



# NEWS



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## Tax refund checks sent to San Antonio Heights, Upland property owners are real

Sandra Emerson, Daily Bulletin

Posted: March 16, 2020, 6:00 am

Property tax refunds recently mailed to San Antonio Heights and Upland property owners have led some to wonder if the checks are legitimate.

The San Bernardino County tax collector office has fielded more than 1,000 calls from residents worried they are being scammed.

They're not.

The checks are real and should be cashed, Ensen Mason, county auditor-controller/treasurer/tax collector, said.

"People are hyper vigilant, and for good reason, over scams," Mason said. "We've been addressing those calls when they come in."

In February and March, Mason's office sent out 39,000 checks, worth about \$6.8 million, to property owners in Upland and the unincorporated community of San Antonio Heights who paid a special tax for county fire services in 2017-18 and 2018-19.

The refund results from a lawsuit filed by San Antonio Heights residents against the Local Agency Formation Commission and county. In 2016, Upland officials voted to disband its fire department and join the **county fire district**, which came with a \$150 annual tax, to save money.

However, LAFCO decided to include San Antonio Heights in the deal. A San Bernardino County Superior Court judge ruled they had no authority to do so.

While the refunds are automatic, the interest to which property owners are also entitled is not.

The refund checks come with a form property owners must fill out and return to the tax collector's office if they want a piece of the \$400,000 in interest generated from the two years of taxes. The form asks for their social security number, which could be adding to property owners' concerns, Mason said. The office needs the form for its own reporting requirements, Mason said.

In most cases, however, the interest is less than \$10, he said.

"We're talking about a small amount of money," he said. "Many taxpayers may feel it's not worth going through the trouble. Many taxpayers may feel they want every dollar they're entitled to."

The tax collector's office is resending about 1,000 checks mailed to property owners who changed addresses and is working to find new addresses for about 600 more returned checks, Mason said.

Mason urges property owners to visit the unclaimed tax refund page on the tax collector website. This would also include other types of property tax refunds owed to residents countywide.

Residents who move should also update their address with the assessor's office, he said.

“Please update the assessor so when these situations do arise we can reach them,” he said.

Information: 909-387-8308, <https://www.mytaxcollector.com/default.aspx>

<https://www.dailybulletin.com/2020/03/16/tax-refund-checks-sent-to-san-antonio-heights-upland-property-owners-are-real/>

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## **CAREER DAY AT TWENTYNINE PALMS HIGH SCHOOL**

**Staff Writer, Z107.7 FM News**

Posted: March 15, 2020

Twentynine Palms High School held its 21st annual career exploration day earlier this month. Managing editor Tami Roleff has more...

This year the Transition Partnership Program, in conjunction with the Work Ability I program, hosted the 21st Annual Career Exploration Day March 6 at the Twentynine Palms High School. The event included students from Yucca Valley High School. Some of the 80+ companies and organizations that attended included National Park Services, Army National Guard, US Marine Corps, California Highway Patrol, Morongo Basin Health Care District, Morongo Basin Ambulance, and **San Bernardino County Fire**, along with many other guest. The career day also included student booths to spread information about campus programs and clubs. Other booths at the fair included student-led booths to help spread information about campus programs. Students from the Bottle for Bowling were present, helping share information regarding their recycling program on campus. Students from the Yucca Valley High School Better Together Club, which promotes togetherness on campus, were hoping to encourage students at Twentynine Palms High School to start their own club.

<http://z1077fm.com/career-day-at-twentynine-palms-high-school/>

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## **Fires, burglaries test San Bernardino church's resolve**

**Brian Rokos, The Press-Enterprise**

Posted: March 14, 2020



A fire at New beginning United Methodist Church on Del Rosa Avenue in San Bernardino on March 9, 2020, was under investigation after the pastor said someone broke in and set the fellowship hall ablaze. (Courtesy of Pastor Neil Platon)

The pastor of a small church in San Bernardino that has suffered through burglaries and arson fires this year is struggling to remain philosophical in the face of repeated adversity.

Thieves broke into a clothes closet at New Beginnings United Methodist Church's Del Rosa Avenue campus in late February and stole power strips, an iron and food, Pastor Neil Platon said. On March 5, burglars entered a lounge area and set it ablaze. The next day, still-unidentified persons forced their way in through a kitchen and took amplifiers, speakers and keyboards that the church band uses in worship services. And on March 9, an arsonist caused the most damage by torching the fellowship hall, Platon said.

The **San Bernardino County Fire** Department and San Bernardino Police Department are investigating.

Platon said he is trying to keep his congregation of about 50-60 people in good spirits despite the actions of the criminals.

“I was upset at first, but at the end of the day, they are children of God, too,” Platon said. But in his next breath, the pastor said: “We still are not there yet in terms of forgiveness for that kind of thing by the people that are responsible. That will take a while.”

Before that interview, Platon had written a long Facebook post in response to the crimes in which he said in part: “Like the Mighty Phoenix Rising from the Ashes, We too shall Rise.” Platon said in an interview that he believed those were appropriate words, given that some of his congregation suffered property damage in the 2003 Old Fire that destroyed 975 buildings and burned 91,000 acres.

“We need encouragement among our people,” he said.

But the second fire was especially difficult to take. The flames destroyed donated tablecloths that were used for special events. And the fellowship hall stage that burned had been built by the congregation.

“It just broke the hearts of my members,” the pastor said.

He said he was able to get the electricity restored to the church and will next hold a service there Wednesday, starting at 6 p.m. with food and fellowship. Services were expected to go on as scheduled at the church’s other locations in downtown San Bernardino and Fontana. Platon said Sunday services on Del Rosa would resume March 22.

Platon said he does not believe the crimes were motivated by hate. There were no messages left behind, and the stolen items were the type that could be resold, he said.

The items taken were similar to those grabbed in a Feb. 1 burglary at the Christian and Missionary Alliance Church on E. Evans Street in San Bernardino. The church with about 40 congregants was ransacked, with amplification equipment stolen.

There, Pastor Alan Rosenberg said he’d pray for the burglars, but he was concerned. Rosenberg said recently that he has heard of several other San Bernardino churches being burglarized in the past month.

“The war against the houses of worship in America is very serious and scary,” Rosenberg said. “Why? Because the houses of worship are like the canary in the mine. It’s an indication that the baser elements of our society are rising to the surface unchecked. Everyone is at risk.”

<https://www.sbsun.com/2020/03/14/fires-burglaries-test-san-bernardino-churchs-resolve/>

## TWENTYNINE PALMS CITY COUNCIL KEEPS MOST SERVICES AND EVENTS OPEN

Staff Writer, Z107.7 FM News  
Posted: March 13, 2020

Even with the threat of the spread of coronavirus, services, events and activities scheduled in the City of Twentynine Palms in March will go on as planned. At an emergency meeting of the City Council Thursday afternoon, the council took up new guidelines from the CDC, the state and the county and made their determinations. The guidelines say, until the end of March, gatherings of more than 250 are prohibited and a "social space" of six feet between individuals was needed to prevent the spread of the virulent virus. The council voted 4-1 to allow the Hilltoppers Motorcycle Event to go on at the end of March, noting participants and spectators were not placed close together. Representative Rodney Smith told the council the non-profit stood to take a major financial loss if the annual event was cancelled. The council voted 3-2 to continue the farmer's market. With a 4-1 vote, Theatre 29 was encouraged to continue its planned production schedule emphasizing precautionary measures. Shortly after the council voted to continue the Rotary carnival, **County Fire** pulled the permits and the carnival is now cancelled. The senior lunch program will be altered, with frozen meals delivered to homes instead of participants gathering at the Senior Center. The council also voted unanimously to keep all city buildings, City Hall, Park and Recreation, the Downtown Visitor's Center and the animal shelter open as usual. The consistent "No" vote was from Councilmember Karmolette O'Gilvie, a lifetime health professional, who said, "We should be proactive; this is flu on steroids and not to be taken lightly." O'Gilvie and Mayor Joel Klink attended the meeting via a telephone link. A victim of the virus will be the annual Youth Basketball Tournament which will be canceled not by the council, but because the school and college district are restricting use of their gymnasiums in the interest of public safety. The council agreed to revisit the subject when one case of coronavirus is confirmed in the Morongo Basin.

<http://z1077fm.com/twentynine-palms-city-council-keeps-most-services-and-events-open/>

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## 'Miners' pull lead bullets from the Santa Ana River. Do they help the environment, or hurt it?

Mark Olalde, Palm Springs Desert Sun News  
Posted: March 13, 2020, 11:41 am



Tommy Lu separates lead shot from sand and rock in the Santa Ana riverbed. Lu mines, recycles and sells the lead. JAY CALDERON/THE DESERT SUN

Shrapnel from ricocheting bullets hits Kenny Graham about four times a day. At this point, he just accepts it as part of his job.

As he rolled a cigarette and talked, a piece of flying metal banged viciously off a mechanical contraption with holes in it used to separate sand and rocks, not two feet from Graham's unprotected hands. "There goes a pellet right there," he said deadpan, seated in the dry, sandy Santa Ana River in Redlands. "Ask and you shall receive."

Graham — who said he is experiencing homelessness, working through a divorce and otherwise unemployed — makes money by mining and recycling lead buckshot and bullet fragments that escape from the adjacent Redlands Shooting Park, only to accumulate in this wash. He's 40 years old with streaks of white in his beard.

Wearing a Marilyn Monroe t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, he looks nothing like California's small-scale prospectors of old.

The park has hosted sport shooters since the mid-1960s, but the business did little to stop lead, which is toxic to humans and wildlife, from entering the ephemeral waterway until 2013. Even now, pieces of bullets appear to find their way into this dry portion of the river where they can flow downstream when it rains.

For much of its history, the site fell through the cracks among various regulatory bodies tasked with guarding the environment and public health. In their absence, a small-scale mining economy has sprung up in the legally protected river.

While many people in need of steady work scour garbage bins for recyclable aluminum cans, glass bottles or plastic containers, Graham and a small cadre of compatriots spend their days pulling bullet fragments from the ground. They sell the lead at a nearby recycling center for 40 cents a pound. For some, it's not just about making money; it's about doing their part to protect the environment.

"The ground and everything else eats this poisonous shit. It's careless. I think it's pretty sad," Graham said. "It's not much money, but I get a sense of peace knowing that I possibly can help somebody."

Graham said he can't afford personal protective equipment but knows that lead is a heavy metal that's toxic to humans. Although lead's health consequences are more dire in children, the metal can cause cardiovascular and kidney problems, damage to cognitive functions and reproductive issues in adults, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

A spurt of oversight that began a decade ago looked to solve the issue by removing some lead from the river and installing a large net called a shot curtain to stop bullet fragments from leaving the park. But, the problem persists, albeit to a lesser degree.

Documents from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency revealed that decades of errant bullets had contaminated 42 acres of the waterway, including habitat for several federally listed endangered species such as the San Bernardino kangaroo rat.

Representatives of the shooting park declined to comment, but a 2013 post on their website laid out why the business no longer tries to recover lead from the riverbed.

"Now that the property has been designated a preserve, the commercial reclamation mining of the lead shot cannot be permitted because it would destroy the endangered species habitat," read the post attributed to Allison Bilbey, a member of the family that owns the park.

Scraping out a living in the riverbed

"It's the sporting of the rich man, but it's the poor cleaning up," observed Tommy Lu, who runs an efficient-looking operation just downstream of Graham.

Lu is 47 years old, short and thin, but his time lugging bags of heavy lead — and the years before that he spent operating machinery in a Massachusetts warehouse — have left his arms well-defined. Working in the river until he can find more permanent employment, he excitedly explains the mining process.

"The vein is right here," Lu said, standing in a hole sunk about five feet deep and drawing a finger down a several-inch-thick layer speckled with gray pellets.

Against the backdrop of the regular report of gunfire, he laid a tarp down, scraped his shovel against the wall in his pit and watched sand, rocks and metal shower down. Next, he poured the mixture over a perforated metal sheet on a contraption he built to separate out rock. An orange extension cord attached to it snaked out of the hole and under the hood of his dusty Lexus SUV parked nearby to provide electricity.

Lu turned on the machine, and it began to rattle noisily, sifting out pebbles. The final step, he said, would be to set up a fan and pour the remaining mixture across the stream of air, blowing away the lighter sand while collecting the lead.

It's not a place to get rich, but the labor does bring a consistent payday. If he works long hours, Lu said he can sometimes make more than \$100 in a day.

Lead has one of the highest recycling rates in the world, according to the International Lead Association. The industry group cited statistics showing roughly half of lead production is recycled.

Not including military bases, there are about 9,000 shooting ranges around the United States. "Millions of pounds of lead are discharged annually at these ranges. In the past, the common practice at ranges was to allow the spent ammunition to accumulate on site," according to the EPA, although practices have become more responsible over the years.

While Lu prefers to follow the vein dipping a few feet below ground, others simply rake and sweep the surface to get their lead. The miners said that holes in the shot curtain allow bullet fragments and buckshot to pass through.

Every so often, a sound like the crackle of dying fireworks signaled material showering against the netting. Lu, like Graham, said he gets hit several times a day, comparing the feeling to a rubber band unexpectedly snapping on the back of his neck.

Most of the miners' holes dug in the riverbed are covered by tarps and fabric held up by mismatched tent poles. The lean-tos are meant to protect them against the hot sun and stinging pellets.

Lu joked that he would mine into someone else's pit if they didn't move fast enough, but he said the group digging in the river is otherwise peaceful. Graham said the people working the area a year ago were dangerous but the scene has since calmed down, although recently, he had some of his possessions like batteries and water stolen.

Carl Baker, a spokesperson for the city of Redlands, said via email that the Redlands Police Department does not usually arrest anyone for mining lead there, but the department is aware that "illegal scavenging" is ongoing.

Last August, "a transient was assaulted in the same area while scavenging for lead. We believe the assault was prompted by an argument over who had the 'right' to scavenge in the area," Baker said. A month later, police met with people working in the riverbed at least twice to tell them to leave the area. Before long, they were back.

Who's in charge here?

But if Graham and Lu are breaking the law, whose job is it to force them to stop, let alone to clean up the river, to protect community health and to ensure that Redlands Shooting Park keeps its shot curtain in good condition?

It's difficult to say.

Calls and emails to the EPA, the San Bernardino County Department of Public Health, the county's public works department, the California Natural Resources Agency, the State Water Resources Control Board, the Redlands Fire Department, the **county fire department** and the Department of Toxic Substances Control did not turn up a lead agency checking on the situation.

Lu said that the only contact he has had with the government in the two or three months he has worked there came through tickets the city issued him for parking his car off the road next to the riverbed.

"I've never seen anyone take a mineral sample," said Graham, who said he lives at the site and has worked there nearly a year. "I've never seen anyone take a water sample. I've never seen anyone do an environmental report or anything."

The regulatory timeline goes like this: For roughly 45 years, customers at Redlands Shooting Park would simply aim toward the river, which is county property. From time to time, according to the park's website, "contractors would remove the lead shot from the river wash." The California Department of Fish and Wildlife halted this practice in 2010 because it was occurring without required permits.

According to EPA documents, the park's owner said by that point, contractors hired by the park had recovered 300,000 pounds of lead from the river.

Three years later, the shooting park, working with the EPA, installed the 1,300-foot-long, 40-foot-high shot curtain, which was made of strong netting that would catch flying metal before it left the range.

A review of EPA documents showed that the federal agency abdicated responsibility for the site once the netting went up in 2013. Robert Wise, an EPA employee assigned to act as the on-scene coordinator, called off further reclamation that September, saying that it would do more damage than good to the important habitat. Still, he knew unpermitted mining would continue.

"Wise made the determination that no further cleanup of the lead in the River/Preserve is warranted. Over time, the illegal scavenging operations will remove the lead currently present in the River/Preserve," according to an EPA report on the matter.

Soledad Calvino, an EPA Region 9 spokesperson, told The Desert Sun in an email that "EPA decided not to pursue further action because we aimed to avoid impacts to the habitat" of the area's endangered species. She said that EPA's involvement was only on an emergency basis.

None of the agencies contacted were able to provide The Desert Sun with an ongoing inspection schedule focused on the shot curtain or lead in the river.



According to the post on its website, the shooting park "has no interest in trying to reclaim any of the lead in the river wash itself. However, reclaiming the lead that is being caught by the shot curtain is what is providing the cash flow to amortize the \$150,000 installation cost."

A few miles northeast of the shooting range, the 550-foot-tall Seven Oaks Dam halts the Santa Ana River's flow before sending it in a trickle downstream. At the surface, the river is a dry wash when it gets to the Redlands Shooting Park, but it eventually reemerges several times before dumping into the Pacific Ocean at the southern end of Huntington State Beach.

In addition to lead, testing conducted when the government was actively engaging in mitigation efforts between 2010 and 2013 found varying levels of arsenic, antimony and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, a class of chemicals believed to cause cancer.

In a 2012 letter to the EPA, Scott Sobiech, a deputy field supervisor with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, wrote that endangered species inhabited the area adjacent to the shooting range or immediately downstream.

"In addition to federally listed species and migratory birds, the Santa Ana watershed provides important habitat for a variety of diverse species such as aquatic invertebrates, amphibians, reptiles, fish, soil invertebrates, plants and numerous avian species," he wrote.

Environmental responsibility

"My man, you want cream soda?" Lu yelled over to Graham.

"Yeah, my lips look I've been eating this dirt out here," Graham sarcastically shouted back before returning to his philosophizing.

Graham's birthday makes him a Pisces — the fish sign — in astrology, and one of his dreams as a child was to become a marine biologist. Even though he's saving up to buy Lu's old car, he's adamant that his main rationale for scavenging is to protect public health and the environment.

"It's not fair for people to get unknowingly sick because of someone else's extracurricular carelessness," he said.

However, trash — evidence of humans' presence — was strewn about the riverbed. The pits he and others dug while scavenging in the Santa Ana River are destroying pockets of the very habitat he said he wants to protect.

But the alternative — abstaining from mining — would mean doing nothing to clean up the lead that can head downstream, potentially harming the health of those using the river farther west. For now, the informal business continues.

As the unwavering sun beat down on the riverbed, Graham paused to take another drag of his cigarette, then a sip of his cream soda that perspired in the midday heat. A hawk soared overhead.

A few hundred feet away, the persistent gunfire continued.

<https://www.desertsun.com/in-depth/news/environment/2020/03/13/the-lead-bullet-miners-of-san-bernardino-county/4865778002/>