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Year in Review: A look back at the year that was

Politics, projects dominate the headlines in '14

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Sarah Ruf/Maricopa Monitor

Rescue

The rescue of 2-year-old Kylie Howard from a septic tank is one of 2014's top stories.



Posted: Tuesday, December 30, 2014 10:00 am

Staff Reports | 0 comments

Editor's Note: These are the top 20 news stories for 2014 as determined by the Maricopa Monitor staff.

No. 20: Constable candidate pads his resume

Prior to this summer, John Acton was just an average unlucky local politician, one who had lost bids for County supervisor and recorder in previous two election cycles. When Acton won the GOP nod in August for constable in District 7, things were looking good for the San Tan Valley retiree.

But as his claims about 26 years of upstanding service as a true blue cop in Chicago turned up false, sheriff Paul Babeu vowed to eliminate any chance Acton had at the low-level elected spot. Despite refusing to talk to reporters about his murky record and a last-minute effort by Babeu to oust the candidate from the ballot, Acton won anyway. The debacle ultimately raised questions about the ability of the county's Republican leaders to vet ethical candidates for office.

Looks like Acton's luck has tipped in his favor – for now.

No. 19: Oracle protests:

Passions provoked

It's safe to say sheriff Paul Babeu has an opinion on immigration. He regularly appears on national TV and radio shows railing against President Obama's border policy and pronouncing the evils of drug and human smuggling in Pinal County. But the sheriff really outdid himself in July, announcing the Department of Homeland Security intended to bring Central American

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minor-aged children – who recently crossed the Texas-Mexico border – to a boy’s school in rural Oracle. Protestors then lined Mt. Lemmon Highway to wait for a busload of kids that never arrived. Tensions between anti-and pro-immigration sides flared, however, reaching new heights when state Representative Adam Kwasman told a reporter he saw the “fear on their faces” of what turned out to be a busload YMCA kids on the way to summer camp.

Babeu was widely criticized for whipping up a potentially unsafe situation to score political points.

No. 18: Babeu calls out judge for low bail amount

The April arrest of an 18-year-old Poston Butte High School student athlete for various sex crimes shocked Pinal County residents. As girl after girl came forward with accounts of how Tyler Kost had raped, groped or harassed them, people began to ask how crimes committed by such a low-key kid could escalate to reportedly affect at least 18 minors over a five-year period virtually unnoticed. The probe even reached the Tempe Planned Parenthood, after a girl reported a clinic worker advised to mark down her unwanted sexual encounter – which resulted in a pregnancy – as consensual to avoid more “hassle.”

While Kost is sitting in Pinal County Jail awaiting trial for 30-odd serious charges, educators, parents and law enforcement still wonder how it all was allowed to happen.

No. 17: Barto brings state pageant crown to Maricopa

It was another win for Maricopa on the pageant front: 17-year-old Amber Barto snagged the state crown in Miss America’s pageant for teens just one year after Miss City of Maricopa Jennifer Smestead went all the way to Miss America in Atlantic City in 2013. Barto performed a crowd-pleasing dance number to Barry Manilow’s “Jump, Shout, Boogie” and dazzled the judges. The Mountain Pointe High School student faced off against 18 others for the chance to represent Arizona at the national competition in July, but lost out in nationals to a contestant from Georgia. She took it in stride, though, and Barto has continued to use her statewide platform to champion awareness about pancreatic cancer.

No. 16: Santa Cruz Wash project gets flood of cash

U.S. Rep. Ann Kirkpatrick, D-Flagstaff, and U.S. Rep. Paul Gosar, R-Prescott, secured critical funding in the President’s budget for the Lower Santa Cruz Watershed Project in Pinal County during the spring.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which recently completed a study that concluded a massive flood on the river could cause about \$186 million worth of damage, can begin work on the watershed project should Congress give the OK. The funding secured will fully finance the first phase of the project (\$100,000) and part of the second phase (\$200,000).

Kirkpatrick wrote a letter to President Barack Obama urging him to provide funding for the project in his budget.

“Due to dramatic population growth over the past 10-15 years,” she wrote, “a major flood event today would likely cause unprecedented damage, disruption and economic harm.”

No. 15: Farrell steps in it with pro-Westboro founder post

Social media can be a doozy. Maricopa vice mayor Ed Farrell learned that the hard way after posting a link to a satirical obituary about Fred Phelps, the founder of hate group Westboro Baptist Church, with the words “We need more Fred Phelps in this world. May you rest in peace sir.” The comments puzzled some and outraged others, reaching national media outlets like the Huffington Post. Farrell then apologized, saying he didn’t know that ‘The Onion’ was a satirical website and claimed he had never heard of Phelps before reading the parody piece, and thought he was only a pastor who spoke out against same-sex marriage.

He followed up with an emotional public apology at a city council meeting, calling Phelps an “evil and deranged” man. “I deserve all of the criticism and all of the insults thrown at me,” Farrell told the audience. “I am ashamed and embarrassed.”

No. 14: Man arrested for murder of girlfriend

contest

Harrah’s has put its stamp on Pinal economy

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Online Poll

Do you support the sale of fireworks to private individuals?

- Yes, people should have the right to fire them off as long as they are safe
- No, they are a hazard and a nuisance for people with small children or pets

Murders are rare in Maricopa. Nonetheless, 2014 saw the death of 43-year-old Holly Berry, a local mom who was romantically involved with Miguel Tapia, 21. About 6 a.m. on May 18, Tapia asked a neighbor to call police that morning because he said his mother was dying from a suicide attempt.

Tapia later admitted Berry was his girlfriend and said the two got into a drunken shoving match, causing Berry to fall backwards and "stop talking." She had visible injuries on her face, arms and stomach. Tapia has pled not guilty.

No. 13: Board boosts assistants

Three assistants to the Pinal County Board of Supervisors received a large increase in pay, thanks to their bosses.

The move Feb. 5 meeting, chairman Anthony Smith (R-Maricopa), vice chair Todd House (R-Apache Junction) and supervisor Cheryl Chase (R-San Tan Valley) voted to give their assistants more than \$10,000 in additional salary. Assistants for Chase and House will receive a 28 percent jump in pay from \$44,699 to \$57,241.

The board's other two supervisors, Steve Miller (R-Casa Grande) and Pete Rios (D-Dudleyville), vehemently opposed the move and voted against the pay increase.

The process of creating the new job description is supposed to go through the Human Resources department of the County. When it took several months and the department ruled the assistants did not deserve a raise, House and Smith became frustrated. That's when Smith decided to bring it to an agenda for a board vote.

No. 12: DOC employee admits to shooting mother

Alexander Santiago, 41, is being held without bond in the Pinal County Jail on charges of first-degree murder, second-degree murder and aggravated assault with special circumstances in connection with the shooting death of Sean LaFitte, his mother.

Santiago was an officer with the Arizona Department of Corrections. He resigned from that position after he turned himself in to authorities, having allegedly confessed to shooting his own mother.

LaFitte, 61, was the owner of Animal House Pet Resort, a pet boarding and grooming business in Maricopa. She also served the board secretary for the Maricopa Domestic Water Improvement District since 2010.

No. 11: Long-lost tortoise comes home

A 100-pound tortoise featured in the Monitor's Pet of the Week section is now reunited with his original owners, a full year after the reptile wandered off into the desert.

Casa Grande residents George and Mary Plumb had their tortoise returned to him after he was found more than 30 miles away and was cared for by a volunteer at the Phoenix Herpetological Society for months before a friend of the Plumb's spotted the tortoise in the newspaper.

The story of the well-traveled tortoise became well-traveled itself, being picked up by news outlets across the globe – from London to India.

No. 10: Potter seeks

Kimball's ouster

Councilmember Leon Potter attempted to have fellow councilmember Bridger Kimball recalled from the Maricopa City Council, though failed to collect enough signatures to force the issue before the voters.

Potter also resigned his seat in March due to what he saw as mayor Christian Price's lack of support for his effort to have Kimball removed from the council. Potter said publicly he would challenge Price for his mayor's seat in the fall elections, but failed to collect enough signature to qualify for the ballot.

Price told Potter he has given members of the public details about the case and the recall when asked, but chose not to give his opinion. He did tell Potter that the vast majority of people that have spoken to him on the issue did not see the need for a recall or for Kimball to resign.

– Yes, I believe people have the right to use them, though I'd rather not have to hear it

Vote View Results

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January 2015

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"The mayor should (give his opinion) regardless of where popular opinion is," he said. "I don't think (Price's decision) is good leadership."

Price was elected to a second term in August.

No. 9: Former broker jailed for stealing funds

A former Maricopa real estate broker is in the midst of a three-month stint in jail after admitting to stealing money from more than 100 homeowners for use on exotic vacations and personal items.

Dawn Anderson, 42, pleaded guilty to charges of theft, forgery, and fraudulent schemes and practices at a disposition in Pinal County Superior Court on Oct. 31.

Anderson owned property management company Maricopa Properties LLC, where she also faced allegations of misuse of her position after using her husband Chad's company CA Handyman Services LLC for unauthorized repairs.

Last April, Attorney General Tom Horne issued an indictment against Anderson, formerly known as Dawn Madden. An audit performed a year earlier by the Arizona Department of Real Estate found she took at least \$360,000 in rent money and security deposits from local renters and failed to pass the funds along to landlords, using the cash for vacations to Hawaii and New Orleans instead.

No. 8: A Rose by any other name...

Just days into the new year, the Maricopa City Council named Gregory Rose as Maricopa City manager, despite revelations of a pair of unceremonious exits from past municipal government positions.

Rose, the principal agent at Rose and Associates consulting firm in Dallas, previously worked as City administrator for the City of Hyattsville (in Maryland) and City manager in North Las Vegas, Nev.

Rose negotiated a severance as part of his exit as City manager in North Las Vegas in late 2009 after he was accused of misappropriation of funds in relation to a voter-approved initiative to hire more police officers in the city.

In October 2011, Rose resigned from his post as City administrator in Hyattsville, after about 10 months on the job. Rose said a new mayor was voted in during that period, and the two did not share the same values.

Several members of the council were critical of the negative response when it was announced Rose would be the choice.

"To jump to conclusions can be very dangerous and very hateful," councilmember Marvin Brown said.

No. 7: Trio saves toddler from septic tank

Kylie Howard's life was saved by a trio of heroic bystanders in a dramatic rescue on Jan. 11 just south of Maricopa.

The girl was reportedly chasing a dog when she stepped onto a cracked plastic disc that covered a sewage tank next to the Farmer's Market store at the corner of Papago and White roads, said Pinal County Sheriff's Office spokesperson Tim Gaffney. The tank's cover flipped up, causing the girl to fall into the full pit.

Two men delved through raw sewage as the seconds, then minutes ticked by with the toddler underground. After bringing her black and blue limp body out of the tank, a woman performed mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on the child.

The three individuals were honored for their heroism by Pinal County sheriff Paul Babeu, who presented each with a life-saving award.

No. 6: Major employer starts back up

One of Maricopa's largest employers, Pinal Energy laid off most of its workers at the end of 2012 and completely halted production – a move that was forced by a weak ethanol market.

However, by March of this year, the market had bounced back, and Pinal Energy was ready to resume business.

Matt Rynearson, plant manager at Pinal Energy, told the *Maricopa Monitor* that his company hired back about 40 employees, putting staffing levels at the same point they were prior to the plant's shutdown.

Rynearson said the company functions on a commodity market, and grain is the main commodity.

According to the Pinal Energy website, it produces 50 million gallons of ethanol each year from approximately 18 million bushels of grain acquired from local producers and the Midwest.

"The pricing – the margin if you want to call it – improved to the point where we could start the plant back up," Rynearson said.

No. 5: Copper Sky builds Maricopa's profile

Putting bond money from 2008 to use, the city constructed a regional park and a multi-generational center together with an aquatics center to bring about the Copper Sky Multi-Generational Center and Regional Park.

Completed in March, the 98-acre facility boasts two dog parks, an aquatic center, lighted ball fields, a weight facility and gymnasium with many more amenities.

Joe Salvatore, the principal architect for the project, called Copper Sky "state-of-the-art" and said there is nothing quite like it in all of Arizona.

"There's a lot of wow factor – a lot of eyes are just in awe of what's going on," he said. "That was very rewarding ... and [the people] can't believe the city of Maricopa has these facilities now."

No. 4: Special needs school comes under fire

Under fire from the state Attorney General's office for consumer fraud, the special needs school Rise & Shine Exceptional Services has another problem on its hands: a staff member who is in trouble for failing to register as a sex offender.

William LeBlanc, 31, is the brother of indicted owner Desiree Truett and acts as Rise & Shine's office manager. He's also listed as the vice president of the school's affiliated nonprofit.

Andrea Monchamp used to work at Rise & Shine and dated LeBlanc for a brief period. Although his main role consisted of passing out checks to employees, "he was definitely around the school," she said.

Later, when Monchamp expressed concern about LeBlanc's past criminal behavior to her boss Desiree Truett, Monchamp was told she didn't need to worry.

"We were told Billy had gotten a DUI and that was what his criminal past was about," said Monchamp, who has a five-year-old daughter.

After a story about the school and LeBlanc ran in June, he was placed on Arizona's sex offender registry as a level 2 offender.

No. 3: Justice disgraced

The State Bar of Arizona disbarred Scott Sulley, the former City of Maricopa magistrate and justice of the peace for the Maricopa-Stanfield Justice Court.

The action follows that of the Arizona Supreme Court's decision Sept. 23 to remove Sulley from his JP position and ban him from serving on any other bench within Arizona for life.

One of the biggest concerns was more than \$200,000 missing from Sulley's court.

"So much has been made of the fact that the money was missing," said Rick DeBruhl, chief communications officer with the State Bar of Arizona.

A criminal investigation into the missing funds is being handled by the Arizona Department of Public Safety.

While the 15-page recommendation details the lost funds, most of the Bar's document focuses on Sulley's refusal to close expired warrants, resulting in the re-arrest of several people who were previously incarcerated in the Pinal County Jail for the same incident.

More than anything, DeBruhl said, the wrongful incarceration of at least seven individuals is inexcusable.

"There were people that were actually thrown in jail," DeBruhl said.

No. 2: Local couple at heart of gay marriage fight

Two landmark lawsuits in Arizona challenged the state's gay marriage ban – which was overturned by a district court in October. One of those is Connolly vs. Roche, which asked the Arizona court to allow gay couples to marry and officially recognize couples married outside of the state.

Connolly is Joe Connolly, and he just so happens to reside in the city of Maricopa.

He married Terry Pochert on July 4, 2008, in a Lutheran ceremony during California's short-lived flurry of same-sex marriage licenses that year.

The couple – who met in Michigan in 1995 – then returned to their Maricopa home, only to be rejected as a married pair under Arizona law.

"Nothing has changed as far as people's religious freedom," Pochert said. "Stable, life-long relationships are nothing but an asset to foster kids and adoptive kids (in) society."

No. 1: Overpass a reality

At a board meeting in Willcox this June, the State Transportation Board voted to put the Arizona 347 overpass project in its five-year plan. That means it's no longer just an idea; it's a reality.

Mayor Christian Price said he was "excited" to hear that, in addition to being put on the plan, the board voted to include \$55 million in funding – nearly the entire cost of the project.

The City had already set aside \$10 million for the project in its capital improvement projects budget, which should be enough – along with the \$55 million through the Arizona Department of Transportation – to cover the total cost, estimated at \$65 million.

The first phase of the project, acquiring right of way, will include businesses being relocated to make room for the overpass.

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