

# Daily Pilot & Times OC

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## O.C. college district finds \$8M of its own money

A risk management fund held by an insurance vendor quietly accrued dividends until questions about it arose.

BY SARA CARDINE

Rancho Santiago Community College District found itself this summer in a position almost too good to be true, after officials received \$8 million in dividends from a third-party insurance vendor that has arranged coverage for the district since 1997.

Two checks — one for \$7,167,249

and another amounting to \$878,105 — were cut on June 24 by Cerritos-based vendor the Alliance of Schools for Cooperative Insurance (ASCIP). And while it seemed like a gift, the transfer of funds was hardly that.

The collective \$8,045,354 represents public school money that had amassed over years, during the Or-

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### INSIDE

As stakeholders of the Orange County community college district probe a decades-long relationship with the Alliance of Schools for Cooperative Insurance Programs, the names of two now-retired administrators keep popping up. PAGE A3



A RISK management account maintained by a vendor amounted to millions of dollars that elected officials with the Rancho Santiago Community College District knew nothing of until they started asking questions.

Don Leach

## Playhouse auction raises money for homelessness



Eric Licas

DEBRA HARRISON and Jeff Cooley of CDC Designs fit a pair of glasses on a bunny enjoying tea inside a playhouse built by Shea Homes for Project Playhouse on Thursday.

BY ERIC LICAS

A cozy farmhouse hosting stuffed bunnies for tea, a Barbie-themed dream home, a palm-tree-lined beach hut and other whimsical, kid-sized scenes on display at the Irvine Spectrum Center through October invite people to learn more about efforts to create real homes for people living on the street.

The playhouses will be on display beneath the Ferris wheel at the Spectrum through

Oct. 5, and were created by teams of home builders for Project Playhouse. The fundraising event benefits Homeaid OC, a nonprofit that helps develop both shelters and permanent supportive housing for homeless people.

“It gets people asking ‘what are these

playhouses? Why are they here?’” said Brooke Doi of Shea Homes, one of this year’s five participants. “And then they start reading the signs. It’s a great way to educate the general public about the work Homeaid

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Don Leach | Staff Photographer

THE BOYS & GIRLS Club of Huntington Valley operates a performing arts center and daycare facility on city-owned property near Fountain Valley City Hall.

## Public space in F.V. wins support

Residents turn out to advocate against redevelopment of city-owned property near City Hall.

BY ANDREW TURNER

Fountain Valley residents made their voices heard in their collective desire to preserve a community space just south of City Hall on Tuesday.

Some two dozen speakers addressed the City Council to oppose the potential redevelopment of two buildings that have most recently been leased by the Boys & Girls Club of Huntington Valley.

The city-owned property includes a 9,200-square-foot building utilized as a daycare center for children who are between the ages of 6 weeks and 6 years. Additionally, a 9,311-square-foot building serves as a performing arts and fitness center.

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## Renovated Ronald McDonald House reopens



Sarah Mosqueda

CHARLES ANTIS cuts the ribbon at Ronald McDonald House Orange County along with Ronald McDonald and other RMHC board members.

BY SARAH MOSQUEDA

On the deck of the Ronald McDonald House Orange County in the city of Orange, there is a clear view of Children’s Hospital of Orange County. CHOC can be seen from multiple vantage points, a detail that Noel Burcelis, RMHOC’s executive director said is a big source of comfort for families staying at the facility.

“For some families it is critical, because they see their child, not the building, and they feel the proximity,” Burcelis said.

Ronald McDonald House Charities offer support and rooms in home-like facilities to families who have traveled far for medical care for their children.

The first house opened in Philadelphia in 1974, and today there are more than 258 Ronald McDonald House chapters in 60 countries. Ronald McDonald House Orange County, at 383 South Batavia St., is located just a few blocks from the Children’s Hospital of Orange County.

Burcelis said the proximity is instrumental in supporting many of the families he has encountered since he began his career with RMHOC in 2011 as director of operations.

Once, a father and son from Korea came to Southern California for vacation, and the day before they were scheduled to return home, the son was involved

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### ALSO FROM THE DAILY PILOT:



Gabriel San Román

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# Disney union activist eyes Anaheim council seat

Cristal Ruiz would be first Disney worker to sit on council long swayed by her employer's campaign spending.

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

For half of her young life, Cristal Ruiz has worked for the Disneyland Resort, Orange County's largest employer and a company that has left a dominant imprint on Anaheim politics.

In November, she's hoping to go from "cast member," as Disney calls its workers, to council member with the help of the city's voters.

Ruiz, 34, grew up in Anaheim and started working at Disneyland selling churros as a junior in high school. She continued working at the park while attending Fullerton College where she wrote for the Hornet, a student newspaper on campus. Ruiz transferred to Cal State Fullerton, from which she graduated with a journalism degree.

More recently, she championed a reform slate for her Disney labor union, Workers United Local 50, before turning her sights on Anaheim City Hall.

"I never imagined myself running for office, but I know people like me need to stand up," Ruiz said. "For me, personally, it's about giving back to my community."

Ruiz lists more services for the unhoused, public safety and housing affordability as key issues for the city.

She also touts herself as a first-generation Anaheim resident and the only Spanish-speaking Latina on the ballot for District 5, where Latinos form a majority of registered voters.

It remains the only district out-



Courtesy of Cristal Ruiz

**CRISTAL RUIZ** is campaigning for a seat on the Anaheim City Council.

side of Anaheim Hills to not have elected a Latino since the city retired at-large elections in 2016.

Not only did Ruiz not see herself seeking public office until recently, she also never envisioned herself running for a leadership position in Workers United Local 50, the single biggest Disney labor union with 9,500 members.

But when union leadership faced questions over transparency and as disaffection among food and beverage workers lingered after a narrowly ratified contract with Disney last year, Ruiz took action.

She served as campaign manager for the "We Take a Stand for Change" slate that won a bitterly contested union election in May.

Past president Angel Esparza appealed the election results before withdrawing his challenge in late August.

The new slate finally took office on Sept. 5 with Ruiz winning a seat on the union's executive board.

to gain the trust of our constituents."

In recent years, Disney labor unions have tried to flex some political muscle in Anaheim with endorsements and independent expenditures in support of favored candidates.

But until Ruiz, a Disney union worker has never been the council candidate before.

"She was a passionate advocate for student parents and making sure that students are represented in our shared governance at the campus," Jodi Balma, a Fullerton College political science professor, said of her former student. "I wasn't at all surprised her trajectory in the union and that perspective probably has given her a different view of the role that Disneyland takes in Anaheim."

Ruiz, who currently works as an administrative assistant in workforce management, reports that Workers United Local 50 is endorsing her campaign. She hopes that it won't be the only union to back her bid.

It is support she'll likely need as the district seat that Ruiz is vying for promises to be the most competitive race in Anaheim, one where Balma observes that a plurality may be all that's needed to prevail.

Kristen Maahs, a cultural and heritage city commissioner, is running for council in the same district and enjoys the endorsement of Anaheim Mayor Ashleigh Aitken.

"My dedication and service to the community have been acknowledged by the Orange County Labor Federation, the largest association representing working families in Anaheim, the Anaheim Firefighters Assn., and other unions," Maahs told TimesOC. "Once on the council, I aim

to represent and advocate for policies and projects that benefit working families in Anaheim."

Andrew Sarega, a former La Mirada mayor, is also campaigning to represent District 5 residents and has secured the endorsement of the Anaheim Police Assn. According to campaign finance documents, Sarega has loaned himself about \$59,000 and raised another \$30,000 for his campaign.

TimesOC reached out to Sarega, who did not immediately respond.

Disney hasn't yet made its presence known in the race through independent expenditures or direct contributions.

Ahead of the November election, Disney has contributed \$49,000 to the Anaheim Residents, Small Businesses and Public Safety Leaders PAC supporting the election of Councilwoman Norma Campos Kurtz in a neighboring district. The company also deposited the same amount in support of District 1 council candidate Ryan Balius. No such donations have yet been reported for a similarly named PAC in support of Maahs.

SOAR, Disney's previously preferred PAC, reported no cash on hand in its last campaign finance filing.

Being a Disney union worker has given Ruiz an interesting perspective on curbing the company's influence from the labor front lines, a lesson she hopes can be replicated in local politics.

"Disney has a lot of power within the city," she said. "But I also see the impact that we have as a union to be able to provide a voice for workers. Money doesn't hold all the power."

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## COLLEGE

Continued from page A1

ange County community college district's participation in a self-funded risk-sharing pool that provided employee healthcare, workers' compensation and property and liability coverage.

The smaller check came from rebates, or dividends, accrued through Rancho Santiago's workers' comp program. But the larger check reflected a full remittance of funds long held in a risk management deposit fund.

The rub? Most Rancho Santiago stakeholders, including the Board of Trustees, which was authorized to spend the funds at any time, had no clue such a repository of assets existed until only recently.

The ever-growing balance was never reported on the district's budget, and a regular accounting was never provided to the Board of Trustees by the district administrators who oversaw, and made withdrawals from, the account.

It wasn't until a group of current and former employees, following up on the status of a \$1-million "rebate" promised by an ASCIP official trying to convince the district to continue its employee healthcare coverage with his organization last fall, that the truth about the fund, and its enormity, began to come to light.

This is the story of how a public school district — one that had endured post-recession layoffs and salary freezes while banked dividends multiplied off the books — came to learn through numerous public records requests and collaboration with the Daily Pilot the details of a long and murky relationship with ASCIP that has been anything but transparent.

In short, it's about how a district found \$8 million of its own money.

## THE GREAT REBATE DEBATE

For years, members of Rancho Santiago CCD's Joint Benefits Committee — a group of employee representatives and district officials that makes recommendations about employee health benefit coverage — had heard about the ASCIP rebates.

Whenever collective premiums, paid into the pool by scores of California school districts for various forms of coverage, exceeded the total claims, or losses, paid out over a certain period, the leftover funds were available to be returned by the nonprofit joint powers authority to member districts according to each district's calculated share of the risk pool.

Under the program, districts can transfer dividends to their individual general funds, apply them to programs, equipment and training designed to minimize their risk of liability or use them to draw down the cost of future premiums. They can also cache them in a risk management deposit fund.

But Rancho Santiago Trustee Phil Yarbrough, who also heads the Board Fiscal/Audit Review Committee, said he was not made aware by district administrators that the rebates were being held in an account maintained by ASCIP.

"This \$7 million with ASCIP was never disclosed. I never saw it," said Yarbrough, who routinely reviews quarterly reports on the district's accounts. "Why isn't a cash account with ASCIP disclosed anywhere?"

Last fall, a rebate was proffered to Rancho Santiago when the district was deciding whether to keep its \$30-million employee health insurance contract with ASCIP, at a 7% proposed premium hike, or switch to competitor Aetna, which would have saved the district from \$670,000



James Carbone

**THE ALLIANCE** of Schools for Cooperative Insurance Programs CFO Jeff Grubbs, right, speaks during an Aug. 31, 2023, meeting of the JPAs Executive Committee.

to \$3 million annually, depending on employee participation.

Dan Sanger, who then served as ASCIP's executive director of health benefits, informed officials the agency would be returning some \$1 million in healthcare rebates to the district.

During an Oct. 23, 2023, Rancho Santiago board meeting covered by the Daily Pilot, Sanger explained that when inflation and post-COVID demand for healthcare were driving up costs, ASCIP charged higher premiums to protect members.

"The question is, did we overcharge you? Well, yeah, because if we undercharged you we'd have to assess you in the middle of the year. So we always add a little bit of margin, just for safety," he told trustees.

"But we do have a significant equity balance that we have built for just this purpose," he continued, "so we can keep rates stable — that's one of the advertised benefits of ASCIP — and so we can launch value adds that we believe will get a positive return on investment."

Board members in attendance at that meeting decided to stay in the pool with ASCIP for one more year and revisit the matter this year. They are scheduled to take a vote on the health insurance contract during their regular meeting Monday.

But something didn't sit right with one union president, whose questions about a single rebate from a statewide insurance risk pool started a tidal wave of interest and inquiry that would lead to a public demand for the entirety of Rancho Santiago's rebates to be returned to the district's coffers and its budget.

## THE INSCRUTABLE RISK MANAGEMENT FUND

In May of this year, when the district's Joint Benefits Committee was once more engaged in talks about whether to keep its employee health coverage through ASCIP's risk-sharing pool, Morrie Barenbaum — then president of the Faculty Assn. Rancho Santiago Community College District (FARSCCD) — was reminded of the rebate Sanger had mentioned at

the October meeting.

What had happened to those promised funds?

As a member of the benefits committee, Barenbaum had asked about the rebate in the months following Sanger's declaration that it had been sent but was told twice it had not been received.

So, he emailed Iris Ingram, the district's vice chancellor of Business Services, on May 29 and copied a handful of administrators and faculty association members, asking once more about the status of the rebate.

Through a series of emails with Ingram and other district administrators that have been reviewed by the Pilot, Barenbaum said he learned \$1.04 million had been deposited by ASCIP into a risk management deposit fund for which, according to Ingram, the district receives quarterly statements.

As a lead negotiator for the faculty union, Barenbaum, a Santiago Canyon College astronomy professor, had become accustomed to combing through budget documents to gain

a clear picture of the district's finances ahead of bargaining.

Yet he had never heard about the risk management fund held by ASCIP.

"They didn't give us the \$1-million rebate," he said in an interview with the Pilot in late July. "They set it aside in a fund for the benefit of Rancho, but it didn't actually go to Rancho. It just accumulated in a fund."

Curious to learn whether other district stakeholders knew about it, Barenbaum reached out to Barry Resnick, a local resident and former faculty union president from 2012 to 2016 with a reputation for being a watchdog on a number of community and school district issues.

Resnick, it turns out, was already looking into another insurance-related matter involving the district and its ASCIP rebates and had just seen mention of a "Risk Management Deposit Fund" in a Public Records Act response from the chancellor's office about a week before Barenbaum contacted him about it.

Wanting to drill down to the truth, Resnick continued to send public records requests to the district and, on June 4, received a document revealing the \$7,129,246 balance.

"I was shocked. I didn't believe it," Resnick recalled of the discovery. "This rebate thing I had heard for a half a dozen years, and it never made any sense to me. Pretty much from the beginning of [the time our district began] working with ASCIP, the rebates were mentioned and they were emphasized during the times we went out to bid. But Morrie was really the one to push them on where the rebates were."

## THE 'ANNUAL CRY OF POVERTY'

Learning of the existence of the \$7.1 million angers Resnick who, for years,

See *College*, page A3

# College retirees moored in ASCIP pool

Pair involved in college district insurance matters remain affiliated with vendor.

BY SARA CARDINE

As Rancho Santiago Community College District stakeholders begin to probe the district's decades-long relationship with the Alliance of Schools for Cooperative Insurance Programs, an insurance risk pool operator, the names of two now-retired administrators keep popping up.

John Didion, former vice chancellor of human resources, and former Vice Chancellor of Fiscal Services Peter Hardash, not only oversaw matters related to insurance and risk management but have ties to the Cerritos-based joint powers authority that date back far longer than the 27 years Rancho Santiago has been a policyholder.

Although Didion and Hardash retired in 2016 and 2021, respectively, the two former administrators continue their affiliation with ASCIP to this day, serving on the board of Captive Insurance for Public Agencies, Ltd. (CIPA), a nonprofit corporation and subsidiary formed by ASCIP in 2005, according to the organization's incorporating documents.

These board positions are unpaid, as they were during the several years both men served on the CIPA board at the same time they worked for the district, recommending and directing hundreds of millions of dollars of insurance business to ASCIP and its subsidiary.

Didion and Hardash did not return calls requesting comments on the district's relationship with ASCIP.

In January 2023 retired Rancho Santiago CCD Professor Barry Resnick reached out to the Daily Pilot, claiming Didion and Hardash had been corporate officers of a vendor named CIPA that received nearly \$8 million in public funds, from 2008 to 2021, but whose existence was unknown by elected officials.

Resnick had heard about CIPA from a colleague and



Courtesy of Rancho Santiago Community College District  
**FORMER RANCHO SANTIAGO** Community College District vice chancellors Peter Hardash, left, and John Didion have ties with ASCIP dating back more than three decades.

learned Didion was working as a managing director for the company. He called ASCIP directly, asking for confirmation and was forwarded to an attorney who, after much back and forth, confirmed Didion's position, according to Resnick.

While this double duty was occurring — as Hardash and Didion's signatures appeared on invoices cut to the JPA for bond construction insurance handled by CIPA, according to records obtained by the Pilot — it appeared neither administrator directly disclosed his board service to elected officials at Rancho Santiago.

"I asked a few trustees, and they didn't know. It was concerning," Resnick said. "It's like [Didion and Hardash] were working for two masters, but the one they have the fiduciary responsibility to is the district."

John Hanna has served more than two decades on the board of Rancho Santiago CCD, yet he acknowledged in an interview with the Pilot in 2023 he had almost no awareness of Hardash's connection to ASCIP or CIPA.

"I didn't know at the time — I didn't know at all," he said. "[Hardash] was involved in a lot of discussions. He'd be there in closed session when this stuff was talked about, and he'd make some reports about some issues, and maybe ASCIP would be involved, but I wasn't aware of his relationship with ASCIP."

Hardash, who voting records indicate is 68, was just 24 years old and work-

ing at Downey Unified School District in 1980, when he and 45 other Los Angeles County administrators helped form the Alliance of Schools for Cooperative Insurance Programs as a joint-purchase program.

ASCIP officials recount the tale of his role in the JPA's formation in a 2014-15 annual report celebrating its 35-year anniversary and featuring comments and a photo of him.

Today, ASCIP operates a risk pool that comprises 134 members and offers employee medical, dental and vision, workers' compensation and liability coverage, according to its website.

The joint powers authority is led by a chief executive officer and governed by a 13-member executive committee of administrators from California K-12 and community college districts and public charter schools who are members.

ASCIP CEO Fritz Heirich, through the JPA's attorney Robert J. Feldhake, declined multiple requests made by the Pilot in 2023 and 2024 to be interviewed about CIPA and its board of directors.

Exactly when Hardash joined ASCIP's Executive Committee is unclear, according to conflicting documentation provided by Feldhake in response to two separate public records requests submitted by the Pilot.

One document indicates Hardash joined the board in 1995, while another shows him as a member in 1992. He served on the Executive, Claims and Cov-



James Carbone

**THE ALLIANCE** of Schools of Cooperative Insurance Programs headquarters in Cerritos.

erage and Finance committees, as well as a Nominating Committee that selects leaders from among ASCIP's membership for governance positions.

Didion, now 70, first joined ASCIP's board in 1994 and was serving as chair of the Claims and Coverage Committee three years later, when he left Long Beach City College, an ASCIP member, to take a job as director of personnel for Rancho Santiago, which had no relationship with ASCIP at the time.

That all changed three months after Didion's arrival in January 1997, when he recommended the district switch its property and liability coverage from another insurance risk pool to ASCIP, as indicated by a board meeting agenda showing the matter as a personnel item.

By 2001, the district had moved its workers' compensation coverage to the ASCIP, according to an email on Rancho Santiago's historic agreements with the JPA, provided by risk manager Don Maus to Chancellor Marvin Martinez in 2020 and reviewed by the Pilot.

Four years after that, Didion was listed as a founding director of CIPA, the Alliance of Schools for Cooperative Insurance Program's captive insurance company domiciled in Hawaii, according to the organization's incorporating documents.

In that capacity, he and a small cadre of administrators attended annual trips to posh resort hotels where appearances at an annual board meeting and insurance conference were punctuated by golf games, spa trips and excursions that appear on numerous expense reports paid by ASCIP and obtained by the Pilot.

Unlike ASCIP's Executive Committee — which cannot not be populated by retirees no longer affiliated with the JPA's member districts, according to its bylaws — CIPA board members were, until recently, able to continue their tenures indefinitely.

A policy change implemented in January of this year limits post-retirement service to just five years, according to new bylaws received by the Pilot from the JPA through a request for public records.

Didion and Hardash serve on the board to this day and still make regular pilgrimages to Hawaii, with Didion being named as CIPA's board president this year, according to minutes from a company board meeting obtained by the Pilot.

Didion's involvement in Captive Insurance for Public Agencies continued past his retirement from Rancho Santiago in August 2016. Six months later, he accepted a paid consulting position with CIPA, signing on as managing director at

a rate of \$96,000 per year — a sum he earned on top of two public school pensions amounting to \$194,951 annually, according to Transparent California.

But before he retired from Rancho Santiago CCD, Didion made one more recommendation: In June 2015, he advised the district move its \$22.6-million employee health coverage into ASCIP's risk pool. The move was supported by the district's Joint Benefits Committee, a panel Didion chaired.

Today, Rancho Santiago's employee health account represents the district's last tie to ASCIP. Under that program, the district was for years paying premiums to cover retirees who could have been enrolled in Medicare.

When Chancellor Martinez decided in 2021 to shift retiree coverage away from ASCIP and into Medicare, a cost-saving move for the district, Didion filed a lawsuit on behalf of a group of retirees, demanding the business remain with the JPA. He was ultimately unsuccessful.

But now the fate of that 27-year relationship hangs in the balance, as district officials on Monday will vote on whether to continue with ASCIP, and its provider Anthem, or switch to a competitor.

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## COLLEGE

Continued from page A2

tried to bargain for pay raises and training for faculty but was forestalled by district negotiators.

"There were years I sat at the table and listened to them tell us they had no money," he recalled of annual contract bargaining sessions with then-Vice Chancellor of Human Resources John Didion, who served as lead negotiator for the district.

"It was the district's annual cry of poverty: 'We don't have any money, maybe we can give you an off salary schedule raise, maybe we'll give a raise in the spring, but we don't have any money for staff development.' And they had anywhere from \$1.1 million to \$1.8 million sitting in that account [at the time]."

Resnick took the information he'd learned to trustee Yarbrough — a 28-year veteran board member who owns two real estate investment and management companies and is a self-described budget wonk.

For all his tenure and credentials, the risk management fund held by ASCIP was as much of a mystery to him as it had been to Resnick and Barembaum.

So, during a June 10 board meeting, the trustee demanded the money be returned to the district and accounted for in public, moving forward.

"There's \$7.1 million, it's not a small amount of money," Yarbrough said. "It needs to be given back to us, in my opinion as a trustee, to where it's subject to our audits and safely put into the bank accounts we have established at the county treasurer's office."

"This just has to go back into where the taxpayer money is supposed to go," he continued. "I just don't think it should be held at an insurance company."

The day after the board meeting, seeking to learn how long the district's risk management account had been accruing funds, Resnick sent out another records request, asking for all statements from ASCIP, from Jan.



James Carbone

**FORMER RSCCD** Vice Chancellor John Didion, right center, listens during an Aug. 31, 2023, meeting of Alliance of Schools for Cooperative Insurance's Executive Committee in Cerritos.

1, 2020, through May 31, 2024, memorializing the rebates deposited into that account as well as expenditures mentioned by Ingram during the board meeting.

By way of a July 9 response from the chancellor's office, reviewed by the Pilot, Resnick received a single document — dated June 12 of this year — showing rebate deposits, accrued interest and withdrawals made from the account between July 1, 2009, and June 12, 2024. No starting balance was listed, and no running totals were provided.

Nearly three weeks later, on July 29, the district returned information on various purchases made with money from the risk management fund. That document contained a list of sundry line items from 2012 to 2020 — including safety fencing, football helmets and Title IX training and videos — totaling more than \$3.6 million.

Some withdrawals included a

note indicating the date the Board of Trustees had approved the expense, bundled among dozens of purchase orders, while others had no note of board approval.

But the board dockets associated with each referenced approval date, examined by the Pilot, either fail to list such expenses entirely or indicate the purchases as being paid out of Fund 11, the district's unrestricted general fund.

Yarbrough maintains the board only approves purchase orders paid out of two general fund accounts and one for categorical one-time dollars earmarked for specific things.

"There's no way the board would approve expenditures that came from a fund held outside the district or the treasurer's office — no way in hell," he said in a follow-up conversation Wednesday.

A request for an interview with ASCIP chief executive Fritz

Heirich, made through attorney Robert J. Feldhake, was declined in an Aug. 22 email from the attorney.

"Media interviews [are] not really a function which ASCIP is intended to serve or should undertake, generally or at the expense of time for its members," Feldhake wrote in the email. "Interviews with print media are outside the purpose and function of ASCIP, the availability of staff, and not where priorities presently exist."

Rancho Santiago Chancellor Marvin Martinez similarly declined to speak for this story about when and how he was made aware of the district's \$7.1-million risk management fund balance.

Ingram, the district's Business Services vice chancellor, initially agreed to answer questions in a Zoom interview on Tuesday but canceled 90 minutes prior due to illness, according to an email from the district's spokesman,

and asked to reschedule for the following week, after publication of this story.

### SEARCHING FOR ANSWERS

The questions about ASCIP — a joint powers authority that has handled much of Rancho Santiago Community College District's insurance policies since 1997, despite not being accredited by California Assn. of Joint Powers Authorities — come as district leaders are poised, once more, to consider renewing the district's \$30-million employee healthcare contract with ASCIP.

It's been nearly a year since the decision was effectively tabled. And now the currently configured Joint Benefits Committee — Barembaum's term as the faculty association president and his time on the committee ended July 31 — has recommended, in an 8-2 vote, sticking with the Cerritos-based ASCIP. But the astronomy professor has concerns about the district keeping its business with the agency.

"Had each of us not pulled a little thread in this tapestry, we wouldn't know about any of this," he said.

Chancellor Martinez has accepted the Joint Benefits Committee's recommendation to renew its policy with ASCIP for another three years, though it will be up to trustees to decide. Yarbrough says whatever the vote, he still has questions and wants some answers.

He sought a review of the risk management deposit fund under the board's audit committee but was told by Martinez the panel only had purview over Rancho Santiago's audited funds, not those held outside the district.

"Someone is going to answer to me how this account was set up, how it was ever allowed to exist and where did the money go," Yarbrough said. "I'm going to get to the bottom of this, and I'm not going to rest until I get my answers. And they're going to want to give them to me because they have nothing to hide."

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# Buena Park weighs townhomes project near mall

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

A lot across the street from the Buena Park Mall that has stayed vacant for the past six years may soon be revived as a new townhome community.

On Aug. 28, the Buena Park Planning Commission considered a proposal to develop 93 Spanish colonial-style townhomes where an Orchard Supply Hardware formally stood.

The lot is currently being used to warehouse wholesale tile and store Tesla vehicles.

"Vacant land is scarce," said Chris Courtney, senior project manager for Brandywine Homes. "These types of opportunities are a great solution in providing housing that cities desperately need."

But the prospects of changing the zoning from commercial to residential

to make way for the townhome project has divided residents and advocates.

Paul Buron, a Buena Park resident, spoke in opposition to Brandywine's proposal at the meeting.

"Do we really need more housing, right now?" he asked commissioners. "You've got the big housing going on [at] the Sears lot."

Buron made reference to the Village, a 1,300-unit housing development at the site of the mall's abandoned Sears building, which was approved by Buena Park City Council last year.

With hopes of propping up the flagging mall, the Village would also include 126 townhomes for sale.

Across the street from the mall, the Brandywine project is considerably smaller and is even scaled back from the developer's original proposal for 283 apart-

ments and 1,500 square feet of retail space, after meeting stiff opposition during a community forum last year.

Concerns over traffic, parking and privacy that aired back then resurfaced before the planning commission.

But the project also had its supporters.

Buena Park resident Rebecca Kovacs-Stein pointed to California's Regional Housing Needs Assessment, or RHNA numbers, as a prime reason why the commission should recommend the townhomes for approval.

Under the current state housing mandates, Buena Park needs to plan for 8,919 units by 2029.

The city exceeded its RHNA numbers under the last housing cycle that ended in 2021 but has a

See **Project**, page A5



File Photo

**DEVELOPERS ARE** eyeing nearly 100 townhomes across the street from the Buena Park Mall. The project is set to go before city council next.



Photos by Andrew Turner

**A YOUNG RESIDENT** addresses the City Council on Tuesday during a study session regarding two buildings just south of Fountain Valley City Hall.

## SUPPORT

Continued from page A1

During the study session, city staff presented on the deteriorating condition of the 2.55-acre property and the possible opportunities for development there. Community members have suggested an event center and banquet hall, while hotel developers have also shown interest in the site, city officials said.

Community Development Director Omar Dadabhoj said the cost if the city keeps the buildings and updates them could be between \$1.885 million and \$2.18 million. That would include improvements for ADA accessibility, roofing, heating, ventilation and air conditioning.

Art Groeneveld, the chief executive of the Boys & Girls Club of Huntington Valley, said the organization has operated on a month-to-month lease on the parcel at 10200 Slater Ave. for the past five years. Additionally, the Kingston Branch location in Mile Square Park is provided rent free, city officials said.

"We're already working with architects," Groeneveld said of a prospective move of the performing arts center to the Kingston Branch. "We've already been very fortunate to have the entire city meet with our staff and our architecture team to help us streamline the process, so that we can try to raise the money, build that, and get out without an interruption of service."

"Our preschool service is children ages 6 weeks to [transitional kindergarten]. Right now, there's a little over 90 children in the program. We usually average about 120. We always drop down at the beginning of September, and right now, we don't have a plan or a home for our preschool, but we've moved that preschool three separate times. It's not something we haven't done before, and it's something that we're aligned and planning to do."

Community members said they turned up for the item after residents spread the word door to door at approximately 500 homes. The city also provided notice to property owners within 1,000 feet of the site, Dadabhoj said.

The two buildings are situated in close proximity to City Hall, the police station and the library, leading to residents contending that a high-density housing project or a hotel would bring

adverse traffic impacts.

The speakers included residents of all ages. A college student said she had grown up dancing for 12 hours a week and volunteering at the center. A 12-year-old boy stepped up to the podium to say, "If the city sells the land, then I won't have a place to learn and grow. Also, some parents send their kids to the community center because they have to work during after-school hours."

Others recalled their kids, or even themselves, taking classes in art, dance, guitar, gymnastics, karate, music, theater and more through the community center.

Some wondered why the city had not invested in the upkeep of the buildings.

"I am in the Boys & Girls Club Clubhouse Academy watching my daughter's dance classes, and I'm witnessing some of the dangerous conditions that are starting to happen to this building, specifically," said Jayne Gianola Brown. "Roof leaking, falling tiles, wet, smelly carpet in the office, and the staff members armed only with fans and Febreze and baking soda to mask the smell of mildew."

"The only reason they're looking to relocate is because when staff is reaching out for help with repairs, they aren't being prioritized as tenants or being served."

Ultimately, a council majority of Vice Mayor Ted Bui, Jim Cunneen and Patrick Harper provided direction to city staff, determining they did not have interest in declaring the property as surplus land, a step that would allow for development. Mayor Glenn Grandis did not participate in the discussion due to the proximity of the property to his residence.

Reviewing his notes from the public testimony, Harper said the idea that community benefit and revenue generation did not have to be mutually exclusive resonated with him. He also took note that the daycare facility was heavily relied upon by the community.

Councilwoman Kim Constantine expressed concern about streams of revenue that may or may not come to town, noting the 2036 sunset date of the Measure HH sales tax. While she did not support electronic billboards along the 405 Freeway, which were expected to provide some revenue to the city, Constantine said two approved by the council have been put on hold by Caltrans.

"We have potential for

revenue for the city, and we don't yet know if they're going to come, to be perfectly honest," Constantine said. "... I would like to look into potentially exploring the site for a potential hotel."

Cunneen called the property a "sacred space," adding that it would take a lot more to convince him

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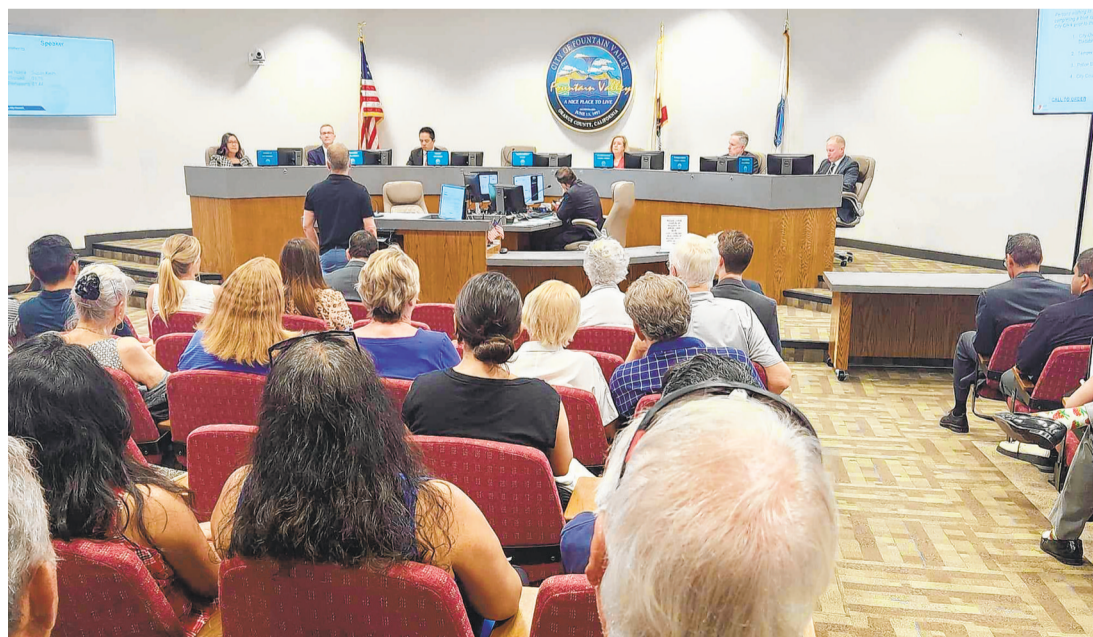
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**RESIDENTS LISTEN** to a discussion on the future of city-owned property just south of Fountain Valley City Hall on Tuesday.

that doing anything other than keeping it would be the right decision for the community.

"It's kind of the people's parcel, to me," Cunneen said. "I want to keep it, but this is a process. We need to flesh this out, and here we are. It's no secret that I would like this to be some-

thing amazing. We spent so many years going to the Rose Center [Theater] up in Westminster because that's where our girls had their dance shows. ... I love it up there. Why can't we have something like that in Fountain Valley? I don't know."

Bui was last to weigh in,

saying, "From what I'm hear[ing] from the public today, that is why I say that we need to look into further, not developing it, but what we can use this building or this area for the public."

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# Bracken's Kitchen aims to beat odds at Hungry Games

BY SARAH MOSQUEDA

Bill Bracken is now 11 years into running his 501(c)(3) organization, Bracken's Kitchen in Garden Grove. He is also preparing for the seventh year of the nonprofit's signature culinary competition and fundraising event, the Hungry Games.

"We are so proud of how this event represents what we do," Bracken said in a statement.

The founder and culinary director of Bracken's Kitchen is well known in the Orange County food community for his work with the county's food insecure and for appearances on shows like celebrity chef Roy Choi's Emmy Award-winning PBS SoCal series, "Broken Bread."

The organization operates on what Bracken calls a trio of services: a res-



**BITES FROM** last year's Hungry Games event from Bracken's Kitchen in Garden Grove.

cue food program, culinary training program and community feed program.

Bracken's Kitchen's mission is to serve the roughly 500,000 people in Orange

County who are struggling with food insecurity. This year's event, Hungry Games 7.0, invites local chefs like Shachi Mehra of Adya, James Hamamori of



Photos by Lisa Hu Chen

**BILL BRACKEN** of Bracken's Kitchen stands with his wife, Molly Bracken, at last year's Hungry Games event.

Hamamori Restaurant and Sushi Bar and Allan Tea of Cali Dumpling Co. to compete for the title of "Hungry Games Champion," with attendees acting as judges.

"Providing high-quality food to those in need through the support of these talented chefs and their culinary delights is both fun and rewarding," said Bracken. "We are blessed to gather so many chefs, guests and supporters to enjoy an evening of culinary wonder while raising awareness and support for our mission: rescuing, re-purposing, and restoring both food and lives through food rescue, culinary training, and our community feeding program."

Bracken's Kitchen's rescue food program works to divert edible food from becoming waste and repurposes it to feed the hungry. An example of rescued or recovered food Bracken's Kitchen has saved from the garbage can includes 1,500 pounds of frozen corn, originally purchased for a large corn chowder order that was canceled. Thirty to 40% of America's food supply goes to waste, according to Bracken's Kitchen, and in 2015, 22,000 tons of edible food waste was generated in Orange County

specifically.

Grocer Food 4 Less/Foods Co. has an ongoing commitment to mitigating food waste, and the company has partnered with Bracken's Kitchen for this year's event.

"Our partnership with Bracken's Kitchen is a testament to our shared vision of a world with zero hunger and zero waste," said Salvador Ramirez, corporate affairs manager at Food 4 Less/Foods Co., in a statement. "We're excited to contribute to this meaningful event and continue our work together to create sustainable change in our communities. With so much anticipation building among community partners and food lovers, we're looking forward to the impact this event will have."

Food 4 Less/Foods Co. has contributed \$20,000 to Bracken's Kitchen that will not only help sponsor Hungry Games 7.0 but also contribute to funding to expand the organization's culinary training program and provide 10,000 meals for the hungry.

Hungry Games 7.0 will be hosted at the organization's commercial kitchen in Garden Grove on Sept. 12 at 5:30 p.m. Although admission tickets are sold out, the nonprofit is still short on its \$500,000 goal, a sum the organization hopes can help beat the odds on hunger in Orange County. At press time, the campaign had raised \$267,140 so far.

There are still opportunities for event sponsorship, and donations of any amount can be made to support the cause on the Bracken's Kitchen website.

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## PROJECT

Continued from page A4

long way to go before meeting its current numbers.

"The lack of parking is not the issue," Kovacs-Stein said. "The lack of housing in Buena Park is."

As the project would offer 14 townhomes at moderate affordable housing levels and just two at the low-income tier, Kovacs-Stein advocated for more inclusionary housing in the future.

Elizabeth Hansburg, co-founder and executive director of People for Housing Orange County, also supported the project against its detractors.

"The people that you're hearing from, who don't want this project to move forward, are lucky enough to have won the lottery of time," she said. "They bought their housing when it was much more affordable, compared with wages. That time has passed."

Commissioners pressed Brandywine and city officials over concerns that parking issues would spill over to neighboring single-family housing tracts.

"The garage is meant for vehicle parking, not for storage," Courtney said. Matt Foulkes, Buena

Park's community development director, noted that the city could issue fines against future townhome residents who used their garage for purposes other than parking.

"We can go in and do an inspection," he said.

Daily fines could escalate to \$500.

Commission Chair Mirvette Judeh deemed all comments from residents and advocates as "relevant" to the discussion.

"However, there are state mandates regarding the shortage of housing," she said. "That is something that every city is struggling with and they're trying to find additional housing."

With that, the Planning Commission voted 4-0 to recommend that the zoning changes be approved by the Buena Park City Council.

Mayor Susan Sonne, who represents the council district where the townhomes are being proposed, said that the project would go before her colleagues soon.

"I will work very hard to ensure any project approved at this site is in the best interests of the community," she said.

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## AUCTION

Continued from page A1

does."

Past entries put up for sale during the Project Playhouse fundraiser include a recreation of the balloon-propelled home from animated film "Up," a spooky farm run by scarecrows and a castle, Doi said. The event began almost three decades ago but went on hiatus in 2012 amid the fallout of the 2008 housing market collapse, Homeaid Executive Director Gina Cunningham said. They decided to bring it back this year both to celebrate the nonprofit's 35th anniversary and to help address the ongoing need for more affordable housing.

Playhouses have fetched an average of about \$2,300 at auction, Cunningham said. Charitable bids peaked in 2001; the most expensive entry that year brought in \$75,000.

"I'd like to beat that this year because we need a lot



Photos by Eric Licas

**CREWS ARRANGE** plants around an entry for Project Playhouse. The playhouses are up for auction in an effort to raise money toward helping people who live on the street.

of housing, because we have a lot of people experiencing homelessness," Cunningham said.

Project Playhouse also offers tours of the entries for a \$5 donation. In combination with other fundraising efforts, Homeaid hopes to raise well over \$500,000, Cunningham said.

That money is desper-

ately needed as homelessness continues to rise in Orange County and throughout the state, despite a dramatic infusion of funds during the pandemic to help people get off the street. Two of the fastest growing demographics in the homeless population are veterans and the elderly.

Practically all shelters in



**HOMEAID OC** Executive Director Gina Cunningham poses for a photo at Project Playhouse, a fundraising event to support the creation of housing for the homeless that's on display at the Irvine Spectrum through Oct. 5.

Orange County are constantly full, Cunningham said. And although shelters are only designed to be temporary, last resort solutions, they often become people's only source of housing for years at a time.

The communal living arrangements can be especially difficult and may even exacerbate the challenges of those dealing

with mental illness or trying to overcome addiction, Cunningham said. That combined with limited availability is often why some of the most chronically homeless people decide to live on the street instead of going into a shelter, she said.

The pressure that comes with trying to survive homelessness can drive

some to turn to drugs as a means of escape. Some people battling addiction while living on the street are trying to avoid what they view as an even less stable environment in shelters, as opposed to their own enclosed tent. Many of them are waiting for acceptance into a permanent supportive housing program, Cunningham said.

She said the idea that homeless people are resistant to services or unwilling to get help fails to take into account their humanity and the complexity of their lives.

"I always ask people to just remember these are our neighbors and some sort of traumatic event brought them into the streets," Cunningham said. "And we can't judge them because we don't know their stories. And if we can provide them with a roof over their heads, that's our ultimate goal at Homeaid."

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forum

COLUMN | **PATRICE APODACA**

# In an age of upheaval, schools and their students face daunting challenges

**W**e blinked and now it's back-to-school season again — always a time of nervous anticipation, perhaps now more than ever considering all the upheaval that students, parents and educators have endured so far this decade.

But, since this is a moment for looking ahead, it's fitting that we consider what are likely to be some of the key themes and challenges going forward.

At the risk of appearing overly pessimistic, let's just say that those challenges are daunting.

Following are some of the issues that will be front and center this school year:

**Learning losses.** I'm not crazy about this widely used term. It sounds to me like knowledge is hiding under a random sofa cushion, waiting to be found along with stray car keys. But the salient point is that students overall continue to perform below pre-pandemic educational benchmarks. According to some measures, the achievement gaps are still widening.

Can we still blame lagging academic performance on the pandemic, or is something else going on now? Is the problem due to a complex mix of pandemic-era hangover and other factors such as the lack of foundational skills, high levels of chronic absenteeism and mental health issues? And what do



Don Leach | Daily Pilot

**VOLUNTEER HAILEY GUILLAN** helps a youngster try on shoes during a giveaway of sneakers and backpacks in Huntington Beach sponsored by the local Toyota dealership and the police department last month.

we do about it, because many approaches that have been employed so far are falling short?

These are among the questions that we will be grappling with as educators try to prevent an entire

generation from falling so far behind that they'll never recover. And note that these are more than academic questions. A failure to get a handle on this situation could have far-reaching implications for

future job prospects, overall economic growth and standards of living.

**Teacher troubles.** Ask any teacher and they will likely tell you that it's not a great time for them. Teacher burnout is ramp-

ant. We're seeing shortages of qualified educators in some areas, layoffs in others.

Attracting fresh blood to the profession has become exceedingly difficult. Fewer young people are signing

up for a career that promises intense stress, constant criticism from overbearing parents, frustration trying to engage distracted students, lack of institutional

See **Apodaca**, page A11

**A WORD, PLEASE | JUNE CASAGRANDE**

## 'Whomever' is rising in popularity, but some of us are using it wrong

**"W**hom" is having a rough couple of centuries. The object pronoun beloved by fans of proper English seems to be less popular than ever. And I don't just mean in casual speech. I mean in published writing.

In the 1820s, "whom" appeared in about 4% of books and articles. By the 1920s, that was closer to 1%. Today, it's even lower — about 0.9%. Meanwhile,

"who" has been on the rise since the 1980s, so it's possible some writers are using "who" in place of "whom," which is fine, especially when it's the first word in the sentence: "Who are you going to support in the election?"

But the interesting thing is that, even as "whom" continues its slide, "whomever" is on the rise, tripling in popularity since the 1980s.

How is it possible that

even as the English speaking world has gotten more chill about "whom" it's discovered a love for "whomever"? I don't know. I had a theory, which didn't pan out.

My guess was that fewer and fewer people know how to choose between "whomever" and "whoever," so they apply a partial understanding of the rules and guess wrong.

If this were true, the word "whoever" would

See **Word**, page A10

**MAILBAG**

## Huntington Beach residents weigh in on council votes

**A** big "thank you" to Daily Pilot reporter Matt Szabo for another article highlighting the political shenanigans that have become all too common in Huntington Beach (Bill, which could shut down Huntington Beach's voter ID require-

ments, passes California Assembly, Aug. 30). Culture war stunts passed off as governing are growing very old, and few examples embody this type of nonsense more than the voter ID fairy tale put forth by Huntington Beach's current City Council majority and

city attorney. While absurdly false rhetoric has elevated voter ID nationally, its newfound popularity has never been supported by facts or credible evidence. Huntington Beach's elected cosplayers

See **Mailbag**, page A8

**CROSSWORD AND SUDOKU ANSWERS**

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# Chef to bring 'Comfort' to the Barclay

BY SARAH MOSQUEDA

There are multiple ways to describe comfort food, but the four words Yotam Ottolenghi and the co-authors of his new book have decided on are: "nurturing, convenient, nostalgic, indulgent."

The chef, restaurateur and author has written best-selling cookbooks and has been a weekly columnist for the Guardian for the past 16 years. For his latest book, "Comfort," he collaborates with Helen Goh, Verena Lochmuller and Tara Wigley to present the recipes for dishes they reach for again and again.

"What Helen, Verena, Tara and I are really focusing on here is the emotional impact food has on us," said Ottolenghi. "Rather than come up with a list of recipes that are perceived as being comfort, like mashed potatoes and mac and cheese, we tried to bring up recipes that we like to cook at home and bring us a sense of comfort."

Ottolenghi will appear at the Irvine Barclay Theatre on Oct. 13 to discuss "Comfort," in conversation with another renowned chef, restaurateur and cookbook author, the Los Angeles-based Nancy Silverton. Live on stage, Ottolenghi will treat the audience to a one-off live experience, preparing a dish in the second half of the show with a little audience participation.

"I will ask the audience to get involved, not come on stage, but sort of vote from their own seats," Ottolenghi hinted.

The Israeli-born British chef has a combined bachelor's and master's degree in comparative literature from Tel Aviv University,

but he moved to London to study French cooking at Le Cordon Bleu.

His first cookbook debuted in 2008, titled "Ottolenghi," and was co-authored by his friend-turned-business-partner, Palestinian chef Sami Tamimi. Ottolenghi's cookbook, "Jerusalem" won the International Assn. of Culinary Professionals' Cookbook of the Year award and was named Best International Cookbook by the James Beard Foundation. His vegetable-focused cookbooks "Plenty," published in 2010, and "Plenty More," published in 2014, have been credited with changing the way diners view vegetables and the way chefs prepare them. His influence in London, where he co-owns delis and restaurants NOPI and ROVI, has resulted in something the dining scene there widely regards as the "Ottolenghi effect."

"Comfort" is Ottolenghi's 11th book and one that Ottolenghi said he and his co-authors wanted to approach without the assumption that we all have the same sense of comfort. Ottolenghi grew up in Israel as a child of parents with Italian and German heritage but also spent summers in Italy and eventually moved to London as an adult, and he acknowledges that comfort can be culturally specific.

"Each and every one of us has their own story, their own background and their own journey," said Ottolenghi. "So what gives you comfort isn't necessarily what gives me comfort."

Ottolenghi maintains, however, that common denominators in cooking go beyond culture.

"Ask 80% of the people on earth, they will tell you

## IF YOU GO

"Comfort" will be available this fall, published by Ebury in the UK and by Ten Speed Press in the U.S. and Canada. Tickets for "An Evening with Yotam Ottolenghi, moderated by Nancy Silverton" on Oct. 13 at 5 p.m. at the Irvine Barclay Theatre are available at [thebarclay.org](http://thebarclay.org).

that they find chicken comforting, but that could be a roast chicken, chicken soup or chicken stir fry," said Ottolenghi.

Besides the four adjectives Ottolenghi said are decidedly present in comfort food, another word that helps to define it is "home."

"Home is a very crucial word here, too, because the book is not restauranty in its nature; it is much more about home and domestic cooking," said Ottolenghi.

The recipes in "Comfort" are meant to give a sense of comfort and home not because they are starchy and cheesy but instead because they are familiar. Within the pages of "Comfort" readers will find recipes for matza ball soup, crepes three ways and tortang talong, a Filipino dish in which charred eggplant is dipped in egg to make a sort of eggplant omelet.

Although none of the co-authors of the cookbook are necessarily Filipino, Ottolenghi believes it is possible to get so comfortable with a place (or with a person) that you find them to feel like another home, and their food can become a sense of comfort.

"Helen and I have been friends for many, many years, and she is Malaysian



Elena Heatherwick

**CHEF AND WRITER** Yotam Ottolenghi will take the stage at the Irvine Barclay Theatre next month to discuss his new book, "Comfort."

and of a Chinese background but also grew up in Australia. I learned to love Malaysian food through her," Ottolenghi said of the cuisine culturally influenced by India, China and Malay. "Now I have a nostalgia for that."

When it comes to the things that bring Ottolenghi

himself the most comfort, food is certainly a factor but not in the way one might expect.

"I have just come back from holiday, and I have been sitting around a lot of tables with people eating delicious food and for me, those moments of sitting around food and talking

about food, even if you didn't cook it and even if none of the people that are with you are chefs, it's just such a fun thing to do," said Ottolenghi. "That gives me lots of comfort."

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## MAILBAG

Continued from page A6

jumped on this bandwagon immediately without ever filing a formal complaint with the O.C. Registrar of Voters or requesting assistance from the Orange County district attorney's office. Of course, none of this was ever real, but why go to the trouble of filing a formal complaint when you can simply spew ridic-

ulous, fact-free accusations with impunity?

As state Sen. Dave Min noted in his statement about election integrity directed at Huntington Beach's culture warriors, "... produce any evidence of widespread voter fraud, I will [would] lead efforts to change California's voter eligibility rules." Unfortunately, a lack of evidence has never deterred this bunch from doing what they do best: "solving"



Don Leach | Staff Photographer

**MAYOR PRO** Tem Pat Burns and Mayor Gracey Van Der Mark listen to public comments as speakers make emotional statements from the podium during a Huntington Beach City Council meeting on Sept. 3.

imaginary problems.

**Steve Shepherd**  
Huntington Beach

As Matt Szabo's article reports, the legislature has passed SB 1174 which would bar local jurisdictions from enacting voter identification laws inconsistent with state statutes. This will protect Huntington Beach from the extraordinary expense of running separate elections for municipal offices and measures, and from arbitrary enforcement of its deliberately vague voter identification ordinance. SB 1174 and AB1285, also passed by the legislature, establishing state standards for the development of public library collections, are specifically stated by their language to be "matters of statewide concern, rather than a municipal affair, and, therefore, apply to all cities including charter cities."

Huntington Beach City Atty. Michael Gates has already announced, without City Council public authorization, that he intends to challenge these bills in the courts, based upon his contention that they don't apply to charter

cities, despite the language therein. This tactic has not been successful in the past and is unlikely to be in the future. It only puts more city services at risk as the city attempts to stretch its deficit status budget to cover more litigation, which, contrary to Gate's contention, is far from free. His office's multimillion-dollar budget is unprecedented. Whether Gates and the City Council extremist majority like it or not, our city is not the Independent Fascist Republic of Huntington Beach.

**Linda Sapiro Moon**  
Huntington Beach

Once again the conservative four on the Huntington Beach City Council fail to understand their role in governing. They only have jurisdiction over the city itself and none over national or state issues. Voter ID is a state issue, otherwise every small city could determine the requirements to vote and it would end up being a hodgepodge state. By challenging the state regulations and filing lawsuits they are costing tax payers thousands of dollars, money that could best be spent on

## HOW TO GET PUBLISHED

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improving our community. Former Mayor Debbie Cook continues to demonstrate the type of leadership that the con four should emulate.

Not only are the council majority not satisfied with their present control of the council, they are trying to use their influence and money to get more of their kind elected. The citizens should be aware of what is taking place, and do everything possible to insure that they are not successful.

**Richard C. Armendariz**  
Huntington Beach

## Surprise at near consensus

Many in the Huntington Beach community have become used to, some would say numbed by, the partisan decision-making

of the City Council majority. This is especially true when it comes to supporting Republican issues, ideology and officials. So, the entire audience at the council meeting Tuesday night was primed to have the agenda item submitted by the three minority members (Dan Kalmick, Natalie Moser and Rhonda Bolton) to demand the resignation of embattled Republican County Supervisor Andrew Do routinely brushed aside by the Republican majority (Gracey Van Der Mark, Pat Burns, Tony Strickland and Casey McKeon).

After the minority introduced the item, it was the turn of the majority to respond. Several speakers in public comments, including myself, had claimed that it was not just

See *Mailbag*, page A11

## Daily Pilot

A Times Community News publication.

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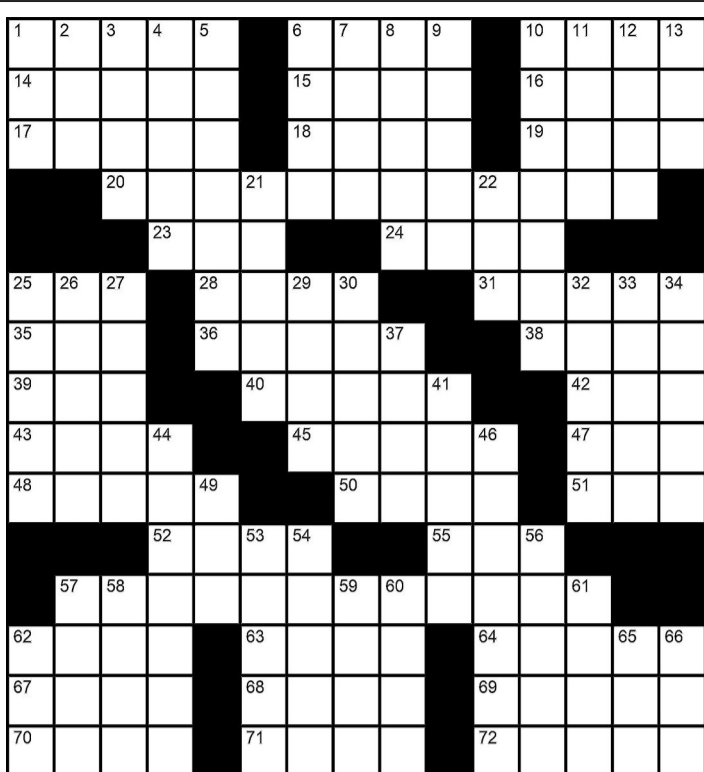
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**THE DAILY COMMUTER PUZZLE**

By Stella Zawistowski

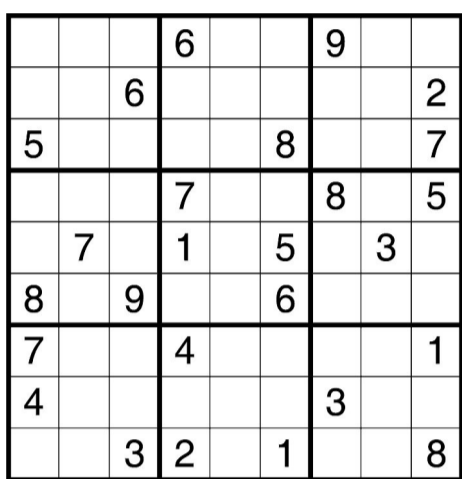
- ACROSS**  
 1 Fat cat  
 6 Drains energy from  
 10 Quick  
 14 Higher than  
 15 Provo's state  
 16 Look \_ (investigate)  
 17 Poisonous shrub  
 18 Corporate emblem  
 19 Swarming insect  
 20 Marvel hero AKA T'Challa: 2 wds.  
 23 Have dinner  
 24 Tidy  
 25 Pig's enclosure  
 28 Tedious walk  
 31 Pie nut  
 35 Cow's noise  
 36 Currency in Italy  
 38 Hard to find  
 39 Flightless Aussie bird  
 40 Theater's capacity  
 42 Not yet used  
 43 Pre-Easter season  
 45 T-bone, e.g.  
 47 Aardvark's prey  
 48 Opposite of heavy  
 50 Rotate  
 51 \_ Vegas, Nevada  
 52 Baseball stats: Abbr.  
 55 Get after taxes  
 57 Authors' secret collaborators  
 62 Field  
 63 Tournament ranking  
 64 Docking spots  
 67 City with a harbor  
 68 Lion's hair  
 69 Taken \_ (shocked)  
 70 She-sheep  
 71 Singer James  
 72 Cause to be late
- DOWN**  
 1 Lil \_ X ("Old



**SUDOKU**

By the Mephram Group

Complete the grid so each row, column and 3-by-3 box (in bold borders) contains every digit, 1 to 9. For strategies on how to solve Sudoku, visit [sudoku.org.uk](http://sudoku.org.uk).



For answers to the crossword and Sudoku puzzles, see page A6.

- |                      |                         |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Town Road" singer)   | 8 Believer in many gods |
| 2 "Aladdin" monkey   | 9 Glowed                |
| 3 Box-office failure | 10 Warrior              |
| 4 Egglike shapes     | 11 " _ of Green Gables" |
| 5 Since              | 12 Have the lead role   |
| 6 Pout petulantly    | 13 Little kid           |
| 7 Placed on          |                         |

- 21 Grade below a B  
 22 Fred Astaire's style  
 25 Odor  
 26 Actress Marisa  
 27 Childlike  
 29 Unrefined minerals  
 30 Nannies and billies  
 32 Artificial waterways  
 33 Sports venue  
 34 Small salamanders  
 37 Staircase part  
 41 Holy person  
 44 Gulleets  
 46 Piece of joint protection: 2 wds.  
 49 Conan's old network  
 53 "Who's there?" answer: 2 wds.  
 54 Blood, \_ and tears  
 56 "Survivor" group  
 57 Become bigger  
 58 In this place  
 59 Lease  
 60 Notion  
 61 Tightly close  
 62 Tailless primate  
 65 Color TV pioneer  
 66 Chicago's WNBA team
- Tribune Media Services



**HUNTINGTON BEACH** police wait onshore at Bolsa Chica State Beach, after a robbery suspect attempted to evade capture by swimming away. June Casagrande explains the difference between "Police will arrest whoever breaks the law" and "Police will arrest whomever they catch breaking the law."

Courtesy of the Huntington Beach Police Department

**WORD**

Continued from page A6

decline roughly in proportion to "whomever's" rise. But "whoever" is more popular than ever, so I don't know where all these "whomevers" are coming from.

But there's still a lesson here — a word of caution about a far-too-common "whomever" mistake committed even by professional journalists. Here's an example of that error: "I'll hire whomever does best in the interview." That should be "whoever."

People who aren't trying to use good grammar, ironically, get this right more often than people who are trying. That's because grammar buffs usually understand that "whom" and "whomever" are object pronouns, but they don't understand that whole clauses can be objects, too.

Object pronouns are words we use every day and include "me," "him," "us" and "them." They're often objects of verbs, as in "show me," "invite him," "tell us" and "ignore them." Or they're objects of prepositions like "at," "to" and "with": "yell at me," "send to him," "relate to us," "go with them."

They're the mirror image of subject pronouns

"I," "he," "we," "they," etc., which we use as subjects: "I yell," "he sends" and so on.

"Whom" is an object pronoun, "You sent it to whom?" and "who" is a subject pronoun, "Who sent this?" Similarly, "whomever" is an object pronoun and "whoever" is a subject pronoun. But because these two often sit between clauses, there's a twist that some people don't realize.

Compare: "Police will arrest whoever breaks the law" and "Police will arrest whomever they catch breaking the law."

In both cases, the pronoun comes right after the verb "arrest." So if you apply a simple understanding of pronouns, you would guess you need "whomever" there because it's an object. But in that second sentence, the word after "arrest" is not the object. The whole clause that follows "arrest" is the object, and that clause needs its own subject: whoever.

For a super-simple example, look at the sentence: I saw who did it. The object of the verb "saw" is the whole clause "who did it." If the pronoun were the object, you'd have to say, "I saw whom did it."

Even professional writers, editors and broadcasters get this wrong. A lot.

Look at this sentence from the Aug. 22 New York Times sports section: "He talks to whomever wants to hear about the story of the hat."

Either the editor didn't understand object pronouns or the writer made a mistake and the editor didn't catch it. He or she clearly thought that the preposition "to" needed to be followed by an object pronoun. But in fact, the object of the preposition "to" is the whole clause "whoever wants to hear about the story of the hat." That's because "wants" needs a subject and only "whoever" can fill that role.

Anytime you see a "whomever" sandwiched between two clauses, ask yourself if the second verb has a subject. In "Police will arrest whomever they catch breaking the law," the subject of the verb "catch" is "they." Clearly, we don't need to swap "whomever" to "whoever" to do the catching in the verb. But in "Police will arrest whoever breaks the law," there's no other word that could be the subject of "breaks," so "whoever" must be it.

**JUNE CASAGRANDE** is the author of "The Joy of Syntax: A Simple Guide to All the Grammar You Know You Should Know." She can be reached at [JuneTCN@aol.com](mailto:JuneTCN@aol.com).

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Los Angeles Times

**TimesOC**

California State Parks seasonal lifeguard Sierra Fockler discovered a 14-inch Pacific football fish around 2:30 p.m. on Friday, Oct. 13, near the lifeguard station located at Crystal Cove State Park in Orange County. It's the second such case of the fish washing ashore over the last three years. (Courtesy of California State Parks)

Good morning. It's Wednesday, Oct. 25. I'm Carol Cormaci, bringing you this week's [TimesOC newsletter](#) with a look at the latest local news and events.

Watch where you're stepping on O.C.'s famed sands, because you may encounter a rare specimen of marine life. One, in fact, that has very sharp teeth.

That's what happened on a recent afternoon to lifeguard Sierra Fockler, who found a spooky-looking black angler fish, specifically a Pacific football fish, while she was walking near the lifeguard headquarters building on Moro Beach, located within Crystal Cove State Park.

# Where to bite into the Dubai chocolate bar craze in O.C.

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

For months, a flurry of “FoodTok” videos on social media have touted a luscious chocolate bar from Dubai filled with pistachio paste and knafeh, a shredded phyllo dough pastry.

Dubbed the “Dubai chocolate bar” by TikTok users, the viral sensation first took off from Fix Desert Chocolatier in the emirate capital.

But the sweet-toothed among us don’t need a one-way ticket to Dubai to experience the buzzworthy bar that is both creamy and crunchy in texture and taste.

Over the summer, local bakeries in Orange County have added their own interpretations of the Dubai chocolate bar to their repertoire, bringing its gustatory bliss much closer to home. With Anaheim hosting the first officially designated Arab American enclave in the nation, the bars aren’t hard to find both in-and-around its Little Arabia district.

And the trend is far from fluff.

Sure, food fads pass without a trace when once they tempted taste buds on and offline, for better or worse. Remember those trendy churros looped into ice cream cups a couple years ago? Try finding them now.

But the Dubai chocolate bar may prove to be more sturdily sweet as a tasty twist on tradition.

“Seeing something that you ate growing up go viral is crazy,” Dana Gharaibeh, baker and owner of Sweetheart’s Dessert Lounge in Anaheim, told TimesOC. “It’s a more modern way to eat knafeh. This chocolate bar is super delicious.”

Here’s four businesses in Orange County where the beloved Dubai chocolate bar awaits your appetite.

**JERUSALEM ROASTERY**  
12531 Harbor Blvd.  
Garden Grove

Nestled next to Shawarma House in a Garden Grove shopping plaza, Jerusalem Roastery offers packaged treats, like date-filled cookies known

as mamool, rows of Middle Eastern candies, spices, nuts and trays of freshly baked knafeh. But tucked into a corner in a fridge where drinks are kept cool is a tray of Jerusalem Roastery’s house-made Dubai chocolate bars, which have been a hit since the business first opened in July. The snack sensation comes in one size at \$7.99 per bar, and is thicker than most. The milk chocolate bar is drizzled with green pistachio cream atop. Inside, toasted knafeh gives the bar an impressionable crunch.

Think of it as a super-sized Arabic Kit Kat bar, only better!

**LE MIRAGE PASTRY**  
100 S. Brookhurst St. Anaheim

As mentioned before, Anaheim’s Little Arabia is a safe bet when it comes to finding Dubai chocolate bars. Le Mirage Pastry, known best for its Syrian bouza ice cream, has a poster advertising its take on the viral hit, with a marbled bar breaking in half to show off its tasty fillings. Bakery owner Maher Nakhal was quick to the craze and started offering his take on the chocolate bar more than two months ago. Most closely resembling the Dubai bars that started the trend, both in appearance (and price, at \$20 each), Nakhal’s wide, squared bars are stuffed with knafeh, pistachio paste, pistachios and tahini. He reports that once offered, Le Mirage Pastry received a volume of calls — with some patrons making a long trek for a taste.

“We were the first ones to do it,” Nakhal said. “Some people drive for two hours to get here, from Temecula and even Bakersfield.”

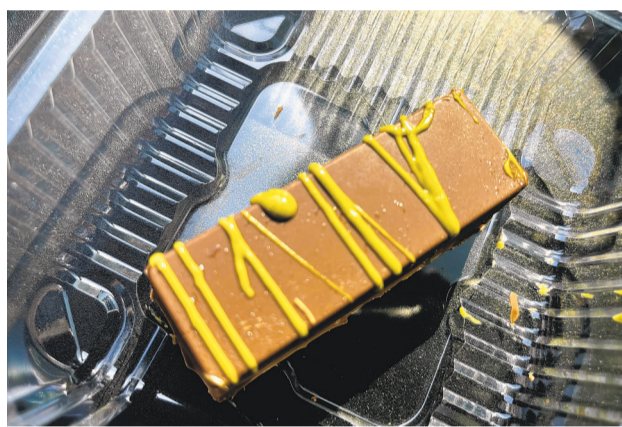
**KNAFEH CAFÉ**  
866 S. Brookhurst St. Anaheim

For years, Asem Abusir has whipped up trays of sweet-and-salty knafeh undergirded by its signature Nabulsi cheese at Knafeh Café. For the past few weeks, his Little Arabia bakery has taken shredded



Photos by Gabriel San Román

**A DUBAI CHOCOLATE** bar, with kataifi inside, from Sweetheart’s Dessert Lounge in Anaheim.



**THE DUBAI** chocolate bar from Jerusalem Roastery comes thicker than most.

phyllo dough and repurposed it as the filling of the much sought-after Dubai chocolate bar. The snack comes in a golden wrapper, which makes patrons feel like they’ve found a coveted Wonka ticket before even peeling the foil back. A bite into the bar reveals the creamy emerald green pistachio goodness inside. At \$12 per bar, Knafeh Café initially thought the snack might be a fading trend, but when the phone lines aren’t blowing up, some customers come through the doors just to exclusively buy them.

**SWEETHEART’S DESSERT LOUNGE**  
301 S. Anaheim Blvd. Unit B, Anaheim

Ahead of its one-year anniversary this month, Sweetheart’s Dessert Lounge began offering the

bars in small, medium and large sizes at varying prices from \$6 to \$15. It paid off with a rush of summertime customers forming long lines outside the business near Anaheim’s Packing House. Still, as summer winds down, a chalkboard sign outside of Sweetheart’s Dessert Lounge boasts its Dubai chocolate bars on a “first come, first serve” basis. In preparing the bars, baker Dana Gharaibeh begins toasting shredded phyllo dough in the oven with butter the day before. The kataifi inside gives the bars their signature crunch — and each bite from Sweetheart’s provides that scrumptious sound that social media can only hint at. Gharaibeh uses Belgium chocolate to coat the fillings, a choice that dials up the decadence. Lastly, the bakery



**KNAFEH CAFÉ’S** chocolate bars come in golden wrappers.



**LE MIRAGE PASTRY** was one of the first bakeries in the county to offer a take on the popular Dubai chocolate bar.

turned to TikTok to spread the word about its special, which racked up nearly 87,000 views.

“We didn’t take TikTok too seriously,” she said. “My mom and I recorded the TikTok, but a lot of people ended up seeing it.

For the first few days, we had lines like never before.” Just then, a youngster walked in and ordered two chocolate bars to go.

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## APODACA

Continued from page A6

support and low pay relative to other professions.

Will any of these issues be solved this year? Don’t count on it.

**Public school finances.** There are a few bright spots, such as Proposition 28, a new state law that provides funds to districts to expand arts education.

But that will likely be overshadowed by grim news about the intensifying pressure on public school finances due to the state’s budget deficit, the expiration of federal COVID relief funding and declining enrollment in most dis-

tricts.

These factors will intensify pressure on school districts. Consider the recent example of Ocean View School District in Huntington Beach. An advisory group recommended that the district sell two of its non-school properties, a decision one committee member said was reluctantly reached but also viewed as necessary for the district’s schools to have funding for maintenance and improvements.

This follows another difficult decision reached by Ocean View last fall to close its Spring View Middle School because of declining enrollment.

Some relief might be coming. Proposition 2 on

November’s ballot would provide \$8.5 billion to K-12 schools and \$1.5 billion to community colleges to renovate, fix and construct facilities. These funds would help, of course; even so, schools will undoubtedly face more tough choices in the days ahead.

**Culture wars.** The fights over school library books, curriculum and treatment of transgender students will continue unabated. And, given that this is an election year, these issues will be key to voters’ ballot box decisions.

A major focus this November should be on school board races, many of which pit progressive and centrist candidates

against far-right activists who seek to impose their policy agendas, many of which are anti-LGBTQ+ but are promoted under the banner of “parental rights.” While nationwide and statewide elections suck up most of the media attention, we shouldn’t ignore these local contests, for their outcomes could have profound consequences.

**Mental health, school safety and technology.** Each of these topics deserves far more than a brief mention at the end of a column. I expect I’ll be returning to these important issues in the coming school year. For now, I will simply point out that they are not unrelated to each

other.

Mental-health professionals have been shouting from the proverbial rooftops about the alarming rise in anxiety-related disorders, depression and suicidal ideation among our youth. It’s no stretch to assume that these health issues are exacerbated by too much screen time, as well as the ever-present fears surrounding school shootings.

Schools are taking steps to address these problems. I recently wrote about Newport-Mesa Unified School District’s new classroom cellphone restrictions, for example, which are helping students focus more in class. And many districts throughout Orange

County are continually looking at ways to bolster security, and services and programs to help troubled students.

But the tragic reality of our time is that, despite such efforts, we have a long way to go to fully address the problems plaguing this generation of school kids. Too many students are struggling, both academically and emotionally. That’s the unhappy picture as a new school year gets underway, and we can’t afford to ignore it.

**PATRICE APODACA** is a former L.A. Times staff writer and is coauthor of “A Boy Named Courage: A Surgeon’s Memoir of Apartheid.” She lives in Newport Beach.

## MAILBAG

Continued from page A8

the allegations of corruption and malfeasance on Do’s part but also the failure to represent his constituents in District 1, which includes Surf City residents, fairly and honestly. Do had been noticeably absent and unproductive while under public scrutiny.

Strickland and Burns equivocated with the dual bromides of “innocent until proven guilty” and “we don’t have all the facts yet.” However, Mayor Gracey Van Der Mark broke ranks and used the “failure to represent” argument to side with the minority. The result was a 6-1 vote (with Burns voting no).

Cypress City Councilwoman Frances Marquez, a Democrat, seeking to replace Do on the Board of

Supervisors, also spoke in public comments to blast Do and dwell on those constituents, many sick and needy seniors and families, who were defrauded and betrayed. It was pointed out that even Republican Janet Nguyen, also seeking the same supervisory seat, had castigated Do (her former chief of staff).

I was amazed at the vote, a direct snub of a local Republican office holder by a partisan council majority. Should mayor Van Der Mark receive kudos for her action or was she merely interpreting the handwriting on the wall? Either way, she did the right thing at the right time. As Martin Luther King Jr. would say “The time is always right to do what is right.” Right?

**Tim Geddes**  
Huntington Beach

## How would the policy work?

So our City Council wants city employees to become the gender police. This would require educators who work in the city’s libraries, parks or other facilities to report a child’s sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression so the parents could be informed. What constitutes an educator? City volunteer homework tutors? Librarians? Storytellers? Makerspace and craft instructors? Lifeguard instructors? Leaders of the police Explorer program? Nature tour guides? Are they supposed to ask the child if the child is gay if they aren’t sure? Could they then be sued for invasion of privacy or harassment?

Our mayor says she was

thinking back on her own teen experience when considering this ordinance. She was afraid to tell her parents she was pregnant but finally did so anyway so they could work it out together. I wonder how that would have worked out for her if an educator had informed her parents of her pregnancy before she, herself, was ready to tell them. And what happens if one informs the parents that their child or teen could possibly be gay, and it turns out they are not? If a child’s or teen’s relationship with their parents is such where the parents don’t know anything about what’s going on with their personal lives, how will this ordinance help these kids? Could it not just as easily hurt them? Instead of turning this issue into an “outing” political witch hunt,

perhaps the council majority might consider offering family counseling classes to the public instead.

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**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR** Noel Burcelis presents Ronald McDonald with the key to Ronald McDonald House O.C.

**REOPENS**

*Continued from page A1*

in a drowning incident at their hotel pool.

“I was called by the hospital, asking me to come in to speak to Dad; he was basically unresponsive,” said Burcelis. “He wanted to sit in silence.”

While the father waited for the child’s mother to fly to the U.S. on an emergency visa, Children’s Hospital of Orange County offered him a room at Ronald McDonald House Orange County, but he refused it. Burcelis let him know it was close enough to walk to, and the father agreed to at least have a look.

“We walked over here and until we got to the parking lot, and he saw the hospital from here, he agreed. He said, ‘Oh, there is my son,’” said Burcelis.

Now, the facility near CHOC will be able to serve even more families. On Aug. 31, Ronald McDonald House Orange County reopened with a ribbon-cutting ceremony after undergoing a \$15.7-million expansion. In 2023, media and alumni families were invited to tour the construction site to see the progress, and even more guests were invited to celebrate the opening.

The capital campaign for the expansion, led by co-chairs Katie Rucker and Charles Antis, surpassed its original \$12-million goal, thanks to donations from

nearly 300 donors and a sizable contribution of \$2.3 million from local Orange County McDonald’s franchise owners.

Burcelis, Rucker, Antis and other board members and alumni families offered remarks before the ribbon cutting. Antis, who first connected with RMHOC in 2014 when his twins were born prematurely, touched briefly on the time it has taken to complete the house.

“I had no idea how the world would keep shifting during the capital campaign,” Antis said. “It was only supposed to be three years, though it lasted a lot longer. It was supposed to go smoothly but not just a global pandemic hit, we had a 25% price increase, we had vandalism, we had all sorts of delays ... but the day is here and I am elated.”

Burcelis presented a key to the new house to Ronald McDonald, and attendees were invited to tour the nearly 30,000-square-foot facility.

The Ronald McDonald House in Orange County opened in 1989 and before the expansion housed 20 rooms. The remodeled and expanded space added 24 additional guest rooms as well as new services, like an in-house salon and spa.

“We’ve offered salons and haircuts in the area before, but we had very few takers ... what mom would step away from their kid to get their hair cut? But if it is in



*Photos by Sarah Mosqueda*

**A VOLUNTEER PULLS** cookies from the oven inside Ronald McDonald House Orange County’s new expanded kitchen.

the space, that really helps them,” said Burcelis.

There is also a sensory room for families with little ones that require a reprieve from the overwhelming sensations of a hospital and a new teen room designed to give young adults a place to exist away from young kids in the separate playroom.

The kitchen and dining areas have also been expanded, which Burcelis said allows families to eat communally or not.

“Communal dining is what we encourage, but we also respect that families may not be in a position to share and socialize,” said Burcelis.

Douglas Kanner, chairman of the board of Ronald McDonald House Charities of Southern California, joined a tour of the new facility with Burcelis and commented on how RMHOC serves as more than an overnight stay. It puts families in a place where they are surrounded by people who understand



**THE EXPANDED** Ronald McDonald House Orange County now includes an in-house salon, sensory room and separate playrooms for teens and younger kids.

what they’re going through.

“This a place where you are around other families, you are around love,” said Kanner. “A hotel is just a room.”

Ronald McDonald House Orange County is now ready to welcome guests home. If families need reinsurance, they can look at the window and see the

hospital, just a few blocks away.

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