OUR NEIGHBORS: CHRIS TREADWAY

GIVING SPIRIT: The office of Contra Costa Supervisor John Gioia reports that West County Times readers weren't shy in responding to an item in the paper this week about the need for donations to the annual coat and toy drive for Verde Elementary School in North Richmond. Response was so strong that officials were able to distribute coats at a holiday party at the school Friday, Gioia said, with enough left over to distribute at the area's two Head Start programs.

"This was definitely the most successful event we've had since my office started holding the party," he said.

City employees helped wrap and give out gifts, and North Richmond's own Fred Jackson played Santa Claus in his own style, making sure each child remembered to say, "Thank you."

Members of the Rotary Clubs of Richmond and Marin contributed funds and their time to help make the event a success, Gioia said. In fact, there was actually some funding left over, and Gioia said he and Verde's principal will meet to decide where it can be best used for the school.

The whole contingent, including Santa Jackson, also went to the home of the 12-year-old North Richmond girl who was hit by a bullet in a random gunfire incident last week, leaving gifts for the child and her family. The girl, who was released from the hospital Thursday, also received a new bicycle from the Contra Costa Sheriff's Office.