County Fire is way to go

Gary McCord Big Bear City
Feb 12, 2020

San Bernardino County Fire was formed by community leaders to increase resources and decrease the costs of fire service. Today, County Fire serves 70 communities with 48 stations, staffed with 683 firefighters. They have numerous regional resources to offer us that we currently don’t have.

County Fire could augment normal staffing and equipment during busy weekends and release them when not needed here.

The sky will not fall if Measure I fails. Big Bear Fire Authority can request a free proposal from the County, and they will find that all three stations can remain open and equipment/staff could be added within our current $16.5 million yearly budget.

My home is in Big Bear City, and we currently pay a $136 fire tax. Measure I will cause my fire tax to increase to $298, nearly twice what a similar homeowner will pay in Big Bear Lake. This new tax can be increased 5 percent every year forever.

I’ve lived here a long time, retired after 28 years with County Fire. Our Big Bear firefighters do a great job and would be offered employment with County Fire. We can update our emergency services without having the most expensive fire protection in the state.
County offices ready for influx of Valentine’s Day marriages

By Rene Ray De La Cruz  
Staff Writer

Wedding ceremonies performed by staff quadruple on Feb. 14, officials say.

HESPERIA — The San Bernardino County Clerk’s office is preparing for its busiest wedding day of the year, Valentine’s Day.

County officials announced that branch locations in Hesperia and San Bernardino will have their hands full Feb. 14 as an estimated 72 couples are expected to tie the knot.

On average, 18 marriage ceremonies are performed per day by county staff, but that number quadruples on Valentine’s Day, county officials said Monday.

“This year, we are expecting a bigger turnout than usual since Valentine’s Day falls on a Friday,” said County Assessor-Recorder-Clerk Bob Dutton. “We are prepared to provide excellent customer service for the many couples that will walk through our doors to get married.”

On Friday, additional marriage rooms and staff at both county offices will be available to handle the increase in marriage ceremonies, which will be conducted throughout the day during regular business hours and by appointment only.

The fee for a public marriage license is $89. A confidential marriage license is $90. The fee for a marriage ceremony is $65. Couples are advised to visit the Assessor-Recorder-Clerk’s website for marriage license
requirements at
www.SBCounty.gov/ARC/Main/RecorderClerk/MarriageInformation.aspx
.

Branch locations include the San Bernardino County Government Center at 15900 Smoke Tree Street, 1st Floor, in Hesperia and the San Bernardino County Assessor-Recorder-Clerk Main Office at 222 W. Hospitality Lane, 1st Floor, in San Bernardino.

To book a ceremony with the county clerk, call 760-995-8065 for appointments in Hesperia, and 855-732-2575 to reach the San Bernardino Hall of Records. Online ceremonies can be scheduled at www.SBCounty.gov/ARC/Main/RecorderClerk/Appointment.aspx

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LOCAL NEWS

$200,000 in improvements planned for San Bernardino park

Volunteers Ramiro Juarez, left, and Stephen Castorena, both of Carpenters Union Local 909, paint a picnic table during an early morning clean up at Anne Shirrells Park in San Bernardino on Saturday, June 8, 2019. (Photo by Terry Pierson, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)

By BRIAN WHITEHEAD | bwhitehead@scng.com | San Bernardino Sun
PUBLISHED: February 12, 2020 at 12:24 pm | UPDATED: February 12, 2020 at 12:24 pm

Anne Shirrells Park in western San Bernardino will receive more than $200,000 in improvements this year.
The Akoma Unity Center, a local nonprofit providing children free after-school recreation at the park and community center in the city’s Sixth Ward, secured $135,000 in grant funding about six months ago from the More Attractive Community Foundation. In January, San Bernardino leaders committed $83,000 in matching funds for three beautification projects.

The park’s community garden, meditation garden and volleyball court are slated for renovations.

Construction is expected to begin next month and conclude later this year.

Akoma leaders say the new community garden will become an outdoor learning center for nearby Rio Vista Elementary scholars and all San Bernardino City Unified students. Likewise, they see the zen garden becoming a space for children to practice mindfulness while enjoying nature and the volleyball court, a haven for children to play.

A mural paying homage to seminal Sixth Ward community members Vivian Nash-Dukes, Bobby Vega, Francis Grice, Valeria Pope, John Griffin, Ratibu Jacocks and Dr. Anne Shirrells also is planned for the park.

In a news release, Akoma Executive Director Kimberly Calvin commended San Bernardino, the More Attractive Community Foundation and the school district for their collaboration on projects intended to boost the spirit and financial resilience of Westside residents.

“We will continue to bring forth economic development, community entertainment and other vital resources in order to promote family and community engagement,” she said.

Akoma, whose lease agreement with the city runs through 2026, still seeks about $90,000 in donations to refurbish the park’s basketball court.

Anne Shirrells Park is at 1367 N. California St. in San Bernardino.

For more information on Akoma Unity Center, visit akomaunitycenter.org.
NEWS

‘Princess’ Diane’s parents file $25 million suit against Riverside County, foster home

Lawsuit claims the county ‘acted with deliberate indifference to the grave risk’ posed to the disabled high schooler and others

Angel Cadena Ramirez, mother of the late Diane Ramirez, protests with others for justice for her daughter in December 2018.

By TERI SFORZA | tsforza@scng.com | Orange County Register
PUBLISHED: February 12, 2020 at 3:29 pm | UPDATED: February 12, 2020 at 3:31 pm
Riverside County effectively signed a disabled girl's death warrant by placing her in a foster home dogged by decades of complaints, charge the parents of “Princess” Diane Ramirez in a lawsuit seeking at least $25 million.

Angel Cadena Ramirez and Alberto Ramirez filed suit on Monday, Feb. 10, against the county and foster home operators Michelle Morris and Larry Kerin. They allege wrongful death, breach of duty and violations of child abuse neglect reporting laws.

“No parent should have to attend his or her child’s funeral,” the suit said. “Yet, due to the collective, systematic malfeasance and deliberate indifference of (the county and foster home) … plaintiffs will never again have the opportunity to experience the life and vibrancy of their daughter.”

In October, Diane's parents filed a claim — the precursor to a lawsuit — against Riverside County, claiming damages of at least $10 million.

“There were multiple complaints to the county from teachers that children at the home were being abused and neglected and that under-aged children were staying in the same facility with adults with various disabilities — a disaster waiting to happen,” said the suit, filed by Newport Beach attorney Charles Krowlikowski.
“Yet, they did nothing to meaningfully investigate the situation — their inaction is reprehensible. By failing to comply with their duties, the county ... acted with deliberate indifference to the grave risk posed to Diane and the other minor children.”

The foster home operators did not respond to requests for comment on the suit.

**New safeguards**

A county spokeswoman said critical incidents break officials’ hearts, and they strive to understand the circumstances in a push for continuous improvement.
Since May, the county has expanded safeguards, enhanced training for social workers, extended hours in its Specialized Placement Unit, expanded audits for high-risk cases and embarked upon stronger contracts with foster family agencies to ensure supervision and compliance with best practices, it said.

**Indomitable spirit**

Diagnosed with cerebral palsy, seizure disorder and other challenges, Diane nonetheless had an indomitable spirit and mischievous sense of humor that were legendary. She was 17, in 11th grade, assessed at grade level and flourishing at Murrieta Mesa High School, where her “prom-posa” to star quarterback Jeff Miller made the TV news.

She placed fake spiders in her locker to scare the teachers who helped her open it. She didn’t like to wear socks or shoes. She planned to go to college, get a California ID, open a savings account, move out of the Morris home and live again with her dad, whom she adored.

Diane wound up in foster care after her parents separated and her mother developed personal problems. Her dad was putting the finishing touches on Diane’s new room when he got the call last April 6 that she was dead.
The county knew, or should have known, that Diane would be subject to abuse, neglect or both if placed in Morris’ home, the suit alleges. Complaints and accusations against the home began decades earlier in Orange County, where Morris, a former social worker, entered the foster care business in 1994.

Officials from the Orange County Regional Center — the agency that funds services for the disabled with public dollars — voiced serious concern about “the quality of care and health and safety of the consumers residing at the Michelle Morris Home,” then in the Tustin foothills, according to records. Officials charged that Morris suffered from Munchausen by proxy, a behavior disorder in which caretakers exaggerate children's health problems to gain attention and sympathy, subjecting them to unnecessary or inappropriate medical treatment, according to records.

Morris sued, accusing officials of slander, defamation and violations of child-abuse reporting laws. The agency’s insurer settled the case for $750,000 with no admission of wrongdoing, rather than face a jury trial in which disabled children could take the stand, officials said at the time.

In 2007, Morris moved to Riverside County to, in her words, escape “persecution” in Orange County. “Due to a stunning lack of oversight and action by the County, this move from one county to another was tragically successful,” the suit says.

**Longstanding complaints**
From 1998 to May 2018 — before Diane was placed in the Morris home — more than 25 reports of physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect were made involving the home, yet it remained open, the suit says.

Eight more complaints of abuse and neglect were made after Diane moved in. Diane told social workers she was unhappy, and, in February 2019, the county concluded that the Morris placement “failed to meet the child’s needs” and recommended that Diane be moved. However, that never happened, culminating in her “tragic and preventable death,” the suit said.

Morris surrendered her foster care license a month after Diane died.
Diane had a feeding tube and was not supposed to eat solid food. On April 2, a Tuesday, she began to vomit, according to records.

She went to the hospital, where she was stabilized and released. Morris was instructed to call 911 immediately and get Diane to the hospital if she vomited blood.
On April 5, a Friday, Diane visited with her father. She was feeling fine, he said, according to the autopsy. But that night, at about 11:30 p.m., Diane vomited brown liquid. Despite the hospital discharge orders, Morris did not call 911 or take Diane to the hospital. She told staffers Diane was sick because her father fed her solid food and would be all right, according to the reports.

An ambulance was summoned at 7:53 a.m., some eight hours after Diane began to vomit. She was declared dead at 8:45 a.m. at Inland Valley Medical Center.

An autopsy concluded an obstruction caused by a twisted intestine was to blame, something that might have been corrected had Diane gone to the hospital at the first signs of distress.

“What kind of monsters are these people to allow a young girl to endure such pain?” the suit asked.

Diane’s mother, Cadena, said she wants justice for her daughter and all the others who have been affected by Morris’ operation. “It is the most vulnerable of children and adults that need the greatest protections,” Cadena said in an emailed statement. “My Diane will not have died in vain and will be a hero always to me and those she rescued out of that horrible home.”
43% in Los Angeles County can afford entry-level home vs. 71% nationwide, by this math

California index was 46% a year ago

STAFF GRAPHIC

By JONATHAN LANSNER | jlansner@scng.com | Orange County Register

PUBLISHED: February 12, 2020 at 2:44 pm | UPDATED: February 12, 2020 at 3:01 pm
First-home house hunting in California was slightly more affordable late in 2019, according to one industry group.

A California Association of Realtors’ measurement tracking finance conditions for a theoretical first-time homebuyer found 48% of households in the state could affordably purchase one in 2019’s fourth quarter, same as the previous quarter and up from 46% a year ago.

The association measures buying conditions for a hypothetical first-time house hunter with an index that assumes more generous borrowing terms than traditional affordability indexes — including a smaller downpayment (10% vs. 20%); adjustable-loan rates vs. fixed; more household income toward the mortgage payment (40% debt-to-income vs. 30%); and buying a less-expensive starter home (85% of the median price).

Affordability improved as cheaper mortgage rates cut payments and a healthy job market kept wages rising. That helped buyers outpace rising home prices.

Looking over recent history, California’s entry-level affordability has averaged 49% in the past five years vs. 37% in the 2003-07 boom years and 64% between 2008-12, when the bubble burst into the Great Recession.

And across Southern California at year-end 2019? Statewide, to buy a single-family starter house, 48% could afford the $515,980 median and its $2,660 monthly payment (including taxes and insurance) requiring $79,800 in annual income to qualify. For a starter condo, 58% could afford the $408,000 median with a $2,110 payment and $63,300 in annual income.

Now let’s compare that with a U.S. house hunter. Nationally, 71% first-timers could afford the $233,670 median with a $1,210 payment and a $36,300 income. So simply put, one-third fewer Californians can afford a starter house than a typical American.

How starter-home affordability looks up and down the state …

Southern California house: 50% can afford the $467,500 median with a $2,410 payment with a $72,300 income.

Bay Area house: 45% can “afford” the $786,250 median with a $4,060 payment with a $121,800 income.
And across Southern California at year’s end, the picture for first-time buyers…

**Los Angeles County:** 43% could afford a starter home — tied for No. 8 lowest among the state’s 49 counties tracked. Compare that with 41% a quarter ago and 42% in 2018’s final three months. Average affordability? 45% for five years vs. 30% in 2003-07 and 57% in 2008-12.

**Orange County:** 43% — also No. 8 lowest. Compare that with 43% a quarter ago and 38% in 2018’s final three months. Average affordability? 41% for five years vs. 28% in 2003-07 and 53% in 2008-12.

**Riverside County:** 58% — No. 26 out of 49. Compare that with 58% a quarter ago and 57% in 2018’s final three months. Average “affordability”? 59% for five years vs. 40% in 2003-07 and 76% in 2008-12.

**San Bernardino County:** 67% — No. 4 out of 49. Compare that with 67% a quarter ago and 65% in 2018’s final three months. Average affordability? 69% for five years vs. 47% in 2003-07 and 82% in 2008-12.
Census Bureau faces 'significant risks' ahead of 2020 census, watchdog says

The Census Bureau will make its online questionnaires and phone interviews available in 13 languages during the 2020 Census.

Washington (CNN) — The Census Bureau faces "significant risks" that could "adversely impact cost, quality and schedule" of the 2020 Census count, according to a new report from the Government Accountability Office.

The bureau is behind on recruiting staff for upcoming operations, behind on recruiting community partners for the bureau to work with to educate the public about the census, and behind on developing certain aspects of technology they plan to use to distribute the census as well as mitigating cybersecurity risks, the report found.

New York Democratic Rep. Carolyn Maloney, the chairwoman of the House Oversight Committee, said in a statement Wednesday that the panel is holding a hearing "to examine this report in detail and to help ensure a full, fair, and accurate count, as the Constitution requires."

"We are only weeks away from the census, but the Bureau faces a host of problems," she said.

Census Bureau Director Steven Dillingham assured the House Oversight Committee on Wednesday that the census will be ready in time and will be delivered properly.
"We are pleased to report that we are on mission, on target and on budget for a complete and accurate count," Dillingham said in his opening statement.

While the Bureau's goal was to have more than 2.6 million applicants nationwide for upcoming operations, "202 of 248 Area Census Offices fell short of their individual recruiting targets" as of February, the report states.

In terms of community partners, which help educate the public about what the census is in order to maximize responses to it, the goal was to have 300,000 partners by March. As of February, the Bureau had 642 national participating organizations and 238,982 community partners, according to the report.

The GAO also warned that the bureau has not properly prepared for cybersecurity risks to census data, stating it "continues to face challenges related to addressing cybersecurity weaknesses, tracking and resolving cybersecurity recommendations from the Department of Homeland Security."

This story has been updated to include additional comments.
2nd case of coronavirus confirmed among China evacuees; patient is hospitalized in San Diego

SAN DIEGO — A second case of novel coronavirus has been confirmed in the U.S. among evacuees from China, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced Wednesday.

The person was aboard a flight from the city of Wuhan that arrived at Marine Corps Air Station Miramar in Southern California last week, the CDC said.

The patient was in isolation at a San Diego hospital, UC San Diego Health confirmed.

Also in isolation is a woman who was mistakenly released because of a mislabeled sample that hadn't been tested for coronavirus.

She was returned to the hospital on Monday after testing positive for the virus.

She was expected to make a full recovery.

The two patients “arrived on different planes and were housed in separate facilities; there are no epidemiologic links between them,” a CDC statement said.

A third person whose test results are pending also is hospitalized in isolation.

“We want to reassure our patients, their loved ones and the community at large that there is no exposure risk at any UC San Diego Health hospitals or clinics,” the health system said in a statement.

Hundreds of people, including U.S. State Department employees and their families, have arrived at military bases in California, Texas and Nebraska aboard chartered flights from Wuhan, a city of 11 million that is the epicenter for the virus. The only confirmed evacuee cases were at Miramar, where about 200 people are being held under quarantine until all are cleared.

The novel coronavirus has killed more than 1,000 people overseas but only 14 cases have been confirmed in the United States.
Front lines of fight on virus

Hospitals stockpile supplies, train workers on crisis plans

DR. BRIAN LEE, emergency department medical director at St. Joseph Hospital in Orange, said that although hospitals are preparing for rising numbers of coronavirus patients, influenza still remains a greater threat to Americans and commands more hospital resources. (Irfan Khan Los Angeles Times)

BY SOUMYA KARLAMANGLA

U.S. hospitals are stocking up on gowns and goggles and holding refresher courses in infection control amid a growing outbreak of a novel strain of coronavirus that has already killed more than 1,360 people in China.

Since it began spreading last year, the coronavirus known as 2019-nCoV has prompted the World Health Organization to declare a global health emergency, U.S. officials to
strongly advise against travel to China and some experts to predict a worldwide pandemic.

In the United States, just 14 people have been diagnosed with the coronavirus so far, though officials say they expect those numbers to rise. Hundreds of people have already shown up at American healthcare facilities with symptoms of the virus, forcing staff to don face masks and put patients in isolation rooms while awaiting test results.

In addition to the 14 people confirmed to have the virus in the U.S., 413 others have been tested for it; 347 tested negative, and results are still pending for 66, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The virus’ symptoms, such as fever and cough, resemble those of the flu, which is in the height of its season in the U.S.

So far, the virus does not appear to be any more contagious than the flu or a cold, though scientists are learning more as cases mount. Because of the ever-evolving situation, the CDC is recommending that doctors and hospitals adopt a “cautious approach” when treating coronavirus patients in their facilities.

This is how that approach would play out if you visited a hospital to be treated for the coronavirus.

**Step 1: Triage**

Patients suspected of having the coronavirus are required to wear face masks and be placed in a separate room away from other patients while they await treatment. Because the virus can travel up to six feet in the air when someone coughs or sneezes, the CDC recommends maintaining at least that distance between the patient and all others to prevent the spread of infection.

“If you have traveled to China, please let us know immediately, even before you walk into a crowded waiting room,” said Dr. Brian Lee, emergency department medical director at St. Joseph Hospital in Orange. “We can’t read minds.”

A doctor then interviews the patient about their symptoms and travel history. Patients must meet specific criteria to qualify for testing, including travel to China in the last 14 days.

Patients are typically admitted to the hospital for treatment while they await results of the test, which is usually done through a nasal swab. In some cases, patients with mild illness can self-quarantine at home.

**Step 2: Isolation**

Admitted patients are placed in “negative pressure” rooms, which keep air from seeping out into the rest of the hospital. The air from these special rooms is eventually released outside instead of being recirculated through the hospital.

Such rooms are typically used for patients with diseases such as tuberculosis and measles. They are standard in hospitals, unlike the special chambers some facilities set up to
handle Ebola cases in 2014.

“To the patient, it looks exactly like any other treatment room,” said Dr. Michael Mesisca, emergency department medical director at Riverside University Health System Medical Center.

The Riverside hospital, which has been receiving people quarantined at March Air Reserve Base, has tested patients for the coronavirus but has had no tests come back positive, he said.

Step 3: Staff safety

All healthcare personnel who interact with infected patients wear gowns, gloves, goggles and masks. Though the coronavirus isn’t believed to be more contagious than the flu, scientists don’t know everything about it yet.

“We’re using what the CDC likes to call an abundance of caution,” said Dr. Shira Doron, an infectious disease specialist at Tufts Medical Center.

In San Jose, five healthcare workers at Good Samaritan Hospital were put on two-week leave after public health officials determined they had contact with a confirmed coronavirus patient.

With suspected and confirmed coronavirus patients, staff members who can enter the room are limited to the patient’s doctor and nurse. Staffers keep a log of everyone who enters the room. Patients aren’t allowed visitors and are encouraged to communicate with their loved ones by phone or video chat.

Hospital workers don’t typically wear face shields or goggles when treating flu patients, but otherwise the precautions are not too different from caring for people with seasonal influenza. Many other diseases that hospitals regularly treat require these precautions, Doron said.

“This isn’t something very out of the ordinary for us,” she said.

Step 4: Treatment

There aren’t any treatments specific to this novel coronavirus, so doctors do what they can to alleviate a patient’s symptoms, which could include administering IV fluids and monitoring lung function. More severe cases may require patients be put on a ventilator to help them breathe.

Positive test results do not change a patient’s treatment plan, because doctors are already treating the symptoms, they say.

Step 5: Reassurance

Hearing that coronavirus patients are in the hospital can be scary for other patients and their families.
Last week at Rady Children’s Hospital San Diego, a 3-year-old girl and her father were admitted as suspected coronavirus cases after they left China last week. Both have since been cleared and discharged.

Dr. Nicholas Holmes, the hospital’s chief operating officer, said staff members emphasized that they were following proper hygiene protocol and doing everything possible to limit the spread of the virus. He said they also reminded patients and their families that the flu is a bigger concern than coronavirus.

“We always have to address those concerns for parents,” he said. “It’s really educating the families about what coronavirus is, as well as what are the other infectious diseases in the community at large.”

Lee, of St. Joseph Hospital, agreed that the flu remains a larger threat than coronavirus for Americans and requires more hospital resources as influenza patients continue to seek treatment.

“Our main ask to the public is: Don’t panic,” he said.
To mask or not to mask

Marta Ayala and Chong Taing, both Rosemead residents, couldn’t view the threat of the coronavirus more differently. You can see it on their faces.

While walking out of Superior Grocers supermarket in El Monte, Ayala’s face scrunched in annoyance as she spotted an Asian customer wearing a white medical mask coming from the opposite direction. Despite hearing about the fast-spreading illness, to the 64-year-old Mexican immigrant the mask is an overreaction that just stokes alarm.

“I don’t believe in using masks and I don’t understand the need,” she said. “I know there’s a serious disease out there, but who has time to think about that?”
For the 39-year-old Taing, who wears a mask, the item makes as much sense as wearing long-sleeve shirts or sunglasses to protect from the sun.

The masks aren’t just designed to protect the person wearing them from illness, but to protect others as well. It’s a common courtesy in a place he calls “the 626” — the area-code-based nickname for the San Gabriel Valley.

“People wearing masks are being considerate,” Taing said. “Yes, we’re going to wash our hands, but we’re going to take extra precautions when we pick up our kids, do our shopping and go outside. We want to avoid getting sick as much as anyone, and at least we’re taking steps to do that.”

The virus, officially named COVID-19 by the World Health Organization, has seen cases worldwide rise to over 60,000, while the death toll has surpassed 1,360 as of Wednesday evening. In the U.S., there have been 14 confirmed cases with investigations ongoing in 41 states and territories.

Few places illustrate the parallel reactions to the illness the way the diverse San Gabriel Valley does. According to 2010 U.S. Census Bureau statistics, Latinos and Asians make up 46% and 28%, respectively, of the area’s 1.85 million residents. Those two largest groups frequently shop, eat and send their children to the same schools. But how they have responded to the virus couldn’t be more different.

It is among the Asian population that concern over the disease manifests itself most visibly, with changing eating and shopping habits, the cancellation of large public events such as Lunar New Year celebrations, avoidance of large family gatherings and the masks.

While the majority of people in the San Gabriel Valley do not wear the masks, those who do wear them — whether as protection against illnesses or pollution — are almost always of Asian descent. That can provoke misunderstanding and prejudice.

“ Asking why people wear face masks ... it’s a little bit like asking why do people wear hats in the U.S.,” said Emma Teng, a professor of Asian Civilizations at MIT.

Across the Pacific, masks have been worn for everything from disease control to anonymity during pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong, Teng said.

She said masks to protect against illness in Asia may have first emerged in Japan during the influenza pandemic in 1918 that lasted two years and claimed 50 million lives worldwide.

In more recent years, masks in Japan have served as a compromise for employees who didn’t want to miss work — or infect colleagues.

“I find it interesting that a lot of American people find it so strange,” Teng said. “Like for us, you’re sick and you wouldn’t blow your nose into a tissue and leave it on top of someone’s desk. This is just a courtesy.”

Still, Teng said, she is selective about where she wears surgical masks. During a recent trip to Taiwan she wore one, particularly while taking public transportation. But in the
U.S., including at her job at MIT, she often refrains from wearing a mask.

“I believe it would make the students very nervous if they saw their teacher wearing a face mask,” Teng said. “So, I think there are some deep cultural differences.”

In the San Gabriel Valley, Latinos and Asians often work in the same places. Many of the Chinese and Vietnamese restaurants that line streets such as Valley Boulevard and Garvey Avenue have kitchens manned by Latino immigrants. And yet it’s exceedingly rare to see a Latino wearing a surgical mask.

News about the coronavirus also doesn’t dominate Spanish-language media the way it does Chinese-language media.

“I think there is a panic too, especially within the Chinese community,” said Karina Hernandez, 25, as she shopped at Superior market with her three-year-old daughter Caroline. She added: “There needs to be more information out there, because I’m not hearing anything.”

Many Latino residents interviewed by The Times described the virus as “distant” and “nothing to be worried about,” while some expressed skepticism.

“I heard the word ‘contagious’ with the virus, and if I hear it gets bad here then I’ll do it,” said Elizabeth Robles, 26, of El Monte, of wearing a mask. “But I haven’t seen anything here yet.”

As he shopped at Superior market, 23-year-old Van Yin said he didn’t understand why some non-Asians were taken aback by the wearing of masks. Yin did not wear one, but he said he understood why many people did.

“If you live in the San Gabriel Valley, you’re just going to see a lot of masks,” he said. “It’s not a big deal.” What worried Yin was that social media might be stoking fears of coronavirus to unnecessary levels.

“A lot of the news has been blown out of proportion, and it’s scared a lot of people,” he said.

At Saturday’s San Gabriel Valley Lunar festival, a smaller-than-normal crowd showed up. Most people, regardless of their background, did not wear masks.

Gabrielino High School junior Kevin He said he felt totally comfortable chatting with hundreds of people as an information booth volunteer without wearing a mask.

Not that the 16-year-old begrudged anyone wearing the facial covering.

“I’m not going to criticize those who wear masks because they’re just trying to stay safe and healthy and not spread anything,” he said. “I don’t think enough people understand that.”

Outside the San Gabriel Mission after evening mass, 73-year-old Dora Oros of Alhambra said she was both confused and intrigued by the masks.
“I see people wearing them, but I don’t know what that means,” she said. “I don’t know if that means they’re sick or they’re trying to prevent others from getting sick.”

Oros said she considered purchasing a mask, but was told by her daughter that the nearest Rite Aid had been sold out for weeks.

“I guess I’ll just wait,” she said with resignation. “I haven’t seen anyone I know getting sick yet, so I won’t worry.”
Long Chen, 32, stands outside the La Sierra University Office of International Student Services on Tuesday, Feb. 11, 2020. Chen says he won’t be able to return to his native China, specifically Henan, due to the novel coronavirus. Chen was contacted via email on Sunday, Feb. 9, that his Sunday, Feb. 16 flight was canceled. The former student just completed a three-year program for his music conductor’s certificate. (Photo by Cindy Yamanaka, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)

By DAVID DOWNEY | ddowney@scng.com | The Press-Enterprise
PUBLISHED: February 12, 2020 at 11:52 am | UPDATED: February 12, 2020 at 11:54 am
Long Chen just earned a certificate for music conducting from Riverside's La Sierra University and he was getting ready to fly home.

But he can't return to his native China because of the travel restrictions triggered by the explosive spread of the novel coronavirus.

The virus outbreak has infected about 45,000 people and killed more than 1,100.

On Sunday, Feb. 9 — the same day he performed a recital conducting an all-string orchestra, completing his certificate requirements — he received an email from an airline saying his Feb. 16 flight from Los Angeles to Hong Kong was canceled. From Hong Kong, he had planned to catch a boat, train or car to his hometown of Xinyang in Henan province, not far from Wuhan, center of the coronavirus outbreak.

Instead, on Tuesday, Feb. 11, he was preparing an application for optional practical training that would let him stay in the United States longer — up to a year while working in his chosen field of study — while the coronavirus epidemic plays out.

Chen's visa expires on Feb. 20, said Heidi Weiss-Krumm, director of the university's Office of International Student Services, so “the clock is ticking.”

Chen, 32, of Rancho Cucamonga, is among dozens of international students pursuing their education at Inland Empire universities and colleges who cannot fly home, or travel to the United States to resume classes after going home to celebrate the Chinese New Year.

That's troubling for Chen because he just finished a three-year program at La Sierra University. And he misses his family. He last saw them in summer 2019.

“My mom is sick at home,” Chen said during an interview Tuesday, saying she has been battling thyroid cancer. “So I want to spend more time with her.”

And Chen has a job waiting as a music teacher at a high school. He landed that job during last summer's visit.

Chen, who has a bachelor's degree in music from Zhengzhou Sias University in China, said he's been assured by school officials that they are holding the job for him.

“Just stay in America. It will be OK when you come back,” he said they have told him. Still, he said, “I just worry about my work.”
At this point, the trumpet and piano player wouldn't be teaching music in the classroom, had he been able to make it back. The schools in his hometown are closed, Chen said, and teachers are instructing students online. He could be teaching music students online.

Then again, maybe not.

Online instruction is effective in subjects like mathematics and history, Chen said. But with music, he said, it's important for an instructor to hear in person how a student is playing an instrument.

Schools aside, the streets of his hometown are mostly empty, too.

“There’s no people. No cars,” Chen said.

And people aren’t shopping at the grocery store. Instead, he said, one member from each family is permitted once every other day to walk to the entrance of one’s housing complex to pick up food for the family.
And Chen said he knows a few people who have lost loved ones.

“We’re afraid,” he said. “We’re all afraid.”

Worries about the coronavirus triggered sweeping travel restrictions between China and the U.S. And that is preventing international students from attending college classes across the Inland Empire.

Joe Gutierrez, a spokesman for Cal State San Bernardino, said 14 Chinese students who are currently in China and had planned to study at the university during spring but can't get back to take those classes.

“One of our current students went home between (fall and winter) terms and is unable to return due to the travel ban,” he added.

The Riverside Community College District system, which operates Moreno Valley, Norco and Riverside colleges, has 90 students from China, said Eyad Alfattal, director of the Center for International Students & Programs, in an email. Alfattal wrote that 21 students have informed district officials they won't be attending spring classes.

District spokesman Robert Schmidt said “we're trying to work with them so that they can continue their studies.”

At Cal Poly Pomona, said spokeswoman Cynthia Peters, an annual program that takes students to China and Japan will travel only to Japan this year.

Applications had yet to be taken when the decision was made not to go to China, Peters said, so no one's plans were disrupted.

However, she said, one Chinese student from Cal Poly Pomona is currently in China and cannot return to Southern California.

UC Riverside spokesman John Warren said one faculty member and two students from UCR are in China, and it's not known when they will get back to the campus.

One is Kevin Wu, a third-year public policy student at UCR.

Wu, via email, said he is currently in Shanghai. He is hoping to be able to fly back to the U.S. in March and resume his studies in spring.

But he's going to have to hustle if he's going to graduate when he planned to, in June 2021. He said he will have to load up on extra classes once he returns — after undergoing a voluntary stay-at-home isolation period.
“I have been greatly affected by this whole situation,” Wu wrote. “My college education is definitely on hold right now, because I am behind my units.”
All travelers from mainland China being monitored for coronavirus in L.A. County

Sarah Chong, middle, who is visiting from Shanghai, and her family wear masks while shopping in San Gabriel on Jan. 29. She and her family are visiting the U.S. for a month. (Gina Ferazzi / Los Angeles Times)

By CITY NEWS SERVICE

FEB. 12, 2020
Los Angeles County public health nurses are closely monitoring all residents who have recently traveled to mainland China, regardless of whether they have any symptoms of the new strain of coronavirus, according to the county’s top health official.

More than 1,000 people have been assigned a public health nurse and asked to self-isolate and not to go to work or school for 14 days, Department of Public Health director Barbara Ferrer told the Board of Supervisors on Monday.

“This is an aggressive effort to touch all the people who’ve come into L.A. County,” Ferrer said.

The health department is also reaching out to employers and schools and asking them to accommodate the travelers with flexible leave and the ability to manage tasks from home.

“It’s a very small number of people ... but nonetheless those people need all of our support,” Ferrer said.

Federal directives affecting travelers went into effect Feb. 2, and notices about symptoms to watch for were posted two and a half weeks ago. Ferrer said any traveler who has any concerns and was not screened at an airport can call 211 to be assigned a Department of Public Health contact.

Supervisor Hilda Solis said she was worried about discrimination and anxiety caused by the pandemic, especially for residents with family in China.

“So many fears have been cultivated based on racial profiling,” Solis said.
The coronavirus — now dubbed COVID-19 by the World Health Organization — was first identified by the Chinese government on Dec. 31, when authorities indicated an unknown pneumonia variant was affecting residents of Wuhan in the Hubei province.

Globally, more than 43,000 people have contracted the virus, and 1,018 people — two of them outside mainland China — have died as a result.

“The numbers are staggering,” Ferrer said, but she stressed that the patient total remains low in the United States, with 13 confirmed cases nationwide. Of those, seven are in California, including one each in Los Angeles, Orange and San Diego counties.

All but two of the 13 U.S. cases are people who had traveled to China. The others are spouses of travelers. Less than 1% of confirmed cases worldwide are outside China.

Ferrer said county public health workers are coordinating on “multiple calls every day with our federal and state partners,” including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Department of Defense.

She acknowledged that additional cases are likely, given continuing travel from China. Ferrer also noted that the majority of deaths from COVID-19, as with the flu, are related to an underlying health condition. In China, an additional issue seems to be that people are having trouble accessing care, she said, though information from China is limited and the government there has refused help from the CDC.

“In the Hubei province, they are overwhelmed with people who are sick,” Ferrer said.

Foreign nationals who have recently traveled to China are no longer allowed entry to the United States. U.S. citizens and family members who travel from China are allowed to enter the country only through one of 11 airports nationwide, including Los Angeles International Airport, where they are screened into one of three groups.
Those with symptoms of respiratory illness or fever — a very small number, according to Ferrer — are transported to a medical facility for further screening and testing.

Those who have been in Hubei province, where Wuhan is, or who have had close contact with someone else with the virus are subject to mandatory quarantine at one of four American military bases, including March Air Reserve Base in Riverside and Marine Corps Air Station Miramar in San Diego.

A group of 195 people held at March were released from a 14-day quarantine Tuesday morning. None had tested positive for the virus. Officials at the base said two other travelers who passed through LAX and were brought to the base separately from the original group remain under quarantine.

U.S. citizens traveling from anywhere else in China who have not had close contact with the virus and show no symptoms are allowed to proceed to their final destination, where they are actively monitored by local health departments and told to stay away from the general public.

Airlines around the world continue to limit flights to China. American Airlines has extended cancellations to mainland China and Hong Kong through at least April 23. Two cruise ships in Asia with more than 5,000 people onboard are stuck at sea. On one, 135 passengers have tested positive for COVID-19 and are being quarantined on board. On the other vessel, no cases of the virus have been confirmed, but the ship has been refused entry to ports in Japan, Taiwan and the Philippines.

The Board of Supervisors has requested a weekly update on the virus.
The trouble with California’s primaries

Moving state and congressional primaries to March could make the state’s election problems worse

BY KRIST NOVOSELIC

California had the right idea when it moved its presidential primaries from June to March. The nation’s most populous state needs to be relevant in the process of choosing the nominees for the two major political parties.
But California, unfortunately, didn’t only switch its presidential primary. It also moved its state and congressional elections up to March 3 as well. This earlier date could make existing problems with state elections worse.

In making this switch, California turned almost the entire year of 2020 into one endless election. The March voting is only the first round of state and congressional elections. The top two vote-getters in the March elections, regardless of party affiliation, will advance to the November election — which means that candidates will be campaigning against each other for eight months.

Elections, even top-two runoff elections, don’t have to work like this.

In 1958, Charles de Gaulle insisted on this kind of voting in the founding of France’s Fifth Republic. The French process is straightforward — if no candidate wins the support of a majority of voters, there is a runoff among the top two vote winners. Voters whose favorite candidate did not emerge from the first round tend to move from the political margins toward second-choice candidates in the center in the runoff election.

But the French don’t run this process nearly as slowly as California. France conducts runoff elections a few weeks after the first round. For example, the first round in the 2017 French presidential election was held on April 23 with the runoff on May 7. California, in addition to allowing seven months and three weeks between rounds, requires a runoff even if one candidate gets a majority in the first round.

There’s no reason to have so much politicking, fundraising and campaigning when there are only two candidates in a race.

In the 2018 California governor’s race, Gavin Newsom won the first round in June, with Republican John Cox finishing second. Newsom wouldn’t agree to the voluntary spending limit for the governor’s race ($14.5 million) and so couldn’t get a statement in the official voter’s guide. Cox did make a statement in the guide saying, “I wasn’t supposed to make it into this run-off for Governor.” It didn’t much matter, though. Newsom waltzed to victory in the November election with a minimum of debate.

In 2016, two Democrats running for the U.S. Senate made it into the top-two runoff. But this intraparty battle did not make for an engaging election because voters faced a choice between two candidates espousing similar policy proposals. Many Californians didn’t even bother to vote in that race; there were nearly 2 million fewer votes cast in the Senate race than in the presidential race in California. Republican and conservative voters simply skipped this nonchoice on the ballot. The same undervote effect happened in the 2018 Senate race, when the two contenders were Democrats, compared with the gubernatorial race.

California’s electoral structure has the effect of shutting out some voters in ways that we would otherwise criticize in other countries. The Council of Europe, for instance, has faulted Russia’s Duma elections for being dominated by one party, United Russia, which does not always participate in debates. This demonstrates “a certain disregard for voters and the other political forces, as well as an unwillingness to explain its political platform,” the Council of Europe said.
Other states with similar top-two runoff systems have avoided some of California’s mistakes. Washington, where I live, also has runoff elections and will hold its presidential primary on March 3. But it did not move up other elections to March. The first round of state and congressional elections will take place in August — which leaves 13 weeks between the first round and the runoff.

For the 2022 election, California voters should demand that the first round for state and congressional elections be moved back to June. They might even consider pushing those primaries to August. That would leave less time for pointless one-against-one campaigning.

Better yet, voters should be discussing other reforms such as a unicameral legislature, ranked choice voting and proportional representation — ways that could truly modernize the electoral system.

Krist Novoselic is the former chairman of FairVote. He played bass in Nirvana.
Fontana City Hall is an official mail ballot drop-off location

Feb 11, 2020

This is the mail ballot drop-off box at the City Clerk's Office at Fontana City Hall.

As an official mail ballot drop-off location, residents can bring their mail-in ballots to the City Clerk's Office at Fontana City Hall, 8353 Sierra Avenue, for the 2020 presidential primary election.

Ballots can be dropped off Monday through Thursday from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. The last day to drop off mail-in ballots is Tuesday, March 3.
Those who are voting by mail will place their ballots inside the official return envelope and sign their name, address, and date on the envelope before dropping it off. No postage is necessary.

Some key primary election dates are:

Tuesday, Feb. 18 -- Voter registration deadline

Wednesday, Feb. 19 -- Conditional voter registration begins

Tuesday, Feb. 25 -- Deadline to apply to vote by mail

Tuesday, March 3 -- Election Day

For more information, call (909) 350-7602.
Kids First nonprofit aims to help children struggling with trauma

By Martin Estacio
Staff Writer

Posted Feb 12, 2020 at 8:07 PM
Updated Feb 12, 2020 at 8:08 PM

APPLE VALLEY — A budding nonprofit created to better aid students suffering from trauma, whether it be physical, sexual or emotional abuse, launched with a soft opening Tuesday to let High Desert community leaders know it's here to help.

The Kids First Foundation held a mixer at The Social in Apple Valley on Tuesday evening, with 15% of profits from the event donated back to KFF to further advance its goals, organizers said.

“Our mission statement is about finding the resources that kids need and connecting them to what will help them,” said Jenae Holtz, a marriage and family therapist who serves as the foundation’s president.

The need for such resources is especially dire in San Bernardino County.

According to KFF’s website, in 2017, substantiated allegations of abuse in the county were almost 30% higher than the state’s average for children aged 0 to 5.

That year, 50% of the county’s infant and child deaths occurred in the High Desert.

The inspiration for KFF, which started in May 2019, was to help “close some gaps” in the services available to children exposed to trauma and adverse childhood experiences, or ACE.

Experiences can range from physical and emotional neglect to substance abuse and domestic violence, and the loss of a loved one.
More than 20% of 939 children, aged from birth to 5, assessed by the Desert/Mountain Children’s Center had an ACE score of 6 or more, according to KFF.

Researchers have found these experiences can lead to stress, which correlates with a higher risk of health and social problems in later years, as well as a lower life expectancy.

Holtz said one of KFF’s goals is to intervene early by training teachers on how to respond to children who’ve suffered such trauma.

She said the foundation is working with the San Bernardino City Unified School District and will begin implementing a “Trauma-Informed” program aimed at educators in two weeks. The longer-term plan is to expand to other districts.

The nonprofit also has a contract with the state’s Department of Rehabilitation.

Holtz said KFF is providing screening and job coaching, and connecting children with disabilities, aged 16 and up, to potential employers.

During a speech Tuesday, Holtz said the state department reached out to KFF because, as a nonprofit, it isn’t as restricted as a government agency may be with regard to providing services.

“So what we’re seeing is this huge opportunity to help kids where, in other ways, we haven’t been able to,” she said.

And the help is much needed in the wake of alarming statistics regarding children's mental health.

The period between 2007 to 2017 saw a 56% jump in the number of suicides for persons aged 10 to 24 in the U.S., according to the National Center for Health Statistics. In that last year, suicide was the second-leading cause of death for the age group.
“Children are in crisis,” said Dr. Ira Chasnoff, a pediatrician who works with KFF. As an expert in prenatal and postnatal trauma, Chasnoff said exposure can begin even before birth.

If a pregnant mother is suffering from emotional trauma, especially in the first 12 weeks, it can change the genetic makeup of the fetus, making it more vulnerable to behavioral problems, Chasnoff said.

That’s why early intervention and recognition of trauma symptoms in the schools is so important, especially for those students who may be internalizing their disorders, he added.

“The kids that are missed are the ones who, with anxiety and depression, sit very quietly in the classroom and nobody notices that there’s a problem,” Chasnoff said.

Chasnoff talked about a young man who fellow students described as popular. He was the homecoming king, a star football player.

One day the man went on FaceTime and, while streaming live, shot himself.

“That’s why we have to get into the schools to identify those children at risk, and there’s all sorts of ways we can do that,” Chasnoff said.

Eddie Peterson, a behavioral health clinician with CAHELP, who serves as fundraising head for KFF, works with those types of children in therapy.

He hopes the nonprofit can raise greater awareness to the struggle younger ones face in dealing with trauma and “how we can undo some of that.”

“What we want to do is provide an opportunity to say ‘yes’ to kids who’ve heard ‘no’ all their lives,” he said.

For more information on the nonprofit, visit www.KidsFirstFND.org.
LA County shakes up structure, function of homeless aid

Supervisors Kathryn Barger and Hilda Solis co-authored the motion recommending a review of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority.

Residents of a homeless encampment on the northwest end of the park around Echo Park Lake in Los Angeles meet in their communal area on Wednesday, January 29, 2020. Residents say they are supported by the Christian ministry Dream Center with meals and tents. The Los Angeles City Council is considering a $560,000 mobile hygiene station at the park. (Photo by Sarah Reingewirtz, Pasadena Star-News/SCNG)
By ELIZABETH MARCELLINO, City News Service

The Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously on Tuesday, Feb. 11, to rethink the structure and responsibility of a lead agency responsible for battling homelessness.

Supervisors Kathryn Barger and Hilda Solis co-authored the motion recommending a review of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority.

“I believe something has to change,” Barger said. “If not … my cities are going to feel that they are not being represented fairly.”

LAHSA was established in 1993 in response to a lawsuit filed against the county by the city of Los Angeles, which felt that the county wasn't doing its share to solve the problem. A joint powers agency governed by a commission with five county and five city appointees, it manages more than $400 million annually, including roughly 70% of all Measure H funds.

Barger said many city leaders have complained that LAHSA focuses too much on Los Angeles rather than taking a countywide perspective.

When Measure H — the quarter-cent sales tax assessed to help fund housing support services — was passed in 2017, the board chose to have LAHSA administer the funds going to service providers rather than setting up another layer of bureaucracy. The county could now choose to manage the money itself, though the board originally determined that would be less efficient and possibly less cost effective, Supervisor Mark Ridley-Thomas said.

However, the supervisors agreed that things have changed dramatically over the last three years.

“LAHSA clearly grew exponentially just in terms of what they were being required to do,” Supervisor Janice Hahn said. “We have really pinned the problem of homelessness on them.”

Hahn suggested that LAHSA is not nimble enough to effectively address the full scope of homelessness.

“I have felt a lack of urgency,” Hahn said. “The bureaucracy that it is there has not been flexible enough to grow and change and adapt.”

She shared a story about her own staff stepping in to rent motel rooms for homeless individuals in Whittier when they were unable to get the help they wanted from LAHSA.

Solis agreed, saying, “We’re triaging … I can’t afford to wait for LAHSA.”
Supervisor Sheila Kuehl said she didn’t believe that a bigger or smaller board would have made a difference in the county’s response to homelessness.

“I don’t care what we do with that board, it is not the central thing that will solve homelessness,” she said.

Kuehl also pointed out that two ideas for how to structure the board could pull in opposite directions — bringing officials from more cities to the table could work against a truly countywide approach.

“I like the city-county partnership,” Kuehl said, before adding that more federal and state funding is the real key to fixing the problem.

Barger said cities are concerned because they’re not seeing the money at work in their communities and she worried aloud that LAHSA hasn’t been able to manage its growth effectively.

“This is not about money anymore, this is about leadership,” Barger said.

LAHSA is the lead agency in the Los Angeles Continuum of Care, the regional planning agency that coordinates housing and services for homeless people. However, CoC has a board of its own and there are various other commissions and advisory boards — as well as the Coordinated Entry System Policy Council and county Homeless Initiative — which share responsibility for policy and oversight.

LAHSA Commission Chair Sarah Dusseault said she hoped to participate in tough conversations about how to move forward but hoped the report back to the board would be open-ended.

“Our hope is that this isn’t prescriptive,” Dusseault told the board.

The Los Angeles City Council is also reviewing LAHSA’s governance structure. LAHSA itself has set up an ad hoc committee on governance as well as a new Housing Central Command tool to try and address challenges to finding housing quickly for homeless residents with HUD vouchers.

A report is expected back in 60 days.
OPINION • Opinion, Opinion Columnist

LA’s homelessness bureaucrats have failed for decades

Homeless tents are dwarfed by skyscrapers as 63-year-old Vincent, who only gave his first name, sorts his belongings Friday, Dec. 1, 2017, in Los Angeles. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

By SUSAN SHELLEY

PUBLISHED: February 11, 2020 at 11:05 pm | UPDATED: February 11, 2020 at 11:05 pm

You wouldn’t know it, but for the last 27 years, the city and county of Los Angeles have had a dedicated bureaucracy in charge of doing something about homelessness.
So far, they’ve done a great job of watching it get worse. At last count, 60,000 people were homeless in L.A. County, a new record high. Los Angeles has the highest number of unsheltered homeless individuals of any city in the United States.

The Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority, also known as LAHSA, was created as a joint powers authority by the city and county of Los Angeles in 1993. Every year, the agency manages $400 million of local, state and federal tax dollars. These funds are supposed to pay for programs that provide services, shelter and housing to people who are homeless in L.A. County.

LAHSA is governed by a panel of 10 commissioners appointed by the L.A. City Council, the mayor of Los Angeles and the County Board of Supervisors. And the agency is under fire.

In August, L.A. City Controller Ron Galperin released a scathing report savaging LAHSA for failing to meet key goals of outreach and housing. Galperin called for a new, data-driven approach to “fundamentally reshape LAHSA’s outreach program,” a more proactive outreach strategy and greater accountability and transparency.

“If we hope to make real progress on homelessness, the City must look soberly at every action it takes and every program it funds to determine what is working and what is not,” Galperin wrote. He said LAHSA needs “a unified set of clear and consistent goals, specific metrics and accurate reporting on outreach activities throughout the greater L.A. area.”

A similar focus on governance of the agency’s actions was put forward on Tuesday at the meeting of the L.A. County Board of Supervisors. Supervisors Kathryn Barger and Hilda Solis co-authored a motion calling for an analysis of the “current structure and function” of the Los Angeles Homeless Services Authority with a focus on changes to improve performance, accountability and transparency.

Elected officials seem to be in agreement that fingers can be pointed at LAHSA. The agency is supposed to be moving people from the streets into shelters, treatment facilities or housing. That’s what the $400 million per year is supposed to be accomplishing.

It isn’t working. The problem continues to worsen. The unsheltered homeless population is growing, as is the appalling death toll on the streets.

While it’s undoubtedly true that LAHSA could be run more efficiently, the true cause of the homeless crisis is the false premise that it is first a problem of housing. Plainly, that’s not the whole story. Consider this paragraph from Galperin’s report, explaining some of the barriers to permanent housing:
“Those experiencing homelessness do not always meet landlords’ expectations for permanent housing — they may have poor or limited rental history, no personal identification documents, income deficiencies, or other characteristics making them less desirable applicants.”

Another identified “barrier” is “incorrect assessments” resulting from the “stigma with certain answers that may influence a person to minimize one’s condition.”

If this euphemistic language is deciphered, it reveals a picture of people with issues that go far beyond the lack of housing.

It’s obvious that elected officials are under intense pressure from constituents to do something about the crisis on the streets. But it will be a depressing waste of valuable time to launch an analysis of the LAHSA bureaucracy, as if technocratic management reforms can overcome underlying problems such as untreated severe mental illness and devastating drug addiction.

LAHSA can be restructured or even abolished and replaced with a new agency. But these are not solutions to homelessness. These are solutions to the political problems of elected officials who would like to push the issue beyond the next election.

Meaningful progress will require an honest assessment of the problem. That’s true for individuals experiencing homelessness and for the government officials who are spending our money to help them.

_Susan Shelley is an editorial writer and columnist for the Southern California News Group. Susan@SusanShelley.com. Twitter: @Susan_Shelley_
A massive mineral deposit in San Bernardino County, California, might yield $2.5 billion in uranium alone, enough to supply the nation’s needs for the next 16 years, according to the miners who own the claim.

Aside from uranium, the deposit is rich in 14 other critical minerals.
Major Uranium, Rare-Earth Deposit ‘Rediscovered’ in California

Aside from uranium, the deposit is rich in 14 other critical minerals—including many rare-earth elements (REEs)—said Ron Kliewer, one of five miners who own Sundown Resources, a privately held California-based company.

These minerals and REEs are needed to build military weapons and defense systems as well as to develop many other high-tech products on the commercial market. They are used in everything from smart phones to computers to missile guidance systems.

President Donald Trump’s 2021 proposed budget, released Feb. 10, calls for uranium purchases of $150 million, an amount that miners expect Trump to extend to $1.5 billion over the next decade. The idea is to make the U.S. nuclear energy industry independent of imported uranium from Russia and other countries.

Rediscovery of San Bernardino’s Uranium

The uranium deposit in San Bernardino was first discovered about 70 years ago, during the uranium boom after World War II and at the dawn of the nuclear age. But the price of uranium dropped before the family who owned the claim could get mining companies to start extracting it, and the family’s dreams were dashed.

In 2017, the family officially released the claim. That prompted one of Kliewer’s partners, Chad Gretzner, to talk to the son of one of the original claim owners, a man now in his 80s.

That man, Richard Higginbotham—now one of the co-owners of Sundown Resources—is poised to realize his family’s forgotten dream.
The miners re-staked and filed new claims last fall. “It’s a lost mine story—a rediscovery,” Kliewer said. “It doesn’t seem real. It’s one of those sounds-too-good-to-be-true stories. It sounds unbelievable, so we try to be very conservative in our estimate and we have geologist reports and assays to prove it.” While the site is estimated to hold 98 million pounds of U3O8 uranium,
While the site is estimated to hold 98 million pounds of U3O8 uranium and may be more than three times that big, more modern geological exploration and verification is needed to determine the exact size of the deposit, Kliewer said.

“We are in talks with several uranium mining companies. It’s very early in the process,” Kliewer said. “One of the uranium companies wants some samples to run through their patented refining process just to see what it’s going to take to refine the ore.”

The mine consists of both lode and placer claims, and also contains precious metals such as gold and silver, he added.

A sample from a critical mineral deposit in San Bernardino County, Calif. (Courtesy of Sundown Resources)
Gretzner said the uranium deposit was initially spotted in an aerial survey in the early 1950s, followed by ground surveys and sampling. Over the years, two mining engineers and three geologists have done reports on the mine, which Sundown claims is the largest known uranium deposit in the state.

“It was one of the best-kept secrets,” he said.

Gretzner was the first of the new claim owners to get out in the field and prospect the old mining site. He found some boxes of old documents buried in the back of the original claim-owner’s garage. It was only then that he fully realized the potential wealth of their investment.

“It’s a bonanza,” he said.

“Surface assaying was done and the previous owners got some companies to do some test drilling. They were able to demonstrate a reserve in 1968 at 16 million pounds of uranium of ‘probable reserves,’ which is the second-to-the-highest reserve status you can have. The next status is ‘proven reserves,’” Gretzner said.

And later studies by prominent geologist Doug Litchfield confirmed the magnitude of the find was even bigger than originally thought.
Some of the minerals listed in historical and current assays are: vanadium, cobalt, lithium, yttrium, germanium, magnesium, manganese, neodymium, rubidium, thorium, and lanthanum.

Two of the REEs in the deposit are strontium and zirconium, which are used in the construction of nuclear reactors, Gretzner said. “So, you have to have strontium and zirconium, but to produce them at the same mine as the uranium is rare.”

Sundown Resources is currently seeking outside expertise about the best way to mine and separate the uranium from the other REEs, Gretzner said.

“No two REE mines are so alike that they can use the same leaching method,” he said.
When asked how they felt about striking it rich, both men laughed. “When you start to run the numbers, you get that kind of deer-in-the-headlights look in your eyes. Who knows? I think we have a long road ahead of us still,” Gretzner said. Kliewer added: “It’s not like we have a lottery ticket and we can go cash it in. It means a lot more work, and we’ll have to put more money into the operation before it can pay out.”
Massive wildlands bill passed by House would preserve more than 416,000 acres in Southern California

The proposed Rim of the Valley National Recreation Area would run from the Simi Hills, the Verdugo Hills, the Santa Monica Mountains, the San Fernando Valley and into the western part of the Angeles National Forest. Here, a hiker and her dogs make their way along a trail in the hills above Simi Valley on Jan. 23, 2014. On Wednesday, Feb. 12, the House passed the measure along with five other wildlands protection bills.

By STEVE SCAUZILLO | sscauzillo@scng.com | San Gabriel Valley Tribune
PUBLISHED: February 12, 2020 at 5:24 pm | UPDATED: February 12, 2020 at 5:28 pm
A massive public lands bill approved Wednesday, Feb. 12, by the House of Representatives will preserve more than 416,000 acres of wildlands in three Southern California counties, adding protection for such sensitive species as Nelson's Bighorn Sheep, the California Condor and the Santa Ana Sucker fish.

By a 231-183 vote, including six Republicans, the House passed the Protecting America’s Wilderness Act, an omnibus bill that includes more than 1.3 million acres of wilderness and 1,000 miles of wild and scenic rivers in California, Washington and Colorado. To become law, it needs Senate approval and must be signed by President Donald Trump.

The act incorporates two local measures:

• The San Gabriel Mountains Foothills and Rivers Protection Act, authored by Rep. Judy Chu, D-Pasadena, an effort that started in 2002 by then Rep. Hilda Solis. Though part of the larger bill, this is the first time the act received a vote of the full House.

Under this provision, the San Gabriel Mountains National Monument established by President Barack Obama in 2014 will be expanded by 109,143 acres, going from 346,177 acres to 455,320 acres to include the Arroyo Seco. Chu's bill would add 31,069 acres of wilderness, including an expansion of Sheep Mountain Wilderness near Wrightwood to help the threatened breed, and 8,417 acres of the western Angeles National Forest near Ventura County as a wilderness area to protect the California Condor. In addition, 45.5 miles of wild and scenic rivers would be added, mostly in the Angeles, including the East Fork of the San Gabriel where the sucker fish are struggling to survive.

Also, Chu's provision creates a 51,107-acre San Gabriel Mountains National Recreation Area, or NRA, a swath of non-forest land that hugs the San Gabriel and Rio Hondo rivers from the mountains through El Monte and Pico Rivera, which also run east-west parallel to the 60 Freeway from Whittier to Rowland Heights along the Puente-Chino Hills.
“Being declared a NRA, we will have a line item in the budget and that means, monies for future trails, greater signage, better hiking opportunities and maybe even a national visitor's area,” Chu said Wednesday during an interview.

- The Rim of the Valley Corridor Preservation Act, authored by Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Burbank, more than doubles the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area by adding 191,000 acres in a ring of wild lands surrounding the San Fernando Valley. The long-established SMMNRA — home to trails and an isolated population of mountain lions — would now include wildlife corridors between the Santa Monica Mountains in the west and the San Gabriel Mountains in the east.
Map of the “Rim of the Valley Unit,” as proposed in legislation by Rep. Adam Schiff and Sen. Dianne Feinstein. Purple areas represent land that would be added to the Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area. (map courtesy of the U.S. National Park Service).

The addition includes a narrow stretch along the Los Angeles River and its tributary, the Arroyo Seco in west Pasadena; the Verdugo Mountains above Glendale; the San Rafael Hills, a portion of Chantry Flat hiking area above Sierra Madre, Millard Canyon, the Simi Hills and the Santa Susana and Conejo mountains in Ventura County.

The overall bill includes 40,000 acres of wilderness in the Los Padres National Forest in Ventura County.

“If we don’t take action, these wildlife corridors will disappear. Mountain lions, bears, incredible species of birds and other wildlife such as bobcats and deer will disappear,” said Schiff, during a Wednesday interview.

Schiff’s Rim of the Valley portion doesn’t just protect wild parts of the mountains surrounding Los Angeles. It includes urban parks and historical sites, dipping southeast to envelop Griffith Park, Hansen Dam Recreation Area, Sepulveda Basin, Ernest Debs Regional Park, El Pueblo De Los Angeles Historical Monument in downtown Los Angeles and the Rose Bowl in Pasadena.

The National Park Service’s role would be expanded to serve the “Rim of the Valley Unit.”
“The Rim of the Valley expansion isn't just about open space. We are talking about historical resources and urban parks,” said Dennis Arguelles, Los Angeles program manager for the National Parks Conservation Association, a nonprofit that advocates for the National Park system.

The NPS had opposed the measure in 2018 because it didn't have the budget nor staff to handle more land. In August 2018, the agency reported it had a $11.6 billion deferred maintenance backlog and needed to focus on critical needs within the 409 areas it manages.

Schiff re-introduced the measure separately for the third time in March. Sen. Dianne Feinstein wrote a companion measure in the Senate.

During the House vote Wednesday, many Republicans said the bill was a waste of time because it would not pass the Senate and Trump already said he would not support it.

“This bill is destined to fail. We are wasting our time with messaging bills that have no future,” said Rep. Rob Bishop, R-Utah.

Schiff said the original bill gained bipartisan support and hopes the larger wildlands bill passed Wednesday gains more Republican support in the Senate. Sen Kamala Harris will introduce a bill incorporating the California provisions, Chu said.

“I've also been fighting we make sure we expand funding for the National Park Service,” said Schiff.
Meet Arrowhead Village’s New Owner: Jay Kerner

Posted: Thursday, February 13, 2020 9:00 am

by Nick Kipley, Reporter

Mountain residents and small business owners may be pleased to hear that the Lake Arrowhead Village is now under new management. New changes and improvements to the property are being planned for the future. The Village closed escrow in Dec. of 2019. It was purchased by U.S. Realty Partners, a Los Angeles-based, privately held, real estate investment company that specializes in acquiring, managing, developing and redeveloping retail properties in the western United States. The company focuses primarily on grocery-anchored retail properties and works by purchasing shopping centers, refurbishing them, and injecting life where things may have stagnated. This is done by drawing in new retailers, building upon existing assets and by refurbishing pre-existing assets. The company’s current portfolio includes 15 retail properties totaling over two-million square feet.

President and CEO of U.S. Realty Partners, Jay Kerner, is quite pleased about his company acquiring Lake Arrowhead Village. He brings over thirty years of experience owning, managing, and operating grocery-anchored retail properties to the mountain and is currently assessing ways that the Village can be refurbished to attract new tenants.

According to his biography on U.S. Realty Partners website, Kerner is a graduate of UCLA with a degree in Business and Economics. He is a member of the International Council of Shopping Centers and has served as a speaker at past events. In addition, he is a licensed California Real Estate Broker, General Contractor, and FINRA member with Series 7, 24, 27, 63 and 79 licenses. He was formerly Regional Director of Capital and Counties, U.S.A., a privately held real estate investment trust with 2.5 million square feet of retail, office, multi-family and mixed-use properties organized as a subsidiary of Capital Shopping Centres Group, London (a publicly-traded FTSE 100 company; CSCG.L). In addition to his duties overseeing acquisitions, dispositions, financing, and operations, he was a key executive involved in the sale of the company to Equity One (NYSE; EQY) in 2011 for more than $600 million. Before that, he was Senior Director of Acquisitions for Federal Realty Investment Trust, a public REIT with more than 19 million square feet of high-quality mixed-use and retail properties in the best markets in the U.S. (NYSE: FRT).

Kerner was also President of Kerner Management and Investments, a regional shopping center operator and developer, for more than 10 years. Over his career, he has been personally involved in more than one billion in commercial real estate projects. Kerner is also the author of Chasing Yield; an Individual Investor’s Guide to Passive Commercial Real Estate Investments.

“We have some broad-brush ideas of what we want to achieve here,” Kerner said. “And the devil is always in the details. So as far as specifics of what exactly we’re going to do, we’re still working through a lot of those things. We’re looking at some different ideas. We are bringing on some consultants to help us in that regard with respect to marketing, ...leasing, ...changes we may make to the common areas to improve them.”

“It’s really early on. I mean we just closed on the property in December and you know it takes a little while to get up and running,” Kerner said. “We’re getting out arms around things.”

Kerner said that at the top of his list is to cure the deferred maintenance around the property so that existing tenants can operate in a higher quality establishment while making the property more appealing to new tenants who might want to come on board.

“There’s a lot of wood rot. There’s stucco that’s deteriorating on certain buildings. There’s roofs that are aging and need to be repaired or replaced in general. So there’s maintenance things like that, that are the long-term capital nature that we’ll be working through systematically to improve,” Kerner said. “And that goes for the common areas as well.”
“We want the Village to be a place that people feel like somebody cares, that we’re paying attention and that we’re improving it for everyone’s benefit so that it’ll be an attractive place. A nice place to be,” Kerner said.

Kerner also said that high on his list of proprieties is the goal of ‘bringing some excitement’ to the Lake Arrowhead Village so that residents of Lake Arrowhead, Crestline, and Running Springs can all benefit from the property. He aims to steer away from relying wholly on the current setup which segregates the upper village into “residents” and the lower village into “tourists.”

When the purchased the Lahaina Cannery Mall, U.S. Realty Partners approached the tight-knit island community for ideas on how to make the only indoor shopping mall on Maui accessible and convenient to locals while benefiting from the daily influx of tourists.

“There’s got to be a balance between the interests of the locals and taking care of the community and also to bring tourists in because, you know, the tourists bring in the necessity for jobs and keep the businesses thriving,” Kerner said. “We want to get a really good balance where the community feels good about the property.”

Beyond the concerts and programs that have been the tradition at the village for some time now, Kerner and his team are currently looking into new entertaining and interesting programs that will attract residents from Lake Arrowhead and the surrounding communities during the weekdays to attract more local shoppers to the Village. The goal is to keep the property busy for retailers throughout the week rather than have them be wholly dependent on the tourists who come up during the weekend. Kerner said he would like to see Lake Arrowhead Village become a place where residents go for reasons other than buying groceries or filling out a prescription at the local pharmacy. He said he would like to see more events filled with “energy and liveliness.”

“A couple of weeks ago I was in Cabo for a brief trip and I went down to the art walk in San Jose,” Kerner said. “They have an event every Thursday night. I don’t remember the month it runs but it’s still (hosted) six to eight months of the year. It started off about eight years ago, one of the merchants was telling me, and you know that the downtown there was in disrepair and there was not a lot of business going on there at the time so the city actually invested some money in creating some nice common areas and then all the merchants started doing really well. They started having these events so now it’s a vibrant event they have every Thursday and the streets are just full of people.”

“There’s all these cute art shops both with inexpensive items as well as fine-art type galleries. There are little boutiques and it’s really interesting.” he added. “So it’s not necessarily that there’s a correlation between that and the Village but just the idea of having a mix of interesting things that people come out for.”

Kerner said that he go the idea of purchasing Lake Arrowhead Village after he visited a few years ago and was impressed with the natural beauty. He’s able to draw comparisons between his property on Maui and his newly acquired property in the mountains.

“We’re in the very early stages at the moment,” Kerner said. “We’re still working out what that looks like. (And are asking) what are the types of tenants that would attract locals to the property? So we are still assessing what we’re missing: what does the local community desire that’s not there today? That might activate the lower village for residents.”

Kerner said that he plans on actively participating in improving the Lake Arrowhead Village not only on a physical level but also by becoming engaged with the community to restore and renew the property so that locals and tourists can benefit from it.
LOCAL NEWS

Needles’ request to honor out-of-state concealed weapon permits could get boost

Assemblyman Jay Obernolte, R-Big Bear Lake, introduced legislation that would allow counties and cities, like Needles, to recognize out-of-state concealed weapon permits. (File photo by Jennifer Cappuccio Maher, Inland Valley Daily Bulletin/SCNG)

By SANDRA EMERSON | semerson@scng.com |
PUBLISHED: February 12, 2020 at 6:04 pm | UPDATED: February 12, 2020 at 6:08 pm

Several months after Needles officials declared their small desert city a “Second Amendment Sanctuary,” a new bill proposes allowing them to recognize concealed weapon permits from neighboring Arizona.
Assembly Bill 2206, introduced Wednesday, Feb. 12, by Assemblyman Jay Obernolte, R-Big Bear Lake, would let California cities and counties recognize permits issued in other states. County approval would also require the sheriff’s department’s OK. If the bill becomes law, out-of-state permit holders would have to follow California’s law for concealed weapons.

California, which has some of the country’s toughest gun laws, does not recognize out-of-state permits, nor does the state issue such permits to residents of other states.

“The city of Needles has this unique problem,” Obernolte said. “Being located right on the border, they have a lot of residents that live in the city of Needles on the California side and then they have a lot of friends and neighbors living right across the river. It’s one contiguous community.”

Needles, a town of about 5,000 in eastern San Bernardino County, borders the Colorado River and Arizona state line. There is no grocery store, so residents do most of their shopping in Arizona, where gas is also half the price. Many residents also feel more a part of Arizona than California, economically and culturally.

The Needles City Council made the declaration in June and started working with state lawmakers on legislation that would exempt the city — and possibly other border cities — from rules on ammunition and concealed-weapon permits.

Needles officials say permit holders from Arizona and Nevada avoid driving through the city because of the state’s laws, which means they’re not stopping to spend money.

“We know it’s an uphill battle with Sacramento and the political landscape that’s there now, but it doesn't mean we're not going to try,” said Needles Councilman Tim Terral, who championed the declaration.

Terral said some residents have moved from Needles to Arizona because of California’s gun laws.

“I hear all the time form people asking me ‘Can we come back to Califonria yet?’” he said.

Needles officials also are looking for relief on ammunition purchases. It is illegal for California residents to cross state lines to purchase ammunition, but the closest in-state ammunition stores are 100 miles away in Blythe or more than 140 miles away in Barstow. Stores that sell ammunition are a 15-to-20-minute drive across the river in Arizona.

Obernolte said they are still researching whether that could be done through legislation or require voter approval.
For now, the permit bill is expected to be referred to a committee in the next three weeks. It will then be presented during a hearing, Obernolte said.

The bill is also supported by Sen. Shannon Grove, R-Bakersfield, and Sen. Mike Morrell, R-Rancho Cucamonga.

While the rule change would apply to all cities and counties in the state, Obernolte, who is leaving the Assembly to run for the 8th Congressional District in November, said he doesn’t expect a lot of inland cities to take advantage of it.

“I firmly believe in the fact that communities can decide what’s best for themselves,” he said.
Riverside County’s 15 Freeway toll lanes on track to open in late 2020

A FasTrak sign for the new express lanes is up along the southbound 15 Freeway near Cantu-Galleano Ranch Road in Eastvale on Monday, Feb. 10, 2020. (Photo by Watchara Phomicinda, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)

By DAVID DOWNNEY | ddowney@scng.com | The Press-Enterprise
PUBLISHED: February 12, 2020 at 10:20 am | UPDATED: February 12, 2020 at 10:23 am

Call it a sign of progress.

Visible indicators that the toll-lane project on the 15 Freeway in Riverside County is moving forward are popping up all over.
“We are starting to put up some of the overhead signs,” said John Standiford, deputy executive director for the Riverside County Transportation Commission.

Those are going up in the northern portion of the 15-mile-long project area in Eastvale and Jurupa Valley. And pavement is being poured in Corona, Standiford said.

The agency is constructing four express lanes between the 60 Freeway along the Eastvale-Jurupa Valley boundary and Cajalco Road in Corona.

Drivers will be able to enter or exit the lanes at Weirick Road, Cajalco Road, Ontario Avenue, Magnolia Avenue, Hidden Valley Parkway, Second Street, Sixth Street, Limonite Avenue, Cantu-Galleano Ranch Road and near the 60 Freeway, agency plans show.

Standiford said the lanes are on track to open late this year.
LOCAL NEWS

Riverside homes for homeless bring HUD Secretary Ben Carson

Ben Carson, Secretary, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, center tours one of the four units at The Grove Village with Pastor Andy Gibeault, left and Riverside Mayor Rusty Bailey, right at The Grove Community Church while discussing affordable housing and homelessness in Riverside on Wednesday, Feb 12, 2020. (Photo by Terry Pierson, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)

By JEFF HORSEMAN | jhorseman@scng.com | The Press-Enterprise
PUBLISHED: February 12, 2020 at 5:58 pm | UPDATED: February 13, 2020 at 8:26 am

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson visited Riverside on Wednesday afternoon, Feb. 12, for a discussion with local leaders about the faith community’s role in providing affordable housing.
Carson toured The Grove Village, a collection of homes at The Grove Community Church that provide housing and support services to the homeless.

The project is the first visible effort of Riverside Mayor Rusty Bailey's “Love Your Neighbor” initiative, a partnership involving city government, religious institutions and non-profit organizations.

After the tour, Carson and Bailey joined others in a roundtable discussion. The visit was part of HUD's Driving Affordable Housing Across America bus tour.
LOCAL NEWS

Riverside seeks medical masks for coronavirus fight in Chinese sister city

By RYAN HAGEN | rhagen@scng.com | The Press-Enterprise
PUBLISHED: February 12, 2020 at 11:54 am | UPDATED: February 12, 2020 at 11:59 am
Riverside’s sister city of Jiangmen, China, has seen rapidly diminishing supplies of medical face masks as the novel coronavirus spreads, and local physicians and medical groups can help, say city officials, the Riverside International Relations Council and the Riverside County Medical Association.

They’re asking for face masks to be donated by Friday, Feb. 21, to the Riverside County Medical Association, 3993 Jurupa Ave., Riverside, CA 92506.

People can also send cash or checks to the International Relations Council of Riverside at P.O. Box 2221, Riverside, CA 92516. The council will use donations to buy medical protective gear recommended by the medical association, according to a news release.

Two cases of the virus have been reported in Jiangmen, which is about 700 miles from Wuhan, where the novel coronavirus broke out.

The outbreak that has infected over 45,000 people worldwide, including 13 people in the United States, and killed more than 1,100.

For donation information, call 951-826-5692.
This Prop 13 is a school bond, not tax reform, and it’s one of dozens on the March 3 ballot

If approved, it would be the state's fifth school construction bond since 2002
For many Californians, the 2020 primary election will be highly educational – with ballots featuring a big statewide school bond measure alongside dozens of smaller bond bids from individual school districts.

On the local side, more than 100 districts throughout California are asking residents to fund facility improvements. The March 3 ballot includes 10 bonds pitched by districts in Orange County, five from San Bernardino County districts, four from Riverside County districts and two from districts in Contra Costa County.

But perhaps the most interesting bond proposal, and the one that will appear on every ballot — the inconveniently named Proposition 13 — would affect schools throughout the state. Contrary to assumptions bandied about on social media, the proposal has nothing to do with California's famous 1978 law that keeps property tax assessments within range of original purchase prices.

Instead, this year’s Proposition 13 would tap into the state's general fund, not property taxes, to cover $15 billion worth of bonds to be spent on school construction and renovation.

If approved, the spending would include about $9 billion for elementary public schools, $4 billion for universities, $2 billion for community colleges and $500 million for charter schools. Because school enrollment is declining statewide, the spending plan would prioritize renovating older buildings over new construction.

The bond would be paid off at a rate of $740 million a year, spread over 35 years. That would cover the principal plus an estimated $11 billion in interest.

The legislation that put the 2020 Proposition 13 on the ballot drew strong bipartisan support, with only five assembly members voting against it. Some big backers of Prop 13 include the California Teachers union and the Democratic party. Opponents include taxpayer groups, such as the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association.

The broad support in Sacramento came, in part, because the measure puts a focus on small and rural districts that serve populations that lean conservative, said Tim Taylor, executive director of the Small School Districts’ Association.
“Until now, it has not been a fair playing field for small schools,” Taylor said. “Many are in really bad shape.”

School district bonds, which can only be used on construction and renovation, are repaid at the local level via supplemental property tax fees. With money in hand, districts can apply to the state for matching funds – traditionally doled out on a first come, first served basis.

Urban and suburban school districts, Taylor said, enjoy the expertise needed for success at the polls and in Sacramento.

Rural schools, on the other hand, are located in areas with low property values and where voters might balk at tax increases. Proposition 13 would send historically overlooked small schools to the front of the line, reserving 10% of state money for districts with 2,500 or fewer students.

Local school bond measures have mushroomed in popularity since 2000, when voters lowered the threshold for passing them from two-thirds to 55%. Since 2002, state voters have approved four separate school bonds, earmarking a total of $54.6 billion for education-related construction and renovation.

This year, the prospect of new money from Proposition 13 has intensified local districts’ interest in bonds. That’s also why the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association opposes it, said David Wolfe, the organization’s legislative director.

“It pressures school districts to sell bonds, which translates into higher property taxes,” he said. “We’re not saying ‘No bonds at all, ever.’ But in a perfect world, we would like to see more general-fund spending and less debt.”

Additionally, Wolfe said, Proposition 13 would allow school districts to sell more bonds than they have previously.

With a $215 million bond initiative coming up, Tustin Unified School District counts among those hoping for help from the state. “Absolutely, we want to get in line for those matching funds,” said Superintendent Gregory Franklin.

Like districts up and down California, many of the schools in Tustin Unified were built in the 1960s and ‘70s, to keep up with swelling baby boomer enrollment. More than half a century later, Franklin said, those buildings need major updates.

“Eighty-five percent of our general fund goes to salaries and services,” he said. “We don’t have money left over for facility modernization projects.”
Bonds grant the advantage of “spreading the pain” to future parents and residents, Franklin noted: “Everybody who is going to benefit shares the cost.”

In the Silicon Valley, Pleasanton Unified School District hopes to raise $323 million in bonds.

“Parents move here for the great schools, but when they see the condition of some of our facilities, it’s not what they thought it would be,” said Superintendent David Haglund.

“We need 21st century schools.”

But because Proposition 13 prioritizes smaller schools, big districts such as Pleasanton might have to wait longer than in the past to qualify for matching funds.

“That’s OK,” Haglund said. “We’ll get the dollars whenever they become available. These are long-term projects. Time is on our side.”
Silence speaks

“Freedom of speech is essential to democracy” are the opening words to my computer’s dictionary definition of democracy. If true, we no longer live in one in San Bernardino County.

According to SB County Code 12.0101, to speak to an agenda item during a county Board of Supervisors public meeting, you must return a completed speaker form to the clerk before the item is opened for discussion.

Too bad, if you wish to refute a rostrum speaker’s assertion you believe misleading. Or the discussion of an agenda item raises a serious concern about the matter being addressed, with public comments ready to be closed, you believe there’s a serious concern not yet addressed.

You must only address the agenda on matters under discussion, or, during public comments, matters under Board purview, and not repeatedly. You must obey the chairperson’s order to cease speaking and return to your seat.

Speaking without the chair’s permission, the First Amendment-protected “happy cacophony of democracy,” is banned.

You can be removed from the meeting for “disruptive” behavior or content of speech.

And refusing to “immediately” obey the sergeant-at-arms’ order to leave a Board meeting is defined by the Removal Protocol for the sergeant-at-arms post as unlawfully resisting or delaying an arrest in violation of Penal Code 148(a)(1), which justifies a trip to jail for “book and release.” You can even be held on bail, if you’ve been arrested during a Board meeting before.

During the Jan. 28 Board meeting, with over a week’s advance notice, when asked during public comment whether or not these rules qualified the Board meetings as being “unlawful in nature,” long silence was the Board’s reply.

I.e., “Yes, these meetings are unlawful in nature.” Communicated “loudly and eloquently,” by silence.

Bob Nelson, Hesperia

Purge

Loyalty, with Trump, is a one-way street. The purge started with Yovanovitch and now Ambassador Sondland, LTC Vindman and Sen. Mitt Romney. And the Republicans gave Schiff a ration of feces over Trump’s “head on a pike” threat. It’s going to be one hell of a blood bath. Trump is a vindictive bully, with toadie Barr as enforcer. What is it going to take for the Trump cultists to realize that they are backing a mentally ill individual? God help us.

Marty Torok, Apple Valley

Medio-care

Medio-care, my term for the mediocre medical care in the High Desert. How many U.S.-trained medical doctors do we have here? Why must Kaiser Permanente subscribers go to San Bernardino for specialty or hospital care? Why are so many patients regularly seen by a physician’s assistant instead of a MD? Is there no
McClatchy Co. filed for bankruptcy Thursday, a move that will end family control of America’s second largest local news company and hand it to creditors who have expressed support for independent journalism.

The Chapter 11 filing will allow McClatchy to restructure its debts and, it hopes, shed much of its pension obligations. Under a plan outlined in its filing to a federal bankruptcy court, about 60 percent of its debt would be eliminated as the news organization tries to reposition for a digital future.

The likely new owners, if the court accepts the plan, would be led by hedge fund Chatham Asset Management LLC. They would operate McClatchy as a privately held company. More than 7 million shares of both publicly available and protected family-owned stock would be canceled.
“While this is obviously a sad milestone after 163 years of family control, McClatchy remains a strong operating company and committed to essential local news and information,” said Kevin McClatchy, chairman of the company that has carried his family name since the days of the California Gold Rush. “While we tried hard to avoid this step, there’s no question that the scale of our 75-year-old pension plan – with 10 pensioners for every single active employee – is a reflection of another economic era.”

The filing has no immediate impact on McClatchy’s employees or its 30 newsrooms in 14 states, including the Kansas City Star, the Miami Herald, the Charlotte Observer, the Fort Worth Star-Telegram and the Sacramento Bee. The company said it has secured $50 million in new financing from Encina Business Credit to ensure it can continue to operate while in bankruptcy and hopes to emerge with its balance sheet equipped for the future.

McClatchy executives fought for months to avoid Thursday’s filing; the company pursued multiple regulatory and legislative avenues to address its pension and debt obligations before turning to the bankruptcy process.

Negotiations with creditors intensified late last year. In addition, just weeks ago, Congress — in a last-minute about-face — excluded McClatchy from newspaper pension relief that would have prevented the company from having to choose among paying bond holders, meeting pension requirements or seeking bankruptcy protection.

Also, the documents submitted to the U.S. Bankruptcy Court for the Southern District of New York confirm that the Sacramento-based chain twice last year reached agreement on terms in separate strategic transactions “that would have delevered the business.”

But in both cases, it said, “McClatchy was unable to come to agreeable terms on financing, leaving the transactions unexecutable.” (Industry experts have widely reported that it was Tribune Co., the owner of the Chicago Tribune and other mastheads, that had been in talks about combining with McClatchy.)

“In this important moment for independent local journalism in the public interest, a stronger capital structure will enable McClatchy to continue to pursue our strategy of digital transformation and continue to produce strong local journalism essential to the communities we serve,” said Craig Forman, McClatchy’s chief executive officer.

McClatchy’s bankruptcy underscores the grim reality facing the local news industry amid profound transformation in its business and revenue model. More than 2,000 newspapers ceased production in the last 15 years, according to a recent think-tank report from the Brookings Institution.

Not only has the business model changed for newspapers, legacy companies carry large pension obligations that eat into cash flow and profits. McClatchy’s qualified pension covers more than 24,500 current and future retirees — many retired blue-collar workers who manned printing presses or loaded newspapers onto delivery trucks — supported by fewer than 2,800 active employees.
Between 2006 and 2018, McClatchy’s advertising revenue fell by 80 percent and daily print circulation fell by 58.6 percent. While the company has worked over three years to achieve a more sustainable 50-50 split of print vs. digital advertising, those gains couldn’t outpace the approaching pension and debt obligations.

In filing for Chapter 11, McClatchy is following a familiar path for legacy newspaper companies; most other major newspaper companies, including Tribune, Lee Co. and New Media/Gatehouse, which recently acquired Gannett, preceded McClatchy on this bankruptcy restructuring path.

McClatchy’s new owners will face the same “fundamental headwinds” that have driven mergers and closures, said Anthony Campagna, director of research for ISS EVA, a provider of analytics and market intelligence to investors.

“There’s probably economies of scale that have to happen in an era where much less people are reading print media,” he said.

Chatham, in a statement shared early Thursday, expressed its support for the mission of local journalism in the public interest.

“As a supportive investor in McClatchy since 2009, Chatham is committed to preserving independent journalism and newsroom jobs. We look forward to working with the company in the best interests of all stakeholders,” Chatham said.

AREAS OF AGREEMENT

McClatchy and its creditors fell short of a fully pre-arranged bankruptcy, leaving open the possibility of a legal battle that could drag out. But the company reached substantial agreement on major issues.

Among them was a debt-for-equity swap that leaves its main bondholders led by Chatham with control of the company, meaning the end of the McClatchy family’s control after 163 years.

Chatham is a New Jersey-based hedge fund that last year reported more than $4.4 billion in assets under management on behalf of 14 clients. Hedge funds pool investment from wealthy individuals and big institutional investors, and Chatham’s specialties include investing in companies facing debt distress.

Other bondholders named in the filing who stand to get an ownership stake in the new company are Leon G. Cooperman, a prominent billionaire investor and CEO of Omega Advisors, and New York-based Brigade Capital Management, another hedge fund specializing in companies with high debt and distressed balance sheets.

McClatchy had outstanding debt of more than $703 million at the time of filing, and its unfunded pension obligations — the proximate cause of the filing — were estimated to be valued above $805 million last July. Since 2011, the company had made more than $275 million in pension payments in excess of what was required. It has used the sale of its buildings and other assets to pay creditors and pension obligations.

Under a deal with creditors, holders of McClatchy’s most protected debt — known as “first lien” debt — will swap it for new debt worth $218 million, with the same maturity date but a 10 percent annual interest rate, an increase from the current 9 percent rate on similar securities. Holders of a larger pool of second and third-level McClatchy debt will swap it out for a 97 percent equity stake in what will become a privately held news organization.

McClatchy has asked the court to appoint a mediator to supervise remaining negotiations with creditors to speed a mutually beneficial resolution.

McClatchy’s restructuring proposal, submitted to the court, also would see the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation take over administration of the qualified pension plan. As part of that proposal, McClatchy committed to making payments of $3.3 million annually to the federal entity over the next 10 years. The agency would get up to 3 percent of the new company emerging from bankruptcy. The PBGC did not agree in advance to that proposal.
NARROW MISS

The inflection point for McClatchy’s bankruptcy was the failure to get pension relief from Congress.

A pension solution appeared hours away from a legislative agreement late last year, before falling victim to partisan politics.

Congress passed the Secure Act in December, a retirement-security package that became a legislative vehicle to which a range of tax matters could be affixed, some of which involved technical corrections to inadvertent errors in President Trump’s tax overhaul signed into law in December 2017.

During the negotiations over the scope of what would be attached to Secure Act legislation, McClatchy and the San Diego Union Tribune, among others, sought to be added to already existing language in the bill designed to give struggling community newspapers more time to address their pension commitments.

The language, which remained in the version of the Secure Act passed into law, gave these smaller papers 30 years to fully catch up on their current pension obligations, relieving them of the burden of choosing between creditors and bankruptcy.

McClatchy was late to the game and one participant in the process described it as an attempted “Hail Mary.”

The company worked through several lawmakers on both sides of the aisle from communities where McClatchy owned newspapers and with congressional leadership.

It sought what was ultimately granted to about a dozen companies: 30 years to meet its pension funding requirements instead of the current seven years. For that help, it would pay a higher interest rate of 8 percent on its delayed contributions.

Like much in Washington today, partisan politics were on full display.

The pension-relief plan quickly faced opposition from Utah Republican Sen. Mike Lee, who publicly opposed the plan’s extension of pension payments. The longer payback window, he argued...
in a Nov. 8 statement, amounted to a “special interest bailout to these newspapers.” He added that they’d unlikely ever make up the shortfall.

Kent A. Mason, a partner in the law firm of Davis & Harman, which specializes in retirement policy issues, worked on behalf of McClatchy in the negotiations. The proposal was designed to prevent, not cause, a bailout by allowing the company to weather temporary difficulties, he said.

Instead, by filing bankruptcy, McClatchy was forced to seek help from the PBGC.

“That is an actual bailout that could have been prevented by funding relief, which simply gives a company more time to pay its own obligations without a bailout,” Mason said.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., and Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer, D-N.Y., actively worked on the issue. Multiple sources said Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell didn’t oppose their effort; a McClatchy masthead, the Lexington Herald Leader, is in his home state of Kentucky.

Several people involved in the negotiations said they believed they’d struck a deal on a Sunday night and the matter was dealt with.

Then, it wasn’t. Something changed in the wee hours of morning.

“There were at least parameters of a deal,” said one person close to the negotiations, who described talks as “basically a hostage drama.”

How did it all fall apart even as three of the top four congressional leaders -- called the Four Corners -- were expressly behind the plan?

“I myself would like to know,” said Rep. Doris Matsui, D-Calif., a reader of the Fresno Bee since childhood who worked with House leaders to find a solution. “We felt like we made a lot of progress. We thought it was ready to go. It didn’t happen.”

Accounts vary from numerous congressional staffers, industry groups and lawmakers themselves over just what was at play, what was offered if anything as trade bait and how close they were to a deal.

In conversations they conditioned on anonymity to speak freely about an ongoing negotiation, the one constant was bipartisan rancor.

The Secure Act finally passed Congress on Dec. 19, one day after House Democrats passed articles of impeachment against President Trump. The atmosphere for bipartisanship wasn’t exactly palpable.

The Secure Act passed without the language that would have helped McClatchy and the San Diego Tribune, although it did include original language that provided relief to the Seattle Times, Minneapolis Star Tribune and Tampa Bay Times, among others.

“We were delighted Congress provided pension relief to roughly a dozen community newspapers but at the same time completely disheartened that the relief was not extended to McClatchy and other newspapers that clearly match the spirit of the provision,” said David Chavern, president and CEO of the News Media Alliance, an industry trade association.

Pension relief wasn’t the only important thing that didn’t get done for their home districts. Leaders could not agree on a fix for a drafting error in the Trump tax revamp that would have helped retailers, restaurants and producers of energy efficient lighting. This fix appeared to be a tradeoff for pension relief.

Republicans were seeking the fix on the “Qualified Improvement Program,” or QIP, designed to give some businesses the ability to write off more on taxes and over a shorter time period. But House Democrats, unhappy with having no voice in a tax revamp done when the GOP led both chambers, demanded $100 billion worth of refundable tax credits or child tax credits in exchange.

This sort of horse trading in legislation is common, but the Democrats’ number, said some involved in talks, was so high it signaled disinterest to Republicans.
A QIP fix was in discussion the night that McClatchy’s inclusion in the pension relief came undone, even as other obstacles in the negotiation were cleared.

The Trump administration did not appear opposed to pension relief efforts.

A White House official acknowledged that what appeared set on Sunday night changed, and that when talks resumed “what was on offer from House Democrats and Senate Republicans to us was what ultimately agreed to and enacted.”

Whatever changed at the last minute happened at the level of talks between top leaders in both parties. And representatives for their offices did not respond to repeated requests for comment.

**HISTORY REPEATS**

Since its shares will no longer be traded on the NYSE American stock exchange under the ticker symbol MNI, McClatchy expects to begin the process of being delisted and cancelling its existing equity.

The McClatchy family was forced to give up its protected Class B stock that had served as a buffer against hostile investor takeovers. That was not without irony since McClatchy’s leap into the ranks of the largest publishers came after an investor-led revolt forced the Knight Ridder chain to sell itself.

McClatchy was the proverbial dog that caught the car, buying its larger competitor Knight Ridder in March 2006 for $4.5 billion in cash and stock. It also assumed $2 billion of Knight Ridder debt.

Just a year earlier, McClatchy stock topped $740 a share. But, in 2007, the first cracks appeared in what would become a snowballing global financial crisis. The subsequent Great Recession, fueled by a collapse in housing prices, took a huge toll on McClatchy and its competitors alike. Advertising dollars shrunk. Emerging internet companies such as Craigslist and Zillow lured away classified ad revenue.

McClatchy’s stock **fell to 35 cents a share last Nov. 27 amid bankruptcy fears**. It bounced back above $1.50 in mid-January on **news that talks with the Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation had entered a quiet period**, signaling a potential solution.

The stock traded at 75 cents a share at Wednesday’s close.