistol and a rifle while walking on his 152 acres off Ida Clayton Road. Officials cited the involvement of Mexican drug cartels, more aggressive law enforcement tactics and proliferation of large pot gardens as reasons for the growing hazards in the backcountry.

In November, 55 percent of California voters rejected Proposition 19, the marijuana legalization ballot measure. Sonoma County voters went the other way, with 54 percent in favor, but the Emerald Triangle counties of Mendocino, Humboldt and Trinity rejected legalized pot.

8. All over for Ursuline. Students, families, staff and alumni were stunned by the November announcement that Ursuline High School will close at the end of the school year due to lack of funding. The all-girl Catholic school has educated generations of young women for 130 years. But a 30percent enrollment decline — attributed to the recession's impact on families' ability to pay the \$11,000 annual tuition — took a toll.

The sudden announcement caught the school community off guard, but officials at Cardinal Newman, the neighboring all-boys Catholic school, quickly said they would admit girls next year.

9. SMART stumbles. Citing a \$155 million funding shortfall, Sonoma-Marin Area Rail Transit officials approved plans in January to run trains from Marin County to either Petaluma or Santa Rosa, slicing off the northern portion of the commuter rail line designed to run from Larkspur to Cloverdale.

In November, SMART said the financial gap had more than doubled to \$350 million and the train's stretch north of Santa Rosa might be deferred three to five years. Amid a flurry of outrage, SMART blamed falling tax revenue and escalating construction estimates. Critics said SMART was underfunded from the beginning and the recession only made it worse.

10. Nature knocks grapes. As the harvest drew to a close in October, wine-grape growers declared 2010 the worst year in recent memory with financial losses possibly hitting a record. Crop damage began with mid-season mold outbreaks, compounded by an August heat wave that scorched grapes and capped by fall rains.

"In farming, every now and then you get a baseball bat across the face," said Michael Collins, a Healdsburg grower who lost his entire 30-acre crop. "We got that this year."

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