

World/Nation

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► **Afghan election:** President Hamid Karzai's challenger drops out of the race, accusing the government of corruption and electoral fraud. **A3**

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Sporting Green



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► **Raiders fall again:** Despite some positives in a loss to the Chargers, 2-and-6 Oakland limps into its bye week. **B1**

Bay Area

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Technology

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Datebook

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San Francisco Chronicle

SFGATE.COM | Monday, November 2, 2009 | PRINTED ON RECYCLED PAPER \$1.00 *****

Bridge closure enters Week 2

More deadlock traffic as repair fails critical stress test

By Carolyn Jones
CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

Pushing traffic turmoil into a second week, Caltrans said late Sunday that the workhorse Bay Bridge will probably remain closed through the morning

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► **The latest:** Find updates on the Bay Bridge at sfgate.com.

commute after a fix meant to shore up a cracked beam failed a critical stress test.

When the region's busiest span will reopen remains unknown. Caltrans officials refused to speculate, saying that their repairs must pass several rounds of tests and inspections before the bridge is deemed safe

Bridge continues on A11



Lance Iversen / The Chronicle
A California Highway Patrol officer walks on the Bay Bridge, which will remain closed through the morning commute.

YOSEMITE Park upgrades natural by design

By John King
CHRONICLE URBAN DESIGN WRITER

When Yosemite-bound visitors emerge from their cars at Half Dome View for a first glimpse of distant splendors, they probably pay no attention to the scattering of boulders on their right.

The chunks of granite look as if they've been there all along, a natural outcrop on the terrain along Big Oak Flat Road. But they only arrived this past summer, and each was placed with deliberate care.

Yosemite continues on A8

Half Dome View overlook

Increasingly, overlooks in Yosemite National Park aren't just wide spots in the road: Four have been redone with durable but discreet materials and such features as bronze sculptures. The newest upgrade is at Half Dome View, which offers an alluring panorama of the distant valley to travelers on Big Oak Flat Road.

Old overlook

New overlook

- 1 New viewing area with rustic concrete paving
- 2 Granite seatwall
- 3 Bronze sculpture of Half Dome
- 4 "imported" boulders
- 5 Repaved parking area
- 6 Median island with granite curb and granite wall

El Capitan rises in Yosemite, where the design ethos focuses on the scenery.

Sources: The Yosemite Fund, planning drawings courtesy of Royston Hanamoto Alley & Abey

ECONOMY

S.F. construction not expected to grow for years after rebound

By Robert Selna | Even if loans were available, Mahoney said the belief



ON THE BALLOT

Vallejo looking to expand utility tax — to cell phones

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FROM THE COVER



Photos by Michael Macor / The Chronicle

A row of rocks was carefully placed along the edge of the renovated Half Dome View parking lot in Yosemite this past summer so as to appear as if they had always been there.

Upgrades in Yosemite are natural by design

Yosemite from page A1

"We wanted a divider to separate the viewing area from the parking, but we also wanted something organic to relate to the setting," said Douglas Nelson of the landscape architecture firm Royston Hanamoto Alley & Abey (RHAA). "Less of a formal design and more of a natural feel."

The boulders are just one element in the upgrade of the overlook, a project that includes a viewing area paved in concrete mixed with crushed local stone. The final touch comes next month, when park workers add plants grown from seeds and cuttings collected in the 1,169-square-mile national park.

Scenery the focus

The care shown this relatively small project is emblematic of something much larger: a design ethos for Yosemite where the overarching goal is that nothing new should make you look twice. "The scenery is the focus," said Randy Fong, an architect who is the park's chief of design. "Whatever is built or developed should enhance the (Yosemite) experience, not call attention to itself."



A newly built retaining wall is made of granite and materials that blend in with the surroundings.

Fitting in has been the stated goal all along. The Ahwahnee lodge with its castle-like stone walls — Yosemite's most imposing yet revered structure — was billed "environmental" by the company that built it in 1927. Even the thoroughly modern Yosemite Lodge was presented to the public in 1956 as a complex that would "neither intrude upon this splendor nor seem to rival it in permanence."

Some of guidelines

These days, nothing is left to chance in a storied slice of nature that has been celebrated since the first tourist party explored it in 1855. Instead there's "A Sense of Place; Design Guidelines for Yosemite Valley" from 2005, a hefty volume that goes so far as to spell out how log columns should be used

for bus shelters in forested areas — and how "tight knots are desirable, similar to lodgepole pine with bark peeled." Among the consultants on "A Sense of Place" was George Homsey, a founder of EHDD, a firm distinguished by the thoughtful modernism of such efforts as the Monterey Bay Aquarium. But in a location like this, he suggests, deference is the key.

"You have to wear a different hat when you work in Yosemite. Buildings are secondary," said Homsey, who's also on a team crafting park-wide guidelines to be released next year. "It's all about the use of materials, the image you conjure up."

Parking to picnic

To some extent, the guidelines merely spell out a direction that has evolved by trial and error. There's no better example than a project that opened the year the guidelines were released but was conceived a decade earlier: the approach to Yosemite Falls. The 2,425-foot cascade celebrated by John Muir as "the wildest displays of her (nature's) power"

attracts crowds that can exceed 10,000 people a day. But the experience was strictly stop-and-gawk, the falls reached by a straight asphalt path that could hold 50 tour buses at a time.

No longer. The 56 acres at the base were recast in an ambitious, naturalistic design by Lawrence Halprin, the landscape architecture legend who died on Oct. 25 and in 2005 spoke of how Yosemite "has affected me spiritually as well as physically."

Attention to detail

The straight trail now is a mile-long loop, graded for almost full wheelchair access most of the way. A small amphitheater is formed from clustered boulders.

The parking lot is gone, replaced by native vegetation and picnic tables. The restroom building resembles a ski chalet; the bus shelter has a rustic tone.

Yet not all the moves are scenographic: the loop is paved in asphalt rather than patterned concrete because "asphalt is more malleable," Fong said. "Concrete would have buckled and cracked."

This lavish attention to detail wouldn't occur without private donations that tap into the park's long hold on the American imagination.

The transformation of the base of the falls had a \$14.5 million budget; \$13 million was provided by the Yosemite Fund, a nonprofit organization that has contributed \$55 million to park pro-

Continues on page A9

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FROM THE COVER



Michael Macor / The Chronicle

Boulders and an amphitheater have replaced the huge parking lot at the entrance to Yosemite Falls.

From page A8

grams and projects since it was founded in 1988.

Similarly, the fund picked up the tab for the \$800,000 redo of Half Dome Overlook. It also helped restore the lush of three other famed vantage points: Glacier Point, Olmsted Point and Tunnel View Overlook. All were designed by RHAA.

Donors fund projects

Even when the fund acts as developer, the park staff presents candidates for funding. It also is at the center of all design decisions. Tunnel View, for instance, makes room in the parking lot for a quartet of tour buses — acceptance of the fact this is a near-obligatory first stop for tourists heading into the valley from points south.

This perspective is crucial, according to fund President Mike Tollefson.

"It's a combination of protecting the resources while accentuating the feeling that you are in a special place," said Tollefson, who served as Yosemite's superintendent for six years before moving to the fund in January.

But care isn't lavished only on projects blessed by donors. Consider the

stretch of El Portal Road rebuilt last year by the Federal Highway Association because of erosion from the Merced River alongside it.

Rock replicas

Copies were made of the historic rock wall between the road and the river. Then — to meet new roadway safety standards — concrete panels replicating the original wall were placed over steel guard rails. The wall was hand-painted, with speckles to resemble granite and a final "wash coat" to give the appearance of age.

The two-lane roadway also was widened slightly, which meant cutting into the adjacent rocky cliff. The cliff's retaining wall consists of granite boulders installed one by one and reinforced with cement.

Of course, anything less would likely bring criticism — or lawsuits — from watchdogs suspicious of any changes to the park.

"Everything the park service does, there's someone looking over their shoulder," Homsey said. "Yosemite is the mother church."

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Vallejo seeks to expand tax

Utility from page A1

tired Mare Island shipyard worker John Kocourek of Vallejo, who's been working against the measure. "We just don't think it's fair."

Measure U would lower the utility tax from 7.5 percent to 7.3 percent of a resident's total bill, but would widen the services it covers, from gas, electricity, water and traditional land lines to modern telecommunications.

The tax gets complicated when it comes to things like text messages. Some consumers pay a flat rate, after all, while others pay by the text.

Vallejo, which filed for bankruptcy in 2008, is desperate for revenue. Its general fund has shriveled from \$83 million to \$65 million in less than two years. Property taxes continue to free-fall and public-employee salaries and benefits continue to climb.

"This tax is absolutely critical to maintain some semblance of public safe-

"Most people in Vallejo, unless they have a teenager who texts a lot, will see a decrease in their utility tax."

Donald Maynor, attorney

ty for our community," Mayor Osby Davis said. "Without it, police and fire will suffer. Right now we are absolutely at the bare bones."

About half the cities in California have utility taxes, which range from 11 percent in Seal Beach (Orange County) and Culver City (Los Angeles County) to 1 percent in Menlo Park. Vallejo's existing utility tax is 7.5 percent, the highest in Solano County but equal to those in Oakland, Berkeley and San Francisco.

Because of changes in federal tax law, Vallejo and other cities feared they would lose their utility tax altogether unless it updated the language to include modern technology.

Most cities lowered the

actual tax rate in order to make the change more palatable for voters and, at least initially, not result in a huge change in revenue. Over time, however, as technology evolves, the tax could apply to an increasing number of services.

Donald Maynor, an Atherton attorney who's worked with 50 California cities on the issue, said the fear of taxation run amok is ungrounded.

"Most people in Vallejo, unless they have a teenager who texts a lot, will actually see a decrease in their utility tax," Maynor said.

Taxpayer advocates disagree. The utility tax expansion will amount, over time, to a "massive tax increase," said Jon Coupal, president of the

Howard Jarvis Taxpayers' Association.

"People are going to be shocked," he said. "This will add substantially to most people's tax liability. And these things are almost impossible to defeat because on the ballot it appears as a tax decrease."

The tax will vary widely depending on the taxpayer's cell phone plan. Opponents say cell phone bills are typically higher than those associated with land lines, leaving consumers with a larger overall payout.

As more people drop land lines and rely solely on cell phones, the tax burden should be shared equally, Vallejo Councilwoman Joanne Schivley said.

"The only people who are against this are those who've been given a free ride and don't want to give it up," she said. "The tax should be equitable for everyone."

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