

# The Bay Area

The New York Times

INDICATORS

## Consumers Pay the Price

*The consumer price index in the Bay Area has remained flat in this recessionary year, though grocery costs dipped 3.1 percent and electricity rose 13.1 percent, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported Thursday. Here are other developments affecting local pocketbooks.*



TOLLS

Bay Area commuters can expect an increase of at least \$1 in the cost of crossing all seven local toll bridges beginning July 1, transportation officials say. The Bay Area Toll Authority, which manages the bridges, is expected to make a decision in January on how to close a projected annual budget gap of \$140 million. Every option before the authority raises tolls for passenger cars by \$1, to \$5. In addition, members of the agency's staff say they are leaning toward a first-time charge of \$3 for car pools. And if you use the Bay Bridge, brace yourself for the possibility of a \$6 rush-hour toll.



HOUSING

Bay Area residents are joining in a countryside scramble to refinance or take out new mortgages, local bankers say, as interest rates continue their enticing downward slide. As rates on 30-year fixed mortgages dropped below 5 percent, refinancing applications have flooded in, said Brad Blackwell, a Danville-based sales manager for Wells Fargo. "We've seen as much volume in the last three weeks as we've ever had," Mr. Blackwell said. In Antioch and Fairfield, sharp plunges in home values have pre-empted refinancings and there has been a surge in home sales, he added. Most owners choosing to sell are still finding prices depressed. Figures released Thursday by DQ News showed the median price of a home sold in Solano County was 24.5 percent lower last month than in September 2008. In Napa County, the drop was 18 percent; in Contra Costa County, 12.7 percent; in Santa Clara County, 11 percent. San Francisco home values, down 3.7 percent, fell the least.



POWER

As Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger signed a bill on Sunday requiring utilities to buy back renewable energy from private producers at above-market prices, environmental groups and renewable-energy companies prepared for the fight over where the new price will be set. The more utilities pay for the energy, the more likely there will be a surge in solar-panel installations, though bills might rise, too. Currently, utilities pay roughly 12 cents per kilowatt-hour, and solar advocates want the Public Utilities Commission to make it 20 cents for facilities generating three megawatts or less. That could increase annual solar-energy production to 750 megawatts, up from today's 14 megawatts, said Bernadette del Chiaro, a lobbyist with Environment California. Cindy Pollard, a PG&E spokeswoman, said the utility preferred a price set by auction. PG&E will also argue that its purchase costs should not exceed a predetermined total.

GERRY SHIH

## New Oakland Police Chief Inherits a Force, and a City, in Turmoil

By JESSE MCKINLEY

Anthony W. Batts was enjoying a successful run as the head of the Long Beach police when a headhunter called last winter and asked if the chief's job in Oakland had any appeal. Mr. Batts said no. Then, he said, came March 21, when a recently released parolee, Lovelle Mixon, shot and killed four Oakland police officers and cemented the city's reputation as the violent crime capital of the Bay Area. Sitting at the officers' funeral, Mr. Batts said, he changed his mind. "I decided that I'd like to help," he said. On Monday morning, Mr. Batts will start one of the toughest jobs in American law enforcement, taking over a department demoralized by its losses and distrusted by many it is charged to protect. While his task is straightforward — get his officers to believe in him and themselves and get his community to do the same — the problems are complex: a city already dealing with underperforming schools, an entrenched crack cocaine trade, deadly gangs and a 17 percent unemployment rate. Never mind the surfeit of parolees and probationers who are often entangled in violent crimes.

There are fewer than 800 officers in this city of 404,000. Long Beach, a city of 465,000, has more than 1,000. In Oakland, the force operates under a cloud. The behavior of a group of rogue officers a decade ago led to years of federal oversight, and the city continues to pay millions each year to settle police-related lawsuits. Other Bay Area cities have their own crime dramas — a new chief in San Francisco, charges of racial profiling by the police in San Jose, the Jaycee Dugard case in Antioch — but Oakland's ocean of problems seems wider and deeper. And Oakland officials say it is exactly Mr. Batts's record of managing several problems at once that appealed to them. "I wanted a police chief that was committed to reform, committed to community policing, and one that recognized that public safety is a multidimensional problem," Mayor Ron Dellums said. "We are not going to arrest our way out of this." Mr. Batts's crime-fighting record is impressive. In seven years as the chief in Long Beach, he helped drive down the violent crime rate to its lowest level in nearly 40 years.



JIM WILSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Kevin Arias investigated shooting deaths in East Oakland on Oct. 8. The city is considered the violent crime capital of the area.

Long Beach and Oakland are both busy port cities with blue-collar roots and almost identical poverty levels. Each has large white, black, Asian and Latino communities. Mr. Dellums called them mirror images.

"But when you look at the crime rate," Mr. Batts said, "they are upside down."

Not that the force isn't trying, and having some success. In fact, with the notable exception of rape, which is up 14 percent from

this time last year, Oakland has actually seen double-digit crime reductions thus far in 2009, including murder (down 19 percent from 2008), robbery (down 18 percent), arson (down 27 percent), larceny (15 percent) and auto theft (23 percent), and smaller reductions in assault and burglary.

But how will Mr. Batts keep the crime rate going down while convincing city residents that the police force is on their side? It seems almost certain that he will call for an expansion of community policing. It is an idea that Oakland has tried and even underwritten — with a 2004 ballot measure that resulted in 63 new "problem-solving" officers — but that Mr. Dellums wants Mr. Batts to expand.

"He understands how to do it on the ground," the mayor said. That said, veterans of big-city policing say the mayor must also do his part. "You need the political will to get it done," said Howard Safir, the former New York City police commissioner. "You need the guy at your back."

In a 2006 article for the F.B.I. Law Enforcement Bulletin, Mr.

Batts and Cynthia Renaud outlined his approach in Long Beach. In particular, he suggested that quality-of-life crimes like vandalism be more vigorously pursued by patrol divisions that draw on diverse skills, like those of nuisance abatement officers. In one case he cited, officers and community leaders in Long Beach sealed off and collectively monitored a crime-plagued pedestrian bridge. Crime there dropped, he wrote. Some of these ideas have been used to varying degrees in Oakland. But senior members of the department say they expect bigger changes. "Any time you have a change at an executive level, in any organization, you have a chance for new ideas and new beginnings," said Howard A. Jordan, the acting police chief. Among the rank and file, meanwhile, the appointment of Mr. Batts — an outsider — has been met with guarded optimism. "Is he going to be a crime fighter or is he going to be a politician?" said Sgt. Dom Arotzarena, the president of the Oakland Police Officers Association, the

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## The 2-Percent Solution Is One Size That Does Not Fit All

The phones wouldn't stop ringing at the office of San Francisco's assessor-recorder. A besieged clerk repeated the same words over and over: "It's too late to appeal."

BARBARY COAST  
SCOTT JAMES

Property tax bills arrived in San Francisco last week. Despite the recession and plummeting home prices, homeowners are learning that their property values are up, along with their taxes. Call it the 2-percent solution. Assessors all over California have been addicted to it since 1978 when Proposition 13 capped assessment increases. The most any property value could rise, officially, was 2 percent a year. Since then, nearly every property assessment automatically goes up 2 percent annually, even if property values are down. So when Jon Stuber opened a letter in July saying the value of his home had increased, his first reaction was, "No, it didn't!" Two years ago, Mr. Stuber left a rundown rental, took his life savings and bought a few-frills condo at 15th and Mission. It is rare to be a first-time homeowner

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in one of the world's most expensive cities. Mr. Stuber, originally from modest circumstances in rural Maine, lives a frugal, Hulu-instead-of-cable lifestyle. We have been friends since he moved here a dozen years ago, and I watched him go from slinging hash in a restaurant to managing projects for a biotech firm. He has done hard labor for everything he owns. I was proud of him the day he closed on that condo. Mr. Stuber bought it in 2007 for \$610,000. No one thinks it is worth that much in 2009, but the city sent him an assessment of \$634,642. "I'm going to fight," he vowed. "I pretty much found out my property is about \$100,000 less." Mr. Stuber is not alone. They are still processing the maelstrom of mail at City Hall, but this could be a record year of about 6,500 property assessment appeals, on par with the recession of 1993. Inspired by my friend's outrage, I studied my own assessment and also filed an appeal. Homeowners are armed with statistics from Web sites like Zillow.com that show home sale prices down an average of 21 percent in San Francisco from 2008 to 2009. They want more than just a waiver of the 2 percent. If they prevail, it will cost the county more, on some properties, than if

there had been no increase. "We try to be fair," said Phil Ting, San Francisco's assessor-recorder. Mr. Ting did decrease the assessments on about 5 percent of the properties in San Francisco — 9,997 parcels. But, he said, "everybody who didn't get a decrease went up 2 percent." Not all assessors take the same approach — though, in fairness, property values elsewhere in the region have taken more of a hit



HEIDI SCHUMANN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

Jon Stuber is fighting the assessment on the condominium he bought in 2007.

than those in the city. For instance, Santa Clara County's tax assessor, Larry Stone, reduced the assessments of nearly one in four homes. "If I know someone is over-assessed, why would I look the other way?" Mr. Stone said. Reductions help those who get them, but an analysis of home sales data for the 2009 tax year shows a price drop in every single San Francisco neighborhood. This explains why people are livid. Up? Is this a joke? It is certainly not funny if you try to appeal. To a novice, the paperwork reads like Aramaic translated into gibberish. Then comes the wait. It is expected to take more than a year to process the appeals, and homeowners must pay the contested taxes up front. Adding to the frustration is that it is already too late to object in many counties. There were warnings, but the problem did not hit home for many people until tax bills arrived — hence the avalanche of incredulous calls to City Hall. Longtime homeowners are protected from this mess, since Proposition 13 guarantees that their properties are assessed for less than what they are actually worth. But the value of homes bought in San Francisco since 2004, and as far back as 2000 in

Santa Clara County, is probably down. For those homeowners, how can assessors justify any rise? "You're not required to do a 2 percent bump, right?" I asked Mr. Ting. He stared at me for an uncomfortable moment, like I was blaming him for the anger homeowners feel. Mr. Ting then explained how difficult it was to determine accurate values during this decline, but he said taxpayers might get relief — next year. "There's talk that there may be no 2 percent across the board," he said. No more 2 percent solution for anyone. What a concept.

### To Our Readers

Starting today, the Bay Area pages will appear every Friday and Sunday, featuring coverage of public affairs, commerce, culture and lifestyles in the region, and providing a complement to The Times's national report in print and online at nytimes.com. We invite your comments at bayarea@nytimes.com.



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