Editorial: Focus Ag celebrates its 25-year run

Hit >> For a program to survive for a quarter-century, its creators have to be doing something right. That’s clearly the case with Focus Agriculture, a program designed for community leaders to learn about agriculture in Santa Cruz County. The program, which has been honored nationally for its effort to fill the local knowledge gap about the ag industry, last year saw its 25th graduating class. Involvement entails attending nine day-long seminars held once a month that cover a range of topics. There are speakers and trips to local farms. Put on by Agri-Culture, a nonprofit spinoff of the county Farm Bureau, the program is a gem, and really helps ground community leaders in the details of the county’s largest industry. It’s easy to see why farm bureaus nationwide see the program as a model.

MISS >> Senseless vandalism is an occasional reality. And accidents unfortunately do happen. But an organization that aims to help some of Santa Cruz County’s most vulnerable residents was dealt a quadruple whammy recently. Four properties in Watsonville and Santa Cruz, each falling under the umbrella of the Community Bridges family of services, have seen apparently unconnected acts of vandalism, vehicle damage and theft in less than a month. Community Bridges comprises 10 social service agencies providing resources for low-income children, seniors and families at 20 locations across Santa Cruz County. Programs include Meals on Wheels, four family-resource centers; and a network of child-care centers. Really, this is who vandals target? In one instance, a pickup struck and damaged a building after a driver accidentally hit the gas instead of the brakes. But earlier this month, someone smashed two large plate-glass windows at the Women, Infants, and Children site in Watsonville, and late last month two separate Watsonville child-care facilities were vandalized. The community’s response has been the lone positive to come from the crimes. Visit communityBridges.org to see how you can help.

HIT >> Solar energy is free, produces no pollution, and creates no emissions, no noise and no carbon footprint. But there are downsides, and the state deserves a nod for trying to soften one of them. California has encouraged solar installations to meet sustainability goals, but when it comes to regulations, there is no uniformity. Each jurisdiction sets fees based on recovering the cost of staff time. With a patchwork of requirements that vary from city to city and county to county, staff time varies and so do fees. But a bill signed by Gov. Jerry Brown now requires cities and counties to adopt an expedited permitting process for small residential rooftop solar systems by Sept. 30. The law also specifies use of a checklist and standard plans in the most current version of the California Solar Permitting Guidebook, allowing a fire safety inspection to be consolidated with a building inspection, and requiring the inspection be done “in a timely manner.” The state looks to have done its part. Hopefully local cities and the county will now take in the next step and further streamline the process.