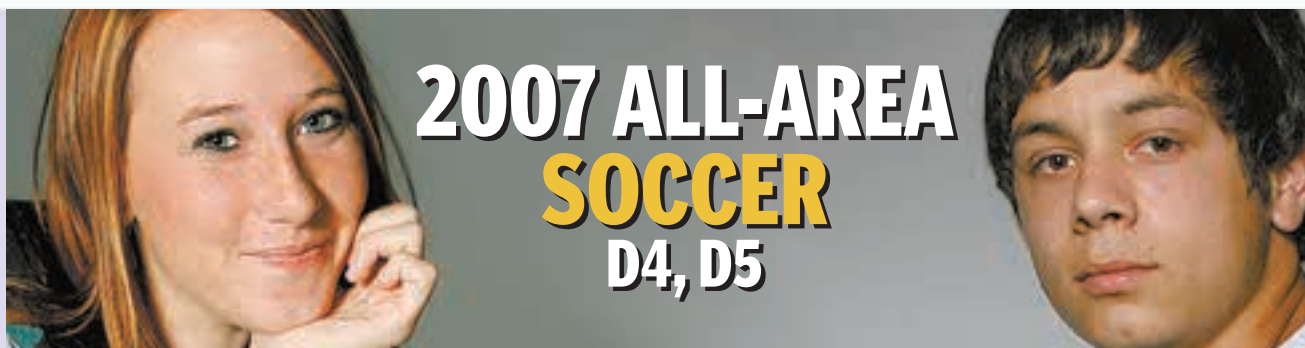


DISNEY'S NEW BOX OFFICE CRUSHER?

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2007 ALL-AREA SOCCER D4, D5

The Bakersfield Californian

MYSTERY RETAILER SETS SIGHTS ON OLD ROBINSONS-MAY, A18



PET FOOD SCARE

More suspected sick from food

Veterinary and consumer groups say there is mounting evidence that the actual number of dogs and cats made sick or killed by contaminated pet food may number in the hundreds or even the thousands, far more than the 16 in the Food and Drug Administration's official count. One medical Web site reported at least 471 cases of kidney failure — including 104 fatalities — nationwide among cats and dogs. And veterinarians suspect the contaminated food was to blame.

Page A3



Kyle Sampson

U.S. ATTORNEY FIRINGS

Ex-aide: Gonzales advised of plan

A former top aide to Alberto Gonzales testified Thursday that the embattled attorney general was aware and regularly updated on the plan to fire several U.S. attorneys. In a tense seven-hour session, former chief of staff Kyle Sampson told the Senate Judiciary Committee that Gonzales' public statements on his limited role in the firings was not "accurate."

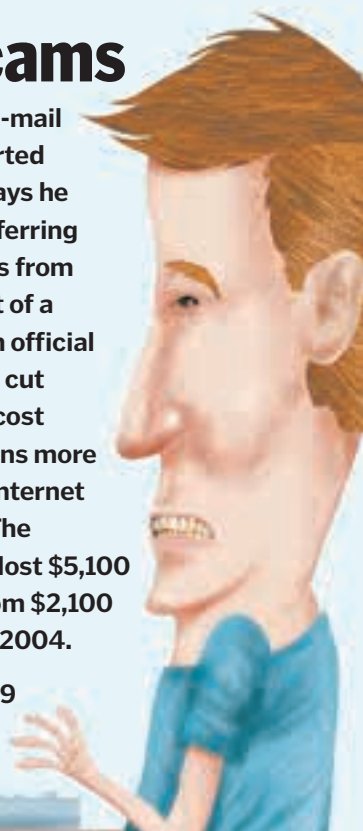
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INTERNET

'Nigerian' e-mail tops scams

The unsolicited e-mail in which a purported African official says he needs help transferring millions of dollars from the bank account of a deceased African official in exchange for a cut of the proceeds cost gullible Americans more than any other Internet scam in 2006. The average victim lost \$5,100 last year, up from \$2,100 per incident in 2004.

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MEXICANA'S FIRST FLIGHTS



Mexicana Airlines Capt. Jose Luis Basterra Caldelas, who piloted the first flight into Bakersfield, enjoys the ceremony that took place in the new international terminal at Meadows Field Thursday afternoon.

JOHN HARTE / THE CALIFORNIAN

Fantastico!

Meadows' new international terminal welcomes first flight from Mexico

BY LOUIS MEDINA
Californian staff writer
e-mail: lmedina@bakersfield.com

Ya es oficial: Meadows Field Airport es internacional. No translation was necessary to understand — no, feel! — the excitement among the 200 people who crowded the airport's newly refurbished international terminal for a historic arrival Thursday.

The waiting area was decked out in balloons in Mexicana Airlines' dark-blue-and-white corporate colors. There was an enormous cake with a photo of a passenger plane and the writing, "Welcome Mexicana: Inaugural Flight, March 29, 2007."

Please turn to MEXICANA / A3



Benjamin Bravo, 4, peeks into the customs area Thursday at the airport where he greeted his uncle, Salvador Barajas, a Mexicana Airlines flight passenger.



"This is great. We won't have to go far to travel to Mexico anymore."
— Rosa Emilia Orellana, 79, is from El Salvador and lives in Bakersfield



"It's excellent. It saved us having to do a lot of driving to go pick him up. Here it's only 40 miles from where we live."
— Daniel Vigil, 40, from Ducor,



"It takes us three-and-one-half hours to get to Los Angeles but just 45 minutes to get here. This is great."
— Rosa Maria Villalobos, 40, from Tulare County



"The flight was comfortable. I wasn't anticipating all the fanfare, but I'm grateful for it."
— Bernarda Cardenas, 84, from Guadalajara

War in Iraq

Senate bill ensures showdown

Democrats ponder next step with Bush likely to veto timeline

Californian wire services

Thursday's Senate vote linking money for the Iraq war to a timetable for withdrawal sets up a standoff that could define the path of the war and appears likely to shape the remainder of the president's term, lawmakers in both parties said.

The 51-to-47 Senate vote — taken six days after the House approved a similar measure, also by a close margin — launches a course that Democrats and Republicans agree is virtually inevitable: The House and Senate will reconcile their bills and pass a measure that ties money for the war to a timeline for troop withdrawal; the president will veto it; and Democrats will fail to override the veto, leaving funding for the war mission in jeopardy.

"We stand united in saying loud and clear that when we've got a troop in harm's way, we expect that troop to be fully funded," Bush said Thursday at the White House, with Republican House mem-

Please turn to WAR / A3

Clinics

Kern to get \$30 million health grant

BY EMILY HAGEDORN
Californian staff writer
e-mail: ehagedorn@bakersfield.com

Kern County will receive \$30 million in federal money over three years to help provide health care to uninsured residents, state officials announced Thursday.

One of only 10 California counties awarded money, Kern County intends to use its share to start a new program — the Camino de Salud (Healthy Path) Network — that will divert heavy users of Kern Medical Center's emergency room to community clinics, hooking them up with primary care providers and preventive medicine.

In the long run, the program should relieve pressure on ERs and free up county dollars spent on medical care for the uninsured, said Fred Plane,

Please turn to HEALTH / A3

bakersfield.com

Check out The Pulse, reporter Emily Hagedorn's blog on health and medicine. You can find it at people.bakersfield.com/blogs/ehagedorn.

WEATHER



Air quality: Moderate, **66**
Complete weather, **B8**

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FOR THE RECORD

There are 162 regular-season games in the Major League Baseball season. A preseason report on Page D5 of Wednesday's Sports section was incorrect.

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Mexicana Airlines' Airbus A319 rolls through a celebratory stream of water provided by two firetrucks as it taxis to Meadows Field's new international terminal Thursday afternoon.

MEXICANA: Dignitaries join in festivities marking service

Continued from A1

Mayor Harvey Hall and other city, county and Mexicana officials were there.

Lots of Hispanic residents from various San Joaquin Valley communities were there either waiting for relatives who were onboard the first direct flight from Guadalajara, Mexico, to Bakersfield, or because they had heard about the event on local Spanish-language radio stations and wanted to come to the catered welcoming fiesta that had been advertised free to the whole community.

"This is fantastic," said a curious Irma Serrano of Bakersfield who was there with her husband. "We wanted to find out more about this. We Latinos need a direct flight to Guadalajara. We can now be spared the delays in traffic and the expense of going to Los Angeles, which is far away," she said in Spanish.

After the plane touched down effortlessly at exactly 4:25 p.m., according to pilot Jose Luis Bastera Caldelas, it was symbolically "baptized" by the hoses of two firetrucks before its load of passengers, mostly Mexicana personnel together with a few commercial travelers, came off onto a red carpet that had been rolled out on the tarmac.

A half-hour later, after Mayor Hall cut a red ribbon stretched across the automatic doors leading out of the customs area, the passengers were greeted by a mariachi band that played, among other festive tunes, the "Macarena," to which some from the band and crowd danced doing the hand movements former President Bill Clinton once made famous.

Indeed, the event was so full of pomp and circumstance that a head of state would not have seemed out of place at all.



The old terminal at Meadows, now a newly remodeled and in some areas newly built international terminal, was packed Thursday for the arrival of Mexicana Airlines' first flight.



Passengers disembark the Mexicana Airlines A319 Airbus jet after its arrival Thursday at Meadows Field's new international terminal.

More pet deaths appear tied to food

Veterinarians and owners report hundreds, if not thousands, of deaths from tainted brands

BY MICHAEL D. SORKIN
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

ST. LOUIS, Mo. — On March 11, Reba stopped eating. Five days later, the black Labrador dog was dead.

The next day, March 17, Reba's owner, retired high school teacher Dennis Mullins of Ballwin, Mo., read in the newspaper of a massive nationwide recall of pet food.

Gay Brown of Troy, Mo., watched her cat, Killer, become disoriented and die from what her

veterinarian diagnosed as kidney failure, a month before the recall.

In Brentwood, Mo., a 120-pound chocolate Labrador named Meshach Valentino had a complete physical this month. He was pronounced in tip-top shape, owner Fred Rauch recalled. The dog died nine days later, on March 11.

The Food and Drug Administration does not count these three deaths among the 16 blamed on contaminated pet food.

But veterinary and consumer groups are pointing to mounting

evidence that the actual total of dead and sick pets may number in the hundreds — or even the thousands. Pet owners, meanwhile, are desperate for answers.

The contaminated food is 95 brands of "cuts and gravy" style dog and cat food manufactured by Menu Foods. The manufacturer blames rat poison from an unknown source, and says all dry food and wet food in stores is safe.

Members of Congress, including Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., demanded this week answers from the FDA within 15 days.

Meanwhile:

• Veterinarians across the country reported at least 471 cases of

kidney failure among cats and dogs, the Veterinary Information Network, a Web site for 30,000 veterinarians and students, said this week.

• The PetConnection, (petconnection.com/blog), reported Wednesday that pet owners had reported 2,237 dead pets that they blamed on contaminated food.

• The ASPCA Animal Control Center in Urbana, Ill., said the signs were not fully consistent with the ingestion of rat poison containing aminopterin.

The ASPCA strongly recommended that government and other investigators continue to search for additional contaminants.

WAR: Party not likely to cut off funds under pressure

Continued from A1

bers fanned out behind him.

The Senate's timeline requires the president to begin bringing troops home within 120 days of enactment and sets a nonbinding "goal" to have most combat forces out of Iraq by the end of next March.

The House plan mandates a far more restrictive timeline for drawing down U.S. forces, requiring the president to begin withdrawing troops as soon as July 1 and to complete the process no later than next March.

The absolute deadlines were key to winning the support of staunch anti-war lawmakers in the House, many of whom have complained that Congress has not moved aggressively enough to end the war. Those lawmakers — who belong to the more than 80-strong Out of Iraq caucus — provided the final votes that guaranteed the 218-212 passage last week.

The same restrictive deadlines, however, could cause support to evaporate for the bill in the Senate, where Democratic leaders were able to unite their caucus behind Thursday's spending bill by explicitly omitting a firm deadline for the final withdrawal of troops from Iraq.

Showdown with the president

Both proposals have prompted repeated veto threats from President Bush, who said he will not sign legislation that limits what military commanders can do in Iraq. Democratic lawmakers are gearing up for a high-stakes showdown with the president.

Though Democrats are loath to cut off funds for the war, they are facing growing pressure from the party's liberal wing to do just that. And conservative Democrats fear that if they do anything that appears to undercut the war mission, it could leave the party vulnerable to GOP attacks that they knowingly are jeopardizing troops in combat.

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., played down the differences between their plans Thursday. Reid insisted the two Democratic-controlled cham-

bers would have few problems reaching a compromise that could pass the House and Senate.

"We don't have a gap to overcome," he said. "The ball is in the president's court. That's who has to make the next move."

Still, with the party divided over how far it should push efforts to end the war, most Democrats acknowledge there is little they can do other than apply political pressure on Bush. And with the 2008 elections looming, there is almost no chance they would allow funding for the troops to run out; many compare the scenario to the Republican Congress' 1995 budget showdown with President Clinton, when the GOP paid a heavy political price for being perceived as causing a federal government shutdown.

One option Democrats are strongly considering is approving funds for the war only on a month-by-month basis. That would put the president's conduct on a short leash and allow opposition to the war to build, which could compel reluctant lawmakers to the point where Democrats gain enough votes to defeat a presidential veto and force Bush's hand.

As Thursday's Senate vote demonstrated — only two Republicans crossed party lines to vote with Democrats — the president can still depend on a relatively unified GOP caucus to support his war plans. Republicans blasted the Democrats' bill, saying that setting a withdrawal date would allow terrorists to prevail by waiting out the United States.

"Their victory is certain if we withdraw," said Senator John Ensign, a Nevada Republican. "We need to give the troop-surge plan time to succeed. We all must hope for its success."

The Bush administration has warned that unless Congress approves more money for the war by April 15, troops in the field will be shortchanged.

Democrats, however, contend that the president has already been given enough funds to wage the war through at least mid-June and could keep it going much longer by redirecting money from other Defense Department accounts.

HEALTH: Program to enroll those not eligible for others

Continued from A1

senior deputy county administrative officer.

"It's not the solution as a whole, but it will help," he said.

A total of \$540 million in federal money "went to counties with proven track records of delivering service to low-income people," Sandra Shewry, director of the California Department of Health Services, said at a news teleconference Thursday.

Seventeen proposals were considered in all, said Kim Belshe, secretary of the California Health and Human Services Agency.

The allotments are expected to help some 180,000 low-income, uninsured Californians. A few thousand of them will be Kern County residents, Plane said.

The county is partnering with COPE Health Systems, a Los Angeles-based health nonprofit, to manage the program.

Using a model similar to one COPE implemented in Los Angeles, Camino de Salud will enroll people who are ineligible for other government-funded health care and provide them with primary care and outpatient diagnostic and specialty coverage at about 30 community and county clinics, COPE CEO Allen Miller said.

As specified in federal guidelines, illegal immigrants are not eligible for the program. Other eligibility criteria and the nitty-gritty of how the program will work still has to be hammered out and presented to county supervisors for approval, Miller said.

The allotment isn't enough to care for everyone eligible in Kern County, he said. But it will hopefully prove that the program works, and then more people can be signed up later.

"As the state is looking at a new health care plan, they can look at Kern County as a model," he said.

The program is set to start Sept. 1, but Plane said the county will receive some of the money before then.

While hopeful, Clinica Sierra Vista CEO Steve Schilling said it was too soon to gauge the program's probability of success. Clinica is one of the clinic partners in the program.

One of the biggest challenges facing the clinic will be maintaining sufficient manpower to treat the new patients, he said.

"That's going to be a big challenge, but I think we can make it happen," Schilling said. "The potential is there to substantially help several thousand people."

Iraq deaths

As of Thursday, at least 3,244 members of the U.S. military have died since the beginning of the Iraq war in March 2003, according to an Associated Press count. The figure includes seven military civilians. At least 2,621 died as a result of hostile action, according to the military's numbers. The AP count is one higher than the Defense Department's tally.

No deaths reported.

The latest identifications reported by the military:

■ Marine Staff Sgt. Marcus A. Golczynski, 30, Lewisburg, Tenn.; killed Tuesday during combat in Anbar province; assigned to the Marine Forces Reserve's 3rd Battalion, 24th Marine Regiment, 4th Marine Division, Nashville, Tenn.

■ Army Master Sgt. Sean M. Thomas, 33, Harrisburg, Pa.; killed Tuesday in Baghdad by small-arms fire; assigned to the 28th Division Support Command, Harrisburg, Pa.

FLIGHT DETAILS:

Every week, there will be three Mexicana Airline flights each way between Bakersfield and Guadalajara, Mexico. The 1,405-mile flights take about three hours.

Flight 133 to Guadalajara Departs Bakersfield at 1:10 a.m. Friday, Saturday and Sunday and arrives at 6:15 a.m.

Flight 132 to Bakersfield Departs Guadalajara at 10:35 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday and arrives at 12:10 a.m. the following day.

Plane: Airbus A319, seating up to 120

Meal and beverage service: sandwich-based light meal and free alcoholic and non-alcoholic beverages

Source: Mexicana Airlines



bakersfield.com

For a video of the celebration at Meadows Field Thursday.