

# DAILY PRESS

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## NEWS

# Topgolf Ontario set to tee off this week; first location in Southern California



**Rene Ray De La Cruz**

Victorville Daily Press

Published 10:35 a.m. PT March 8, 2022 | Updated 10:37 a.m. PT March 8, 2022

Topgolf will open its first Southern California location on Friday, bringing its technology-infused entertainment, food and beverage concept to Ontario, the company announced Tuesday.

Topgolf Ontario, the company's 75th global venue, will be located at the corner of Archibald Avenue and Fourth Street.

The property is adjacent to Cucamonga-Guasti Regional Park, located north of Interstate 10 and the Ontario International Airport.

A ribbon-cutting ceremony is scheduled at 9 a.m. on Friday, with San Bernardino County Board Supervisor and Chairman Curt Hagman, Ontario Mayor Paul S. Leon and others expected to attend.

The open-air, three-level, venue will feature 102 climate-controlled outdoor hitting bays, year-round programming for all ages, more than 200 TVs and a plethora of video games.

Topgolf will also include an outdoor patio, rooftop terrace, private event space and a chef-inspired menu with food and drinks.

The technology-driven experience at Topgolf centers on guests hitting microchipped golf balls at targets while playing video games

"As a company focused on providing our players with an experience like no other, we are thrilled for the opportunity to connect with Greater Los Angeles," said Topgolf Chief Executive Officer Artie Starrs in a statement. "We are excited to invite the community to come play golf with us, with the fun and energetic experience that people of all ages can only get at Topgolf."

Topgolf Ontario will employ approximately 400 workers, the company said.

City of Ontario spokesman Dan Bell told the Daily Press the new Topgolf venue has created a lot of buzz within the city and across Southern California.

“We know that our economic base will benefit when Topgolf begins to draw people from the High Desert, the Inland Empire and across the region,” Bell said. “As the host city, we look forward to that boom of people visiting, recreating, shopping and having fun here in Ontario.”

## **Deal with county expected to bring in \$625,000 a year to support parks**

In February 2021, the Texas-based Topgolf Entertainment Group announced plans to build a nearly 600,000-square-foot facility on 13.7 acres of undeveloped San Bernardino County-owned land in Ontario.

"Topgolf will be an outstanding entertainment asset that will attract people from all over Southern California to San Bernardino County," Hagman said last year.

He added that the Topgolf concept "appeals to all ages, and everyone will benefit from the revenue that will be directed toward the betterment of the county's Regional Parks system."

Topgolf and SBC officials entered into a 20-year lease agreement in 2019, but the COVID-19 pandemic delayed construction of the project, county officials said.

The agreement is expected to bring in more than \$625,000 a year to support the SBC's system of regional parks, which includes Mojave Narrows in Victorville, Mojave River Forks in Hesperia and Calico Ghost Town in Yermo.

## **Topgolf also coming to El Segundo**

Topgolf Ontario marks the third venue in the Golden State, and the first in Southern California. The other facilities are in San Jose, and Roseville near Sacramento.

Topgolf will continue its Southern California area expansion in early spring with the opening of its El Segundo located on Pacific Coast Highway, south of the Los Angeles International Airport and west of Interstate 405.

The El Segundo venue will have a similar 102 climate-controlled hitting bay design and will be fully equipped with Topgolf's latest technology and a 10-hole green grass golf course.

"The energy and excitement for Topgolf in and around the Inland Empire is incredible," Starrs added. "We are excited to finally open our doors to these communities and are looking forward to entertaining guests through the power of play."

***Daily Press reporter Rene Ray De La Cruz may be reached at 760-951-6227 or RDeLaCruz@VVDailyPress.com. Follow him on Twitter @DP\_ReneDeLaCruz***



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# Citrus Threatened By Pests and Disease

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Photo Courtesy of: Dawn Rowe

The Asian citrus psyllid (ACP) is an insect that feeds on citrus plants and can spread a deadly plant disease called Huanglongbing (HLB).



Photos

By Dawn Rowe  
Third District Supervisor  
03/08/2022 at 05:42 PM

The Asian citrus psyllid (ACP) is an insect that feeds on citrus plants and can spread

a deadly plant disease called Huanglongbing (HLB), which has been found in San Bernardino County. While the disease is not harmful to people or pets, once a citrus tree is infected it will die. This disease has had a devastating impact on the citrus industries in Florida and Texas, so this threat to local growers has been monitored closely over the past few years. Recently, populations of ACP were detected near commercial groves in Highland, Mentone, and Redlands, which has resulted in the Proclamation of an Emergency Program from the California Department of Food and Agriculture.

ACP, and the disease it can carry, threaten loss and damage to not only citrus crops but also backyard citrus trees and food supplies. The recommended treatment plan for the ACP detections will be implemented within a 250-meter radius of each ACP detection site.



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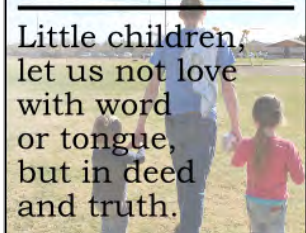
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1 John 3:18 <sup>NASB</sup>


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with word  
or tongue,  
but in deed  
and truth.



Residents in the treatment area will be contacted by the California Department of Food and Agriculture, which will complete the treatments at no cost. All Third District residential citrus owners can find answers to their questions about citrus management [here](#) and [here](#). For any questions related to this program, please contact the CDFA toll-free telephone number at 800-491-1899 for assistance.


Commercial growers can find treatment schedules, and the University of California's recommendations on citrus treatment products listed at [CitrusInsider.org](http://CitrusInsider.org). Commercial citrus pesticide applications must be applied by a licensed pesticide applicator. For referrals on providers in the area, contact Sandra Zwaal, ACP/HLB Grower Liaison, at [szwaal2@gmail.com](mailto:szwaal2@gmail.com) or (949) 636-7089.

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LOCAL NEWS • Analysis

# Drawing a roadmap for the Inland Empire in 2042

By **CONTRIBUTING WRITER** |

PUBLISHED: March 10, 2022 at 8:00 a.m. | UPDATED: March 10, 2022 at 8:00 a.m.

By **Manfred W. Keil and Robert A. Kleinhenz** | [Inland Empire Economic Partnership](#)

*Editor's note: The second of two pieces on growth prospects of the Inland Empire region.*

In [the first part](#) of this series, we presented some Inland Empire statistics: the Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario Metropolitan Statistical Area, or MSA, is the 13th most populous MSA in the nation — over 10% of Californians live here. It ranks third in California, only slightly behind San Francisco but ahead of San Diego. Recently, the area has weathered the economic fallout from the [coronavirus pandemic](#) relatively better than its coastal neighbors. But the region fares poorly in terms of per capita income, a general measure of economic well-being, ranking no higher than 295 out of roughly 380 MSAs across the nation. We do even worse if we do not take into account the income received by commuters from employment in the coastal areas. This puts us in the bottom third of all MSAs nationally.

## [PART I: Planning for the Inland Empire in 2042](#)

We cannot be satisfied with what we have achieved so far, especially since the fourth industrial revolution with increased automation and robotics is about to wipe out many jobs, especially in logistics, that have resulted in our superior employment performance.

Since the start of the 21st century, the Inland Empire's per capita income has grown by an average of 3.3% per year. If, and this is a big if, we continued at that rate, it will reach \$67,250 by 2032 and \$93,400 by 2042, meaning it will be roughly double its current level (abstracting from inflation and population growth). But the American dream is not just about command over goods. Instead it is about the next generation building upon the last generation's achievements.

In the context of the regional economy, we must plant certain seeds now to enable the region to see gains in the coming decades beyond just higher income. More precisely, we have to establish goals for the region to pursue if we want to shift per capita income to a higher trajectory, thereby improving its ranking. Consider what it would take to move the Inland Empire to the 40th percentile. That would place it roughly on par with the Phoenix MSA, currently in 164th place. Assuming the Phoenix area grows at the same rate it has done since 2000, the Inland Empire can catch up by 2042 if its average growth rate increases by just 0.3 percentage points, from 3.3% to 3.6%. Such an incremental change over a 20 year period is within reach, but we have to take action now.

Here is what needs to happen.

First, meeting the realities of the mid-21st century economy will take time, planning, and effort by both policy makers and business leaders. It is incumbent on the region to begin now preparing for and creating the Inland Empire of 2042. They must build on the region's strengths that contribute to growth. For the Inland Empire, this includes industries such as logistics and tourism, as well as those that serve the local population. They also require investment in the region's workers through gains in educational attainment and occupational training. With regard to the potential target, somewhat surprisingly, the industrial composition of the Phoenix MSA is not much different from the Inland Empire. What sticks out is that the percentage of residents with at least a bachelor's degree in Phoenix is 12% compared to 7% for the Inland Empire. There is a clear connection between increases in educational attainment and per capita income. If the region sets a goal of improvement in per capita income from being ranked 296th to 160th by 2042, then a core part of the strategy must be to improve the region's educational attainment. Given the advances in automation, future jobs will be quite different. Hence, we need to institutionalize lifelong learning so individuals can acquire new skills to meet fast-changing needs of industry.





Second, it is vital to pursue a coordinated regional policy effort. Riverside and San Bernardino counties each have their own unique character, but they are a part of the larger Inland Empire region and the broader Southern California area. There are many industry links, a shared transportation infrastructure, and a common labor pool. In many ways, commerce is blind to jurisdictional boundaries. A business in Rancho Cucamonga will not hesitate to buy from a supplier in Norco if the price is right; or to hire a worker from Temecula if qualified. This is why the two counties must cooperate and collaborate to create the Inland Empire of the future. Failing to do so will result in a weaker outcome. The coordinated regional policy effort must take into account the region's assets that will contribute to long-term growth. These include infrastructure — roads, airports, and convention/entertainment venues. They also include the region's relatively young labor force, its communities and regions, its academic institutions, and its natural resources. There are challenges, first and foremost the cost of living and increasing housing costs.

This all requires more than just a cursory knowledge of the regional economy.

The region's largest industries are well known, but we must identify those that create growth in the region vs. those that serve the local population. Regional experts refer to industries that create growth as traded industries, defined by their capacity to sell goods and services outside the region. Traded industries are rarely the largest source of jobs and tax revenues, but they often produce high value-added output and employ workers in relatively better paying positions — a source of new income. Through linkages across the regional economy, new income supports job growth in the population-serving industries such as restaurants, construction, and retail. These industries employ large numbers of workers and also are a significant source of tax revenues for local and state governments. By nurturing the region's existing traded industries and attracting new traded industries, the region will also energize its population-serving industries.

Bottom line: With a comprehensive understanding of the region's industries, assets, and institutions, we must establish goals and priorities and draw a roadmap for the future, then set specific objectives for a course of action.

We must identify and attract new and emerging industries that capitalize on the region's economic and labor-force strengths; and we must rely on a joint political effort to achieve this.

*The [Inland Empire Economic Partnership](#)'s mission is to help create a regional voice for business and quality of life in Riverside and San Bernardino counties. Its membership includes organizations in the private and public sector.*

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**Contributing Writer**



LOCAL NEWS • News

## Mask mandate ending, but shouting continues at Redlands school board meeting

The state is ending masking policies for K-12 schools on Saturday, March 12



A school security officer asks a member of the audience to wear a mask at the Redlands Unified School District board meeting on Tuesday, March 8, 2022. The district only required masks to be worn when a student joined the meeting. (Photo by Jennifer Iyer, Redlands Daily Facts/SCNG)

By **JENNIFER IYER** | [jiyer@scng.com](mailto:jiyer@scng.com) | Redlands Daily Facts

PUBLISHED: March 9, 2022 at 5:55 p.m. | UPDATED: March 9, 2022 at 5:57 p.m.

With the [coronavirus pandemic ebbing locally at the moment](#), Redlands Unified School District board meetings are once again in-person, as are the [heated masking and vaccination debates](#) that didn't go away in the virtual setting.

On Tuesday, March 8, the Board of Trustees met in person for the first time in half a year, a move that led to officials being physically served a list of demands related to pandemic policies, and one man being escorted out while yelling at a speaker.

At the last in-person meeting in September 2021 [proceedings were stopped after 20 minutes](#) when a different speaker refused to wear a mask, and told trustees he would make the mask/vaccine debate "personal."

Earlier that summer [police were called to a meeting](#) when members of the public were barred from entering until they put on masks. Members of the crowd outside started banging on the doors and ripping down posters, according to the district.

Safety precautions for Tuesday's meeting included metal detectors, moving the location to the larger Citrus Valley High School theater, and the presence of about a half-dozen school security personnel, including Redlands Police Department's two school resource officers.

About 50 members of the public attended.

Board President Jim O'Neill asked Tuesday's attendees to put on their masks just before the meeting started, as a student had entered. If no student were present, he said, masks would have been optional. Most attendees complied immediately, and a few were handed masks by security personnel.



The mostly peaceful meeting Tuesday night heated up during the public comment period.

Highland resident Heidi Stutzman told board members they were being served with “a letter of intent for claims to be filed against your liability and criminal insurance policies.”

Several members of the public then walked onto the stage to hand the paperwork to Trustees Patty Holohan, Alex Vara and Melissa Ayala-Quintero, and Superintendent Mauricio Arellano.

“Tonight I’m speaking out to hold you all accountable for implementing the measures which have caused emotional distress, disruption and delays in our children’s learning, mental and health issues in negative capacities,” Stutzman said.

Along with the letter of intent was a list of demands to be rectified within five business days. She did not list the demands.

On Wednesday, district spokeswoman Christine Stephens said she was not able to forward a copy of the documents.

“If these demands are not met we will proceed swiftly with filing a claim with each of your criminal and liability policies,” Stutzman warned Tuesday night.

Stephens said as of Wednesday afternoon the district had no comment regarding the demands.

Several minutes after Stutzman spoke, a member of the pro-mask Save Redlands Schools group told the board she had been targeted and harassed in the parking lot after the [last in-person meeting in September](#).

As she finished, a man who had just spoken against masks and vaccines and had identified himself as “J.B.” yelled, “Are you targeting me?”

O’Neill asked the man to leave.

“Thanks for targeting me ... speaking of targets,” he yelled as he was escorted out.

“Is that a threat?” a female voice asked back.

Redlands spokesman Carl Baker said there were no arrests at the meeting.

“We’ll make sure you are safely escorted to your car,” O’Neill told the female speaker. “There’s no reason for that kind of behavior. I’m sorry and I’m disappointed.”


The state is [ending masking policies for K-12 schools](#) on Saturday, March 12.

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## Jennifer Iyer | Reporter

Jennifer Iyer graduated cum laude from UC Riverside in 2000 with a bachelor’s in creative writing and started working at The Press-Enterprise newspaper that year. After stints as night metro editor, assistant features editor, videographer, community reporter and other roles, she transferred to sister paper the Redlands Daily Facts in March 2018. Jennifer has covered wildfires, war games, courtrooms and blimp rides, been sprayed with fire retardant, and covered in bees (in a protective suit). She has interviewed celebrities on the red carpet at the Palm Springs Film Festival and homeless people in the rain. A nature enthusiast, Jennifer sold some of her nature photography prints to raise money for local nature centers and collaborated with her mother on the book “Wildflowers and Important Native Plants of the Inland Empire” by the Riverside-Corona Resource Conservation District.

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## Fontana taps Chino city manager for top administrative role

Matt Ballantyne will begin his third stint as a city manager April 18

By **BRIAN WHITEHEAD** | bwhitehead@scng.com | The Sun

PUBLISHED: March 9, 2022 at 12:44 p.m. | UPDATED: March 9, 2022 at 2:24 p.m.

Fontana leaders appointed Matt Ballantyne city manager, officials announced Wednesday, March 9.

Ballantyne is currently city manager in Chino. He begins his new gig April 18.

The details of Ballantyne's contract with Fontana were unclear early Wednesday afternoon.



Fontana leaders have appointed Matt Ballantyne city manager, officials announced March 9, 2022. Ballantyne, seen here in a file photo, is currently city manager in Chino. (File photo by David Allen/SCNG)

In 10 years as **Chino's top administrator**, Ballantyne oversaw large financial investments in city facilities, the development of thousands of residential units and the acquisition of park and open space.

He previously served six years as San Marino city manager.



In a news release, Ballantyne commended the “extraordinary team of professionals, elected leaders and community partners in Chino” and said he was looking forward to getting to work in Fontana.

“I am flattered by the Fontana council’s support and confidence,” he added, “and am eager to get started.”

Mayor Acquanetta Warren lauded Ballantyne’s experience and leadership Wednesday.

“His deep roots in the Inland Empire,” she said, “and his understanding of the opportunities ahead of us as a community and a region will serve us well as we continue to move boldly into the future.”

Ballantyne will become the fourth person to serve as Fontana city manager since longtime top administrator Ken Hunt [abruptly retired](#) in 2019.

Hunt, with whom the city [approved a settlement agreement that year](#) that paid him nearly [\\$1 million in 2020](#) without working a single day, was succeeded [on an interim basis](#) by Michael Milhiser.

Mark Denny [took over from Milhiser](#) on a permanent basis in April 2020, but [resigned](#) 18 months later to take a private sector job in Orange County.

Shannon Yauchzee has [served as interim city manager](#) since Denny’s October departure.

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 Author **Brian Whitehead** | Reporter

Brian Whitehead is a reporter for The San Bernardino Sun, covering Colton, Fontana, Grand Terrace, Rialto and San Bernardino. He previously covered prep sports and the cities of Buena Park, Fullerton and La Palma for The Orange County Register. A Grand Terrace native and Riverside Notre Dame alumnus, he earned his journalism degree from Cal State Fullerton in 2010. Since joining The Sun in late 2017, he has reported on development, education, homelessness, marijuana, political strife and the myriad issues facing San Bernardino post-bankruptcy.

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[Follow Brian Whitehead @bwhitehead3](#)



[https://www.fontanaheraldnews.com/news/matt-ballantyne-is-chosen-as-fontanas-new-city-manager/article\\_2dda2c66-9fe6-11ec-8133-c3a615e2b6d5.html](https://www.fontanaheraldnews.com/news/matt-ballantyne-is-chosen-as-fontanas-new-city-manager/article_2dda2c66-9fe6-11ec-8133-c3a615e2b6d5.html)

## Matt Ballantyne is chosen as Fontana's new city manager

Mar 9, 2022



Matt Ballantyne has been chosen to be Fontana's next city manager, effective April 18.

Matt Ballantyne has been chosen to be Fontana's next city manager, effective April 18.

Ballantyne brings extensive municipal leadership experience to the position, including more than 15 years as city manager in Chino and San Marino.

His hiring was approved by the Fontana City Council on March 8 and culminated an extensive search following the resignation last fall of Mark Denny, who accepted a position in the private sector.

"We're thrilled to have someone of Matt's experience and leadership during this exciting time in our city. His deep roots in the Inland Empire and his understanding of the opportunities ahead of us as a community and a region will serve us well as we continue to move boldly into the future," said Mayor Acquanetta Warren in a news release.

Ballantyne has been the city manager for Chino since 2012. During the past decade, he led an executive management team and staff that completed a new \$26 million Chino Police facility, addressed the city's \$69 million unfunded pension liability as an investment tool, and oversaw the development of 2,200 residential units at College Park and 12,000 residential units and a commercial center underway in The Preserve.

Ballantyne and his team negotiated favorable terms for numerous projects on behalf of the city, including one acquiring 95 acres of park and open space for Chino.

“Matt has good business acumen and excellent negotiating skills. Most importantly, he understands and cares about the community,” said Chino Mayor Eunice Ulloa in the news release. “He is a very hands-on and ‘present’ city manager that attends city events, knows the people, businesses and organizations in town, and enjoys being part of the community and staff he serves. Matt has been at the helm of Chino during a time of spectacular growth and change, which will be an asset to Fontana as it continues to undergo a population and economic boom of its own.”

Prior to joining Chino, Ballantyne was the city manager of San Marino for six years. He received his undergraduate degree from UCLA and masters degrees from Cal Poly-Pomona and the University of La Verne.

“I’m extremely grateful to have worked with such an extraordinary team of professionals, elected leaders and community partners in Chino, and look forward to developing those same relationships in Fontana as we embrace the exciting opportunities ahead of us. I am flattered by the Fontana Council’s support and confidence, and am eager to get started,” Ballantyne said in a statement.

Matt and his wife, Michelle, have two sons that they raised in Chino. His son Dean is a sophomore at Hillsdale College in Michigan and son Luke is a sophomore at Ontario Christian High School.

LOCAL NEWS • News

## Genetically engineered mosquitoes could be coming to San Bernardino County

Federally-approved experiment involves modified male mosquitoes whose female offspring wouldn't survive to adulthood



On March 6, 2022, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency approved an experimental use permit for British company Oxitec to release genetically modified mosquitoes in San Bernardino County, along with Fresno, Stanislaus and Tulare counties. (AP file Photo/Felipe Dana, File)

By **BEAU YARBROUGH** | byarbrough@scng.com | The Press-Enterprise  
 PUBLISHED: March 9, 2022 at 5:03 p.m. | UPDATED: March 9, 2022 at 5:05 p.m.

Genetically engineered [mosquitoes](#) could be coming to San Bernardino County in the next two years.

**On Sunday**, March 6, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency approved an experimental use permit for British company Oxitec to release genetically modified mosquitoes in San Bernardino County, along with Fresno, Stanislaus and Tulare counties.

The mosquitoes are modified *aedes aegypti*, an invasive species that can carry [West Nile Virus](#), Zika, dengue, chikungunya, yellow fever and other serious diseases. When the modified mosquitoes breed with ordinary female *aedes aegypti*, they don't produce viable female larvae. Originally native to South America, [aedes aegypti have been found in California for the past decade](#).

"All those eggs hatch, but only the male larvae survive to adulthood," said Rajeev Vaidyanathan, director of U.S. programs for Oxford-based Oxitec. "All the female progeny die as larvae. So this is a way of controlling an invasive mosquito species."

The experiment expands on an ongoing test in the Florida Keys and a previous test in Brazil.

"In California, this is a very different habitat; it's dry and hot and arid," Vaidyanathan said. "And we want to make sure that our mosquitoes can survive, fly and mate in a very different environment than Florida."





Female mosquitoes dying off not only limits the overall population of mosquitoes, it also directly stops them from biting and potentially spreading disease.

“Female mosquitoes bite and they feed on blood,” Vaidyanathan said. “Male mosquitoes don’t even have the mouthparts to bite.”

Advocates at the San Francisco-based nonprofit Center for Food Safety say the EPA’s approval of the experimental use permit ignores problems with Oxitec’s methods.

According to Jaydee Hanson, policy director for the International Center for Technology Assessment and Center for Food Safety, Oxitec’s experiment should be done in a controlled environment, rather than simply releasing the mosquitoes into the outside world. That would mean the number of mosquitoes can be known before and after and spraying to kill mosquitoes doesn’t give the false impression that the modified mosquitoes are more effective than they are.

According to Vaidyanathan, a prior Oxitec test reduced aedes aegypti in the area by 98%. The Center for Food Safety is skeptical of that claim.

“What we would have liked to have seen is something closer to what Oxitec and the U.S. Department of Agriculture did regarding their diamondback moth releases in New York state,” Hanson said. Another invasive species, the diamondback moth likes to eat holes in cabbage crops. “What the (department) did, in part at our urging, were tented trials: You have an enclosed environment where you try to replicate the environment you’re releasing the insect into, as much as you can, to see what happens.”

And there’s another problem: The four counties where the modified aedes aegypti are set to be released are all ones where agriculture is happening. Sprays used to protect crops, including against [citrus greening disease](#), the bane of orange crops in the Inland Empire, contain tetracycline. And that’s a problem, according to Hansen.

“These mosquitoes are genetically engineered to stay alive if they can get access to tetracycline,” he said. “If the female mosquito can get access to tetracycline, it can keep living and keep breeding.”

Oxitec intends to only release male mosquitoes as part of the experiment.

Unlike in Europe, Oxitec is allowed to keep key research results secret when experiments are run in the United States.

“Big portions of the environmental effects have been blacked out (on reports) and, more concerning to me, most of all the discussions of the allergic reactions to these mosquitoes has been blacked out,” Hansen said. “If this is the best thing since sliced bread, show us how you slice it. ... We’re not saying this shouldn’t be done: We’re saying the parameters that the EPA has put on this experiment are inadequate.”

If successful, the modified mosquitoes would be another tool for governments to battle aedes aegypti instead of spraying pesticide.

“Do I think, overall, it’s less toxic? Sure, I hope it is,” Hansen said. “I would like them to feel better by disclosing all of their human health effects. I’m someone who has acute allergic reactions to things. I’d like to know when they’re releasing these things. That’s just the basic human right to know.”

Oxitec’s permit is good through April 30, 2024. It’s not clear when the mosquitoes will be released in the county.

Now that the experiment has received federal approval, California’s Department of Pesticide Regulation will need to give the go-ahead, and then county officials in San Bernardino, Fresno, Stanislaus and Tulare counties.

“It’s kind of at their leisure,” Vaidyanathan said.

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Tags: [environment](#), [mosquito](#), [public health](#), [Top Stories IVDB](#), [Top Stories RDF](#), [Top Stories Sun](#)

 Author **Beau Yarbrough** | Reporter

Beau Yarbrough wrote his first newspaper article taking on an authority figure (his middle school principal) when he was in 7th grade



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# Metrolink seeks comment on Redlands-to-San Bernardino rail line



A Metrolink train crosses into Redlands just east of the 10 Freeway on Feb. 16, 2022. This was the first train on the newly laid tracks between Redlands and San Bernardino. (Photo by Jennifer Iyer, Redlands Daily Facts/SCNG)

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By **JENNIFER IYER** | [jiyer@scng.com](mailto:jiyer@scng.com) | Redlands Daily Facts

PUBLISHED: March 9, 2022 at 6:05 p.m. | UPDATED: March 9, 2022 at 6:06 p.m.

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Metrolink will hold a virtual meeting to let the public review and offer feedback on the [Arrow passenger rail service](#) between San Bernardino and Redlands, which is set to begin this fall.



Smaller, lighter [Diesel Multiple Unit trains](#) will provide the 25 Arrow route roundtrips per day between the San Bernardino Transit Center and the University Village. Regular Metrolink locomotives will offer a limited stop express service from downtown Redlands to Union Station in Los Angeles.

### Arrow rail line

Passenger rail service on the nine miles of newly constructed tracks between San Bernardino and Redlands is slated to begin this year.



A Spanish-language video conference is set for 4:30 p.m. Tuesday, March 15. The meeting ID is 899 3797 0394. Participants can join via the website at [us02web.zoom.us/j/89937970394](https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89937970394) or by phone at 833-548-0276.

The English-language meeting is set for 5 p.m. March 15. The ID for that meeting is 854 1525 2326. The website is [us02web.zoom.us/j/85415252326](https://us02web.zoom.us/j/85415252326). If interested parties wish to call in, the phone number is the same.

Comments can also be made by April 12 at [metrolinktrains.com/ecomments](https://metrolinktrains.com/ecomments).

For more information about the meeting, go to [metrolinktrains.com/about/board-meetings/board-procedures/public-hearing-notice](https://metrolinktrains.com/about/board-meetings/board-procedures/public-hearing-notice).

Though service hasn't started yet, trains are currently being tested on the tracks. Nighttime testing between G and Richardson streets in San Bernardino is set for Friday through Sunday, March 11-13.

Roadway and pedestrian gates are also being tested along the line.

For more information about testing, go to [gosebcta.com/arrow](https://gosebcta.com/arrow) or text "RedlandsArrow" to 888-525-1021.





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TRAVEL

# What's happening in Joshua Tree is a 'dream' — and possibly a curse





BY CHRISTOPHER REYNOLDS | STAFF WRITER

MARCH 10, 2022 7 AM PT

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The sun was low, the cactus shadows were lengthening and laughter rang out amid the Airstreams.

Natalie Valdez, 36, and Clarence Tsay, 37, who last year got engaged at Joshua Tree National Park, had returned with a gaggle of friends from Los Angeles, San Francisco and beyond. Now they filled four tricked-out trailers in the AutoCamp resort, one of many shiny new enterprises in this ever-more-fashionable corner of the desert.

“I love Joshua Tree — its weirdness, its hippiness. I don’t want it to become commercial,” Valdez said.

“We don’t want it to become Tulum,” Tsay said, referring to the Mexican beach town that became an Instagram darling, attracted legions of upscale tourists and now struggles with overwhelmed [infrastructure](#).

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When a naturally beautiful destination starts getting too popular and luxury-oriented, he said, “There’s a fine line.”

Then their friend Hana Cho piped up.

“That’s the only reason I’m here — because there was a luxury option!” she said.

Actually, there are many.

In fact, as more and more people arrive in the towns along Highway 62 near Joshua Tree National Park, those visitors and newcomers are spending freely on everything from neo-bohemian lodgings to vintage goods. In their eagerness to feel those desert vibes, they’ve set off a full-blown boom.



The World Famous Crochet Museum stands near Joshua Tree National Park, where retailers and restaurateurs along Highway 62 are enjoying a boom in recent months. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

# Los Angeles Times





Crocheted animals fill the shelves of the World Famous Crochet Museum in Joshua Tree. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

As first-timers quickly learn, hotels are few and far between but vacation rentals are just about everywhere.

For \$3,460 per night, you can book “[the Invisible House,](#)” a mirror-walled home with a pool. For \$450 to \$800 per night, [reserve a spring or fall stay](#) in the A-Z West compound designed by artist Andrea Zittel. For \$300? Maybe a yurt with Mongolian furniture.

When your retail adventures begin, Ricochet Wears (Joshua Tree) stands ready with old cowboy boots. Chasing an old Tom Waits album? [White Label Vinyl](#) in Twentynine Palms wants to help. Need a \$3,000 fine-art print or a \$16 bar of soap? Consult [Mojave Flea Trading Post](#) (which has stores in Yucca Valley and Palm Springs).

Afterward, sink into an [hourlong sound bath](#) with 27 new friends amid the crystal “singing bowls” of the domed [Integratron](#) in Landers. (No water, no soap, \$50 per person, reservations a must.)



# Los Angeles Times



The Integratron in Landers, Calif., was created by George Van Tassel in the 1950s for the purpose of rejuvenation and time travel. Visitors come for sound baths in the sound chamber, and to find relaxation and meditation on its grounds. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)



AutoCamp Joshua Tree, which opened in early 2022, features 47 Airstream trailers, luxuriously outfitted, and picnic tables and firepits where guests gather. (Christopher Reynolds / Los Angeles Times)

This burst of commerce and creativity follows the highway for 32 miles west to east through the Morongo Basin area, through the varied and formerly sleepy communities of Morongo Valley (population about 3,090), Yucca Valley (pop. 21,738), Joshua Tree (pop. 6,489) and Twentynine Palms (pop. 28,065). Pioneertown, about six miles north of Yucca Valley, is part of the same surge. Joshua Tree National Park registered a record [3.06 million visitors](#) in 2021, up 50% since 2015.

“The pandemic definitely created what I would call a tipping point,” said artist Eric Nash, who moved from Palm Springs to Yucca Valley seven years ago. “Every day I’ll read or hear about a new business ... the kinds of things you can’t do in L.A. or San Diego or Palm Springs for that matter.”

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## 27 of the coolest shops to bookmark for your next Joshua Tree trip

Los Angeles Times



## You've camped in Joshua Tree, but never like this. Inside the desert's new Airstream oasis



## Heading to Joshua Tree? Eat at Pappy & Harriet's



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Meanwhile, many businesses that predate the pandemic are seeing more customers than ever before. In Yucca Valley, for instance, sales tax revenues have doubled since 2017.

“Anybody who owns a business in Joshua Tree is currently walking around in a dream state. It’s so busy,” said Jeff Hafler, 49, owner of the Beauty Bubble Salon and Museum in Joshua Tree.

“Those Airbnb people want something to do,” said Steve Halterman, co-owner of the Station, a 1940s former gas station now filled with souvenir T-shirts, mugs, posters and pottery.

## Los Angeles Times



Travis Poston owns Campbell Hill Bakery in Twentynine Palms with his wife, Nancy Tran. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

Though much of the area's new tourism — both part-time and [full-time occupancy](#) — comes from Los Angeles, 120 miles west, another portion comes from nearby Palm Springs, where Midcentury Modernism is practically a way of life.

Now picture that style in conversation with the cosmic-cowboy sensibility that reached the high desert with rock star Gram Parsons (and his embroidered bell-bottoms) in the 1970s. Factor in thousands of tousled J-Tree rock climbers and boulderers, along with legions of party people drawn by the nearby Coachella musical festival (which will return in April after a two-year absence). Then consider that [registered Republicans](#) continue to outnumber Democrats in Yucca Valley and Twentynine Palms.

That's the unique jumble you see now along the highway: Stetsons and Jetsons, ru cabins and Airstream trailers, the occasional gay pride flag, the occasional Trump bumper sticker.

But with so many changes afoot and L.A. gas prices edging past [\\$5 a gallon](#), how long will this surge last?



Glen Steigelman, left, and Steve Halterman are owners of the Station, a gift store in Joshua Tree that was once a filling station. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

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It's the desert, so there are thorny questions

Traffic might be the most obvious complication of this boom. Even before the pandemic, the Desert Sun newspaper had labeled Highway 62 [“the deadliest road in the high desert.”](#) There's also anxiety over [water supply](#) and rising rents that seem

## Los Angeles Times



sure to drive away some of the artists and longtime locals who helped start this new era.

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“Absolutely unsustainable,” tweeted [Airbnb Whistleblower](#) last year, lamenting the many high desert homes being converted into short-term rentals.

In the 12 months up to January, median home prices rose 42% in Joshua Tree, 38% in Twentynine Palms and 33% in Yucca Valley. In Yucca Valley — where tax revenues from vacation rentals and hotels have risen sixfold since 2017 — the town council voted in February to [tighten restrictions](#) on the rentals. Twentynine Palms officials are [considering limits](#) too.

Then there’s the question of the Joshua trees themselves, which are sprinkled throughout the area, especially in Yucca Valley. The state Fish and Game Commission is pondering now whether to classify the western Joshua Tree as an endangered species — a move that would protect the trees by dramatically curtailing construction in the short term and perhaps longer. A status report is due [April 9](#).



La Copine is a lunch-only restaurant in Yucca Valley that has attracted a faithful following to its far-out location on Old Woman Springs Road. L (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

## Yucca Valley, Joshua Tree and Twentynine Palms: There's a difference

When visitors talk about Joshua Tree these days, they often mean the string of communities on Highway 62. Rolling west to east, you first see Morongo Valley and Yucca Valley, which has the area's only Walmart and Home Depot and a growing number of new small shops.

A few miles farther east, the Joshua Tree community turns up: a tiny but lively business district, a busy national park entrance and a collection of galleries and studios.



Then, after another 10 miles of boulders and blacktop, you reach the city of Twentynine Palms, the last real town west of the Arizona border on this road. “Twentynine,” as locals know it, has its own park entrance, the landmark [29 Palms Inn](#) and, just north, the [Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center](#), which houses 12,500 active-duty military personnel.

The self-sufficiency of that military base has long played a role in keeping Twentynine Palms sleepy. But here too “There’s definitely something going on that hasn’t gone on before,” said Michael Usher, 35, a former high school teacher who opened the city’s [Grnd Sqr](#) gastropub in September.

The city reported [record lodging revenues](#) in the last quarter of 2021. And on March 12 local leaders were due to open [Freedom Plaza](#), a 10-acre community center that will include a gym, event space and new national park visitor center.



The PioneerTown Motel blends in with the Old West movie set. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)





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Pioneertown is an Old West movie set near Joshua Tree. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

On busy winter and spring weekends from one end of the highway to the other, customers often fill the high desert's eateries, including Joshua Tree's [Natural Sisters Cafe](#), [Crossroads Cafe](#) and [Country Kitchen](#). Some grab coffee from the [Joshua Tree Coffee Company](#) or takeaway meals from [the Dez](#). Elsewhere along the highway,

customers queue up for baked goods from [Luna Sourdough Bread](#) (Yucca Valley) or [Campbell Hill Bakery](#) (Twentynine Palms), both opened in the last two years.

Discerning drinkers might pick out wines from [the Bottle Shop](#) (Joshua Tree), [Desierto Alto](#) (Yucca Valley) or the [Wine & Rock Shop](#) (Yucca Valley again). Or they might browse the [Joshua Tree Farmers Market](#) (Saturday morning).

Weekend thrifters might prowl [the End](#) in Yucca Valley or the nearby [Sky Village Market Place](#).

At midday, some of the most ambitious eaters turn their attentions to [La Copine](#), a little diner outside Yucca Valley that serves only lunch, Thursday through Sunday. There, diners often wait an hour or two to dig into duck confit, socarrat de champiñones and other serious seasonal fare.



Pappy & Harriet's has a saloon-style dining room. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)





Cheese fries at Pappy & Harriet's in Pioneertown. (Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)

At dinner hour (or maybe it's the cocktail hour), many a tourist makes the 12-mile expedition from J-Tree to Pioneertown, a former western movie set where [Pappy & Harriet's](#) has been hosting live music and grilling meals since 1982. Since 2020, Pappy's has been complemented by the neighboring [Red Dog Saloon](#), where you can get \$4 tacos or a \$13 Negroni.

If the new boom has an emblem, it might be Big Josh, the 21-foot roadside fiberglass cowboy who towers over the Station. For years, the Station's Halterman said, he and his husband, Glen Steigelman, operated the property strictly as a party rental venue and studio. But then they spotted the cowboy.

Once a muffler-shop mascot, he was laid out like Gulliver among the Lilliputians on a trailer at the Sky Village Swap Meet, priced at \$6,800. They pounced.

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Pretty soon Big Josh was throwing his long shadow across Highway 62 and his owners were selling Big Josh T-shirts. By 2018, the party venue had evolved into a

**Los Angeles Times**

retail shop. Since then, inventory and sales have multiplied — and the party rentals continue as well.

**‘A two-edged sword’**

In an area that has long associated with wide open spaces and solitude, the recent stampede of visitors is “a two-edged sword,” said Nick Usaj of Los Angeles, who bought a property in Joshua Tree about four years ago.

I found him climbing at Intersection Rock, near the busy Hidden Valley campground. When he and his wife want to spend a night under the stars at short notice, Usaj said, they’ve largely stopped trying for campsites within the park because they book up so fast. Instead, he said, “we’re pretty much camping on [Bureau of Land Management] land every time. It’s different. ... You want the national park to do well. You want them to make money and people to see places. But ... “

“Yes,” said Usaj’s friend Ashley Burton, a longtime Joshua Tree rock climber, “it’s going to keep growing. But there’s also good people taking care of this place. I think it’ll be OK.”



(Myung J. Chun / Los Angeles Times)



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Christopher Reynolds

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## Two Montclair employees sue Council Member Ben Lopez for sexual harassment

The lawsuits claim Lopez, who held anti-LGBTQ views, made unwanted sexual advances toward two male employees



FILE- Benjamin "Ben" Lopez won a seat on the Montclair City Council on Nov. 3, 2020. In December 2021, two city employees filed lawsuits against him and the city of Montclair, claiming sexual harassment and unwanted sexual advances that allegedly created a hostile work environment. The City Council on March 7, 2022 asked to put on the March 21 agenda a discussion item about a censure resolution against Lopez. (File photo courtesy of Ben Lopez)

By **STEVE SCAUZILLO** | [sscauzillo@scng.com](mailto:sscauzillo@scng.com) | San Gabriel Valley Tribune

PUBLISHED: March 9, 2022 at 6:56 p.m. | UPDATED: March 9, 2022 at 6:58 p.m.

Two Montclair employees accuse Council Member Ben Lopez of sexually harassing them, subjecting them to unwanted sexual advances and discriminating against them on the basis of their sexual orientation, according to lawsuits filed against Lopez and the city.

The two lawsuits, filed in San Bernardino County Superior Court one week apart in December 2021, allege that Lopez created a hostile work environment and that the city of Montclair did nothing to correct the situation.

Edmund Garcia, a senior IT specialist for the city, filed suit Dec. 7. Michael Fuentes, Montclair's director of economic development, filed the second lawsuit Dec. 14.

Garcia's lawsuit contains salacious material, alleging Lopez, who the lawsuit says presents as a heterosexual man, repeatedly asked Garcia to engage in specific sex acts. The suit also says Lopez took Garcia out to dinner and asked him about his sexual preferences.

Garcia identifies as a homosexual male, according to the lawsuit, which says Lopez's sexual advances toward him were unwanted and caused him emotional distress, affecting his ability to perform his job. The lawsuit describes Lopez's conduct as "severe and pervasive, occurring regularly."



The lawsuit recaps Lopez's job from 2003 to about 2015 as a lobbyist and spokesperson for the Anaheim chapter of the Traditional Values Coalition, "a designated anti-LGBTQ hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center." The suit goes on to say during those 12 years, Lopez publicly lobbied and spoke against same-sex marriage, LGBTQ history curriculums in schools and the legal recognition and protections of transgender people.

After his election in November 2020, [Inland Empire and Montclair LGBTQ groups spoke out against Lopez](#), saying he was homophobic and would discriminate against the LGBTQ community, a charge Lopez later answered by saying he would be fair to all city residents, regardless of race or sexual orientation.

In his lawsuit, Fuentes says Lopez's sexual advances toward him "were at all times unwanted" and included "come-ons in the form of unwanted email messages of a sexual nature." The lawsuit also alleges that in retaliation for refusing Lopez's sexual advances, the council member opposed Fuentes' promotion to the position of director of economic development and spoke about him negatively.

Lopez did not return phone calls or voicemail messages left for him Tuesday and Wednesday, March 8-9. He also did not respond to an email sent Tuesday asking for comment.

Attorneys for the plaintiffs say they expect depositions in the cases to start in about five months. A tentative trial date has been set for July 7 court records show. Brian Hannemann, lead attorney, said delays due to the [COVID-19 pandemic](#) has slowed the movement of civil court cases in the county and that the cases may take up to two years to adjudicate.

Hannemann said the two clients are telling the truth and were very frustrated that Lopez remained a boss who was often at City Hall giving them direction, despite lodging complaints of harassment with upper city management in June and July 2021.

When asked about including the graphic sexual messages attributed to Lopez in the Garcia complaint, Hannemann said they present specific facts that are irrefutable.

"Because you have these actual statements, it removes the credibility contest," he said Wednesday. "No, this is exactly what happened. It did happen. It is wrong. And there are consequences."

The twin cases, [Garcia vs. Lopez](#) and [Fuentes vs. Lopez](#) were discussed by the Montclair City Council in closed session on two occasions this month. On March 1, City Attorney Diane Robbins announced the council had met about the two cases listed on the agenda but recused Lopez from attending the meeting. Lopez then left the dais.

Robbins told the audience the allegations included: discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender; unlawful sexual harassment in violation of the Fair Employment and Housing Act (FEHA); failure to prevent discrimination and retaliation.

At a special meeting Monday, March 7, the council met again in closed session without Lopez, voting 4-0 to approve the hiring of an attorney to defend the city, Robbins said. The city has not yet hired an attorney.

At the end of an open meeting Monday, Council Member Corysa Martinez moved a motion asking the council to support a discussion on censuring Lopez.

"Based on the information that we received at that closed session," she said, "it would be appropriate for the City Council on the next meeting of March 21 to bring forward to discuss a consideration of a resolution of censure of Councilmember Benjamin Lopez."

The vote to place the censure discussion on the next agenda was 4-0, with Lopez abstaining.

"I do not intend to cast any vote of any kind on this matter," he said.

Hannemann wants the city to produce its internal investigation and reach a settlement. That could include awarding damages for emotional distress.

"The city should acknowledge what happened and fix the problem, instead of making our clients endure another two years of litigation," Hannemann said. "When there's harassment by a supervisor, as in Mr. Lopez, it makes the city liable.

"Ben Lopez should resign immediately. The city deserves leadership with integrity," he added. "The citizens of Montclair should rise up and say something. Maybe they will launch a recall."

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Twentynine Palms welcome sign.

## 29 Palms council chooses new voting districts for a changing city

Mar 09, 2022 7:07 PM



By Jene Estrada Hi-Desert Star

TWENTYNINE PALMS — The City Council approved new districts at its regular board meeting Tuesday night, March 8. The chosen map, the orange draft map created by city consultants at National Demographics Corp., shifts the districts to accommodate the large shift in population that Twentynine Palms has experienced since the last census in 2010.

Under federal law, the new districts must be nearly equal in population, follow the Federal Voting Rights Act and have no racial gerrymandering — drawing a district to give a certain group of people an unfair advantage. California also requires that the district lines be geographically continuous if feasible.

“This is our fourth and hopefully final public meeting,” said NDC representative Todd Tatum. “The deadline to submit the new districts to the state is April 17.”

He briefly went over the consultants’ three proposed maps, which divide the city into five council districts, one for each council seat. Each proposed council district is home to one of the five incumbent council members.

All of the maps created by NDC had a deviation of population numbers under 10%, required by federal law. The chosen draft map orange had a deviation of 3.3%.

The existing districts have a 45.74% difference in the number of people, due to a shift in population in the city over the last 10 years, Tatum said.

As previous maps did, all of the proposed maps divide the mainside portion of the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center among the five council districts. This is a unique situation, specific to Twentynine Palms, as this separation stops the districts from being continuous.

“Dividing MCAGCC makes more sense than dividing other communities to try to create balanced maps,” City Manager Frank Luckino said in a staff report. “The nature of MCAGCC is such that by definition its population is transient, and dividing it is very different than dividing an established residential neighborhood.”

Luckino went on to say that many of the MCAGCC residents will be deployed elsewhere for six out of every 18 months. All active service members are also not eligible to run for City Council so, if the entire base is in one district, the pool of people who could run for that district’s seat would be very small.

Members of 29 Palms Neighbors, a group of residents, criticized the proposed maps, saying they leave Twentynine Palms neighborhoods divided. They drafted their own map with an alternate solution that the city create seven voter districts instead of five.

“That solution does not address any of the above issues, and rather exacerbates the problem by diluting the population of each district, and thereby making MCAGCC eligible to be all or part of three separate districts,” Luckino said in a staff report.

A second map drafted by members of the public was also submitted to the council. Public Map 2 was similar to the orange map drafted by NDC, but with slightly shifted boundary lines to keep the neighborhood communities together in the new districts; Indian Cove, Harmony Acres and Chocolate Drop are split among multiple districts in the accepted map.

However, the public map would have two current council members living in the same district, forcing the council to choose to de-seat one. and leaving one district without an incumbent.

After a brief discussion the council voted unanimously to adopt the orange map drafted by NDC.

“The orange map has the best percentage of population for me,” said Councilman Daniel L. Mintz. “That’s what I’m OK with, what NDC has put together for us.”

The orange map moves the south end of downtown Twentynine Palms into District 4; the north side will be moved into District 3. The map also dramatically increases the geographic area covered by District 1. A full version of the new map can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/5n77pnuy>.

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WORLD & NATION

# Landlords finding ways to evict tenants after getting federal rental aid



Prince Beatty on Jan. 10 in East Point, Ga. (Hakim Wright Sr. / Associated Press)

BY MICHAEL CASEY | ASSOCIATED PRESS

FEB. 11, 2022 11:42 AM PT



A day before she was due to be evicted in November from her Atlanta home, Shanelle King heard that she had been awarded about \$15,000 in rental assistance. She could breathe again.

But then the 43-year-old hairdresser got a letter last month from her landlord saying the company was canceling her lease in March — seven months early — without any explanation.

“I’m really [angry] about it. I thought I would be comfortable again back in my home,” said King, whose work dried up during the pandemic and who now worries about

finding another apartment she can afford. “Here I am back up against the wall with nowhere to stay. I don’t know what I am going to do.”

Although the \$46.5-billion [Emergency Rental Assistance Program](#) has paid out tens of billions of dollars to help avert an eviction crisis, some tenants who received help are finding themselves threatened with eviction again — sometimes days after getting federal help. Many are finding it nearly impossible to find another affordable place.

“It is a Band-Aid. It was never envisioned as anything more than a Band-Aid,” Erin Willoughby, director of the Clayton Housing Legal Resource Center Atlanta, said of the program.

“It’s not solving the underlying problem, which is a lack of affordable housing. People are on the hook for rents they cannot afford to pay,” she said. “Simply finding something cheaper is not an option because there is not anything cheaper. People have to be housed somewhere.”

The National Housing Law Project, in a survey last fall of nearly 120 legal aid attorneys and civil rights advocates, found that 86% of respondents reported cases in which landlords either refused to take assistance or accepted the money and still moved to evict tenants. The survey also found a significant increase in cases of landlords lying in court to evict tenants and illegally locking them out.

“A number of issues could be described as issues related to landlord fraud ... and a set of problems I would describe as loopholes within the ... program that made it less effective to accomplish the goal,” said Natalie N. Maxwell, a senior attorney with the group.

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HOUSING & HOMELESSNESS

**State eviction moratorium ends soon, but rent relief will still be available**

Sept. 28, 2021

National Apartment Assn. President and CEO Bob Pinnegar said the survey was not based on facts, adding that its members are doing everything they can to keep tenants in their homes, including lobbying to get rental assistance out faster.

“Skewed surveys aren’t reflective of the entire situation. By and large the rental housing industry has gone to great lengths to support residents, including when it comes to rental assistance and adherence to laws and regulations,” Pinnegar said in a statement.

Legal aid attorneys interviewed across the country confirmed they are seeing a steady increase in cases where tenants were approved for rental help and still faced eviction. These include the mother of a newborn and two other children in Florida who received rental assistance but was ordered evicted after the landlord refused to take the money. Another Florida landlord lied in court that she hadn’t received the money in a bid to push through an eviction.

There have also been cases in Georgia and Texas where landlords who received assistance moved to end leases early, increased rents to unaffordable levels or found other reasons than nonpayment to evict someone, lawyers said.

“As it is right now, it doesn’t seem to be working as intended,” said Tori Tavormina, an eviction prevention specialist with Texas Housers. “It feels much more like it’s a program that is alleviating the pressure of the eviction crisis but not solving the underlying problems.”

District Court Judge Shera Grant, who handles housing cases in Birmingham, Ala., said she and her fellow judges have seen an uptick in cases of landlords getting assistance and returning to court a few weeks later after a tenant has fallen behind on rent to seek an eviction. So far they have prevented them — though she expects a spike in these kinds of cases going forward.

“It’s incumbent on the judges to make sure we are paying close attention to our eviction cases and making sure that the landlord is not having their cake and eating it too,” she said. “By the same token, we are not forcing landlords to take the money. There are some unfortunate circumstances where the tenant has to be evicted.”

In the case of King, she believes her landlord was retaliating for earlier complaints about mold and water leaks in her three-bedroom house. The company King was dealing with, NDI Maxim, which manages property for owners, said it “was not at liberty to share details of tenants’ status nor their payment records.”

Other cases are complicated by the length of the pandemic and conflicting accounts of landlord and tenant. And they [often leave both parties feeling short- changed.](#)

Despite his landlord getting more than \$20,000 in rental assistance, Prince Beatty faces imminent eviction from his three-bedroom house in East Point, Ga.

After the money was approved, Beatty signed an agreement in court late last year to pay several thousand dollars more than he owed as a condition to remain housed.

He went back to the county for additional assistance to cover the balance but says he was denied. Unable to find warehouse work during the pandemic, the 47-year-old Navy veteran still can’t pay rent and is now \$12,000 behind, in part due to his rent increasing from \$1,250 a month to \$2,000.

Beatty, who was told he would be evicted this month, said he wakes most mornings in a panic, wondering if this will be the day when marshals “come and disrespect my stuff and throw it in the street.”

His landlord, Monique Jones, said she tried to work with Beatty. But she said he violated the lease by subletting rooms to several other people and that the amount of



rental assistance has not covered losses from months of unpaid rent that started before the pandemic.

“It was helpful but it did not address the underlying issue, which is his nonpayment of rent,” she said of the rental assistance. “That still remains and that is rightfully why I am proceeding. If I have a tenant who will pay rent and abides by the lease, I would not attempt to evict.”

Limits with rental assistance often come down to some states and localities failing to follow Treasury Department guidance calling for policies requiring landlords delay evictions after getting money. Although the program prevents landlords from evicting during the period covered by rental assistance, the Treasury Department can only encourage states to adopt policies that ban evictions up to three months afterward.

The National Low Income Housing Coalition found only 29 states and localities in 2021 had adopted policies that prohibit landlords who participate in the rental assistance program from evicting tenants for a period ranging from 30 days to 12 months. Six states — Arizona, Kentucky, Louisiana, New York, North Carolina and West Virginia — passed regulations, and several cities or counties in Texas and Maryland did.

Gene Sperling, who is tasked with overseeing implementation of President Biden’s [\\$1.9-trillion coronavirus rescue package](#) , said there were no data to suggest landlords evicting tenants after getting assistance is a “pervasive issue” but that it was “completely unacceptable.”

While it’s “not against the letter of the act, it’s against the spirit of it,” he said.

The coalition also said the program’s issues illustrate a larger problem.

“We are in the middle of a severe affordable housing crisis with gaping holes in our social safety net,” CEO Diane Yentel said. “We have a systemic power imbalance that

avored landlords at the expense of low-income tenants. Emergency rental assistance and eviction moratoriums were a patch to those holes.”

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HOUSING AND HOMELESSNESS

# LA Tenants Approved For Rent Relief Are Still Facing Eviction. Here's Why

By [David Wagner](#)

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Janine Johnson had to fight off an eviction after being approved by the state's rent relief program.

(David Wagner / LAist)

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Californians applying for rent relief were supposed to be protected from eviction. But many are still getting dragged into court by their landlords.

### LA Tenants Approved For Rent Relief Are Still Facing Eviction. Here's Why

4:20

“When I started into this rent relief program, this was my fear. And my fear has come true,” said Janine Johnson, a 70-year-old renter living in Venice.

Johnson applied for rent relief last year. The state approved her landlord to receive funding. But she still found herself fighting an eviction for months, constantly worrying about losing her home.

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[State and local laws](#) currently make it very difficult for landlords to evict tenants over unpaid rent.

Instead, eviction attorneys say they're seeing an increasing number of cases involving L.A. landlords trying to remove tenants over nuisance claims, which are still grounds for eviction during the pandemic.

“What I've seen is creativity from landlords' attorneys,” said Freddy Vasquez, a staff attorney at the [Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles](#) who represented Johnson. He said landlords are “becoming skilled at finding ways to go around the current moratoriums the city has in place.”

Tenant advocates believe those nuisance claims are often exaggerated, and are a smokescreen for the real reason landlords want to evict tenants: months of back rent that have not been repaid through [slow-moving](#) government rent relief efforts.

Despite the state's rent relief program launching about a year ago, most applicants in L.A. County [have yet to receive funding](#).

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## **Her Landlord Said She Was Running An 'Illegal Hotel'**

Entering Janine Johnson's Venice apartment, one of the first things you notice is all the colorful sticky notes.

"They're everywhere," she said, pointing to notes with handwritten phrases. One said, "This is my home." Another said, "I won my case."

With a court date coming up, Johnson said these notes helped her envision a positive outcome in her case.

"Although I wouldn't lie that I have a lot of fear and anxiety, what I do is manifest, every day, positive thoughts," Johnson said.

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Johnson covered her apartment in sticky notes that reminded her to envision a positive result in her eviction case.

(David Wagner / LAist)

Johnson's anxiety started last November, when she found a bundle of eviction papers taped to her door. She said after she posted a Craigslist ad looking for a roommate, her landlord accused her of running an illegal hotel out of her apartment.

"This is a very expensive place to live," Johnson said. "And I've always had roommates to help with the rent."

Johnson said she took down the Craigslist ad and never got a roommate, but the eviction moved forward.

## 70 Years Old And Facing Eviction

Johnson said during the pandemic, she lost work as a landscape designer and could no longer afford her rent. State and local laws [protected non-paying renters](#) like her from eviction — as long as COVID-19 was the root cause of their inability to pay.

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Last year, Johnson applied for California's [rent relief program](#), a multi-billion dollar effort to clear tenants' debts and make landlords whole. She ultimately got approved, and her landlord was set to receive nearly \$47,000 on her behalf.

Johnson recalled feeling relieved to know that her back rent would be paid off. "I called the people that you talk to, and they said 'Yes, you've been approved.' I said, 'Great! So they've got their money?' They said, 'Well, no. It's gonna take a while for the money.'"



Johnson at the front door of her apartment in Venice.

(David Wagner / LAist)

According to the state's rent relief website, those payments for her landlord were still pending. Johnson's situation was not unique. To this day, most rent relief applicants in Los Angeles are waiting for funding.

Based on what she'd heard about ongoing state and local tenant protections, Johnson thought that just applying for rent relief would protect her from eviction. But she found out the hard way that wasn't true.

At 70 years old and still struggling to find work, she worried that if she got evicted, finding another apartment in L.A. would be impossible.

"People are saying well, move to a senior citizen home because nobody else is going to take you in," Johnson said.

## **Landlord: 'We Have Always Valued Each And Every Resident'**

Johnson's landlord is a subsidiary of the publicly traded firm Apartment Income REIT Corp., also known as [AIR Communities](#), which is a corporate spinoff of the real estate investment trust AIMCO.

AIR Communities has a portfolio of more than 26,000 apartments nationwide, according to the company's latest annual financial report.

AIR Communities spokesperson Stephanie Joslin said the company filed for eviction because Johnson violated the terms of her lease.

"AIR does not pursue the eviction of any resident who is in compliance with the terms of their lease," Joslin said in an email.

In addition to the accusation of running an illegal hotel, Johnson's eviction notice cited verbal arguments she had with neighbors. Johnson said at times she had fairly typical and minor disputes over pets and noise, but she didn't believe those arguments were grounds for eviction.

"AIR Communities is committed to providing quality apartment homes in a respectful environment, and we have always valued each and every resident," Joslin said.





The Lincoln Place apartments complex in Venice is one of 13 properties controlled by AIR Communities in the Los Angeles area. (David Wagner/LAist)

## State Says Landlords Can Collect Rent Relief And Still Evict

Last year, California lawmakers [extended statewide eviction protections](#) for tenants seeking rent relief through the end of this month. Back then, they said tenants needed time to apply for rent relief without having to worry about eviction.

But under the state's current rules, there are situations in which landlords can collect rent relief on behalf of non-paying tenants and still evict those tenants, according to Geoffrey Ross of the [California Department of Housing and Community Development](#).

"Unfortunately, what we do know happens is that there are sometimes bad actors," Ross said. "We're absolutely, always concerned about the status of the folks we're trying to serve."

The state should not be giving public money to landlords who evict tenants during a pandemic, argued Elena Popp, executive director of the [Eviction Defense Network](#).

"This is a waste of taxpayer funds," she said, "because it's a bailout for landlords without saving the housing."

It's hard to say how many rent relief applicants have faced eviction. Courts seal eviction records, and many cases never make it to court. Often, tenants simply leave at the first sign of trouble. But Popp said she's seeing more and more cases like Janine Johnson's. About half of her caseload involves nuisance and lease violation claims, rather than non-payment claims.

“Greed always finds a way to get around the law,” said Popp. “And state lawmakers didn't make the law strong enough.”

After I spoke with Johnson, her landlord agreed to settle her case and allow her to stay in her apartment. Johnson knows that on paper, this case had nothing to do with her unpaid rent. But she said she's always suspected that was the real reason her landlord wanted her out.

“There's no question in my mind that this is why people are getting evicted — because landlords are just fed up with not getting their money,” Johnson said. “They're finding other reasons to try to evict you, and it's terrifying.”

Pretty soon, landlords may not need to find other reasons. Some local protections will continue, but statewide rules against eviction over non-payment of rent are set to expire on April 1.

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## A massive fire unleashed a flood of toxic runoff, triggering an environmental disaster



The 15-mile-long Dominguez Channel remains a neglected, trash-strewn waterway designed to flush pollution from surrounding neighborhoods, industrial facilities and oil refineries into the Pacific Ocean. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

BY LOUIS SAHAGÚN | STAFF WRITER

Photography by CAROLYN COLE

MARCH 8, 2022 6 AM PT

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Nyla Olsen’s eyes moisten with rage as she recalls the day in early October when a surge of putrid water rolled out of the Dominguez Channel and turned life in Leeward Bay Marina into “a horror movie.”

Fish were gasping for oxygen at the surface of the water or floating belly up, she said. Boat hulls were slathered with sticky black slime. An octopus died after trying to escape by climbing onto a vessel, she said.

“I called every emergency response outfit I could think of for help, including the U.S. Coast Guard,” said Olsen, owner of the Chowder Barge — [the Wilmington marina’s heart and soul](#).

“But all I got were versions of, ‘Sorry, there’s nothing we can do because it’s coming from up the county flood control channel and out of our jurisdiction,’” the 61-year-old said with a sigh. “I felt utterly helpless.”

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Nyla Olsen lives on a yacht in Leeward Bay Marina, where the Dominguez Channel empties into the East Basin of Los Angeles Harbor. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

Around that same time, air quality officials were being bombarded with thousands of calls from working-class residents upstream in Carson, Gardena, Torrance, Redondo Beach, Long Beach and Wilmington. Many complained of respiratory ailments, nausea and other symptoms due to a foul smell that vexed neighborhoods in the South Bay and Harbor region.

“I woke up choking,” recalled Carson resident Monique Alvarez, 40. “My 3-year-old daughter was curled up in a ball at the foot of my bed crying, ‘Mommy, my tummy hurts.’”

Alvarez and others have long complained of emissions from nearby refineries and chemical plants, but residents say this was a far stronger and more disturbing odor. It was as though “there was something invisible and terrifying lurking in every room,” Alvarez said. “I never felt more afraid in the home I was born and raised in.”

It took officials two months to figure out what caused the overpowering stench: A massive fire that ripped through a Carson warehouse had unleashed a flood of toxic runoff.

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Ethanol, isopropyl alcohol, benzene and other chemicals were flushed into nearby storm drains by fire hoses and then dumped into the channel, where they triggered a chemical and biological reaction that released large amounts of hydrogen sulfide gas, authorities say.

The business had been cited numerous times for illegally storing mountains of hand sanitizer, bacterial wipes and other flammable products before the fire erupted and sent up a column of smoke that was visible for miles.

The incident has left thousands of residents indignant. They believe government agencies meant to oversee their health and safety did far too little, far too late.

A similar disaster in a wealthier, whiter community, they say, would have been met with a more urgent response.

“It’s chemical and psychological warfare that I feel we are fighting here in our communities — in our homes,” said Alvarez, who has since joined a 10,000-person class-action suit.



Workers were hired to clean millions of pounds of charred alcohol-based hand sanitizer products and debris piled up in and around the site of a massive warehouse fire in Carson on Sept. 30. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

The toxic spill that plunged thousands of Los Angeles County residents into misery late last year was scarcely unique, however. It was just the latest in a long string of environmental disasters that have plagued the 15-mile Dominguez Channel — an area where effective enforcement has always been muddled by industry recklessness, official neglect, overlapping government jurisdictions, and a hydrology prone to flooding and offensive odors.

What is different this time is that officials are vowing to seek justice for the predominantly Latino, Black and Asian neighborhoods that straddle the flood channel, which drains runoff from some of the region’s densest urban areas into Los Angeles Harbor.

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“This disaster really is all about social justice and racial equity for people who live along the channel,” said Mark Pestrella, the L.A. County public works director. “It originated from man-made senseless errors and disregard for law by entities operating upstream.”

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Pestrella’s agency, along with Los Angeles County and the Fire Protection District, has filed a lawsuit against 10 defendants connected to the warehouse. They are seeking to recover cleanup costs totaling more than \$143 million.

“I see this as an opportunity to daylight racial inequities, and the actions of the people responsible,” Pestrella said.



A gray heron feeds near the beginning of the Dominguez Channel, where a toxic spill killed many of the fish that lived in the canal. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

If one river mirrors the environmental travails of working-class minority communities south of downtown L.A., it's the Dominguez.

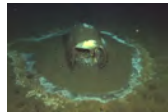
It was a swampy slough that meandered through marshes and mud flats up until the early 20th century, and carried the name of a racist slur. When the Los Angeles



County Board of Supervisors formally changed its name in 1938, development of the area began in earnest — and so did the channel’s problems.

In 1941, a “lake of fire” flared up in the surrounding wetlands when it was sparked by firefighters burning oil seepage from a quake-damaged pipeline. On other occasions, sludge and trash that were washed into the surrounding swamplands produced a stench that made life almost unbearable in local neighborhoods.

After the boom years of World War II, residents pleaded with government agencies to crack down on refineries, chemical plants and other industries that had gravitated to the area and were accustomed to dumping toxic and carcinogenic chemicals into the channel. One of those companies was [Montrose Chemical Corp. of California, which manufactured DDT for several decades.](#)



CLIMATE &amp; ENVIRONMENT

**L.A.’s coast was once a DDT dumping ground. No one could see it — until now**

Oct. 25, 2020

Problems along the channel were not confined to chemicals, however. Frequent incidents of flooding persuaded county officials to convert the waterway into a flood control channel lined with rocks in the 1960s — an act that attracted even more development to the area.



Beside the Dominguez Channel, where a news conference was held to announce the filing of a lawsuit on behalf of Carson residents sickened by a noxious smell. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

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Today, the channel flows south from its origin at West 116th Street in Hawthorne, passes beneath the parking lot of El Camino College in Torrance, skirts the Goodyear Blimp base in Carson, and hugs the roaring 405 Freeway for several miles. From there, the channel proceeds along the vast Marathon oil refinery and a Wilmington sulfur company before it empties into Leeward Bay Marina.

At various points along the channel's course, underground culverts and storm drains dump discharge from more than 100 industrial permit holders. Forty percent of the channel's 72-square-mile watershed is occupied by warehouses and industrial facilities, making the waterway a witch's brew of debris, bacteria, pesticides and heavy metals.

It wasn't until last fall that residents and municipal officials were brutally reminded of yet another of the channel's hydrologic quirks: Because much of the waterway flows at sea level, it is greatly affected by tidal flows, which prevent the channel from discharging freely into the sea.



Bottles of hand sanitizer. Forty percent of the Dominguez Channel's 72-square-mile watershed is occupied by warehouses and industrial facilities, making the waterway a witch's brew of debris, bacteria, pesticides and heavy metals. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

A class-action lawsuit filed by San Francisco attorney Gary Praglin suggests the roots of the disaster stretch back to February 2020, when COVID-19 was declared a pandemic and local health agencies urged the use of hand sanitizer to combat the spread of the virus.

To meet the soaring demand, companies began producing hand sanitizer — many for the first time. One such company was Artnaturals, a Carson cosmetics outfit that advertised itself as wanting to “free beauty from high prices, toxic chemicals and all-around bad vibes.”

Online, the company hawked a large variety of sanitizing products, including its “safety set”: a package consisting of 50 face masks, 100 hand sanitizing wipes, two 8-ounce bottles of hand sanitizer, and a 1-gallon jug of “Scent Free” hand sanitizer. As the pandemic wore on, mountains of these products began piling up outside the warehouse on South Avalon Boulevard. By March 2021, pallets were stacked 15 to 20 feet high, leaning over and spilling onto the ground and blocking vital exits, according to the lawsuit.

On the afternoon of Sept. 30 — one day after fire authorities faulted the company for failing to deal with five months of health and safety citations — [fire erupted among the piles of sanitizer](#).



CALIFORNIA

**Smell that sickened Carson residents was likely caused by warehouse fire, officials say**

Dec. 4, 2021

Tens of millions of gallons of water sprayed by 200 firefighters to fight the blaze flushed huge amounts of charred and contaminated debris through drainage systems and into the channel more than a mile and a half away, county officials say.

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The influx depleted the channel’s oxygen, resulting in the rapid decay of vegetation and an explosion of bacteria, which produced colossal amounts of hydrogen sulfide —

a flammable, colorless and smelly gas that can be toxic at high levels.

The influx of ocean water each day at high tide hampered the ability of the toxic runoff to flow out to sea, county officials say.

Ironically, several days after the fire, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration warned consumers to [“immediately stop” using Artnaturals hand sanitizer](#), saying it contained unacceptable levels of the carcinogen benzene, as well as other contaminants.



Fuel pipes cross the Dominguez Channel, where four months ago a warehouse fire sent millions of gallons of hand-sanitizer liquid laced with carcinogenic substances sloshing into the channel, creating a putrid scent of sewage. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

The fire and its toxic aftermath have spawned multiple lawsuits. In addition to the county’s filing, two class-action lawsuits accuse Artnaturals and the warehouse owner, Prologis Inc., of negligence. (One of those suits also names Marathon Petroleum Corp. as defendant, and accuses the refinery operator of releasing elevated levels of hydrogen sulfide during the same time period.)

“Lawsuits are the only path to environmental justice,” said Chris Guldjian, an attorney representing 3,000 residents in one of the class actions. “Businesses and government agencies have to hurt, or nothing will change.”

ArtNaturals executives, whom court documents identify as Akiva Nourollah, Yosef Nourollah, Yehuda Nourollah and Yaakov Nourollah, could not be reached for comment. However, Jennifer Nelson, a spokesperson for Prologis, said her company has been trying to evict the tenant since it “quit paying rent in March 2021.”



CALIFORNIA

**L.A. County files suit over warehouse fire that led to sickening odor in Dominguez Channel**

Jan. 13, 2022

“Our eviction efforts have been hindered by L.A. County’s commercial eviction moratorium, which ended Jan. 31,” she said. Prologis filed another eviction action after the moratorium ended, she said.

In the meantime, a mountain of charred debris including hundreds of thousands of 8-ounce bottles of hand sanitizer — roughly 7 feet high, 100 yards wide and a block long — remains in and around the warehouse.

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Crews hired by Prologis have been methodically sorting through the mess by hand, separating solid and flammable liquid waste before disposal in certified facilities and landfills in California, Arizona and Nevada. Local storm drains have been plugged to avoid spilling more contaminants into the channel in the event of a strong winter storm.

“We expect to be done by June,” Nelson said. “We will be seeking reimbursement from the tenant, which holds responsibility for this situation and the cleanup.”



Los Angeles Public Works employee Greg Sarpy walks near the starting point of the Dominguez Channel. (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

It may take months yet to determine the spill's cumulative toll on urban wildlife in and around the waterway.

A tour of the channel on a recent weekday led by Greg Sarpy, a regional superintendent for county public works, suggested that life had returned to normal for some species.

Spotted western sandpipers hunted for insects along the edges of the stream strewn with trash. A coyote peered out from behind the fronds of a scraggly palm tree irrigated by water seeping from sewer outfalls. A roadrunner dashed across a swath of gravel and cracked pavement at the base of a mountain of brilliant yellow sulfur. Cormorants bulked up on small fish that had returned to a stretch of the channel that two months ago was uninhabitable.

Farther south in Leeward Bay Marina, however, things remained somber.

The "live-aboards" who make their home there in scuffed-up boats bobbing over the most polluted water in the state are willing to endure seeing just about anything float by after it rains: dead dogs, artificial limbs and, once, even a dead body.



Nyla Olsen recalls the day in early October when a surge of putrid water rolled out of the Dominguez Channel and turned life in Leeward Bay Marina into “a horror movie.” (Carolyn Cole / Los Angeles Times)

But this spill was different.

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“The water turned cloudy and black, there were dead fish everywhere, and birds just took off,” recalled Margaret Alsop, 42. “I thought, ‘What the hell is going on?’”

The more she has learned about the incident, the sadder she has become.

“The neglect for people and wildlife along the Dominguez Channel is shocking and heartbreaking,” she said.

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# Driver flees scene of crash that kills man in San Bernardino

By **QUINN WILSON** | [qwilson@scng.com](mailto:qwilson@scng.com) |

PUBLISHED: March 9, 2022 at 4:33 p.m. | UPDATED: March 9, 2022 at 4:38 p.m.

An unidentified driver ran from the scene of a high-speed crash that killed a 57-year-old man in San Bernardino on Tuesday evening, March 8, police said.

The crash happened at about 10:05 p.m. when a Dodge Challenger was headed north on South Pepper Avenue and struck the rear of a Toyota Corolla headed the same direction at a high rate of speed, the San Bernardino Police Department said in a news release. The force from the crash caused the Toyota to crash into a streetlight, authorities said.

The driver of the Dodge fled the scene on foot and was not found, police said.

The driver of the Toyota, Martin Villegas of San Bernardino, had critical injuries and died at a hospital, authorities said.

Anyone with information about the crash was asked to contact Detective Dan Acosta at 909-384-5792.

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