

Fatal overdoses may lead to murder charges

Orange County D.A. Todd Spitzer issued the warning to dealers who sell drugs that result in someone's death.

BY BEN BRAZIL

Taking aim at the rise of the powerful synthetic drug fentanyl, Orange County Dist. Atty. Todd Spitzer announced Tuesday that he will seek murder charges against dealers who sell drugs that end up killing people.

Flanked by members of local law enforcement during a morning news conference, Spitzer said that his office will now provide an advisement to convicted dealers, manufacturers and distributors about the potential fatal consequences of drugs. His office contends that providing the advisement enables prosecutors to charge them with murder if they commit another drug-related crime resulting in somebody's death.

The tactic was compared to the Watson advisement, which is a warning given to people convicted of DUI that they can be charged with murder if they kill someone while driving under the influence. The advisement is required by California law.

"These are not overdoses," Spitzer said. "These are murders. These dealers are essentially handing a loaded gun to unsuspecting victims knowing that they will probably die, and they don't care. Fentanyl is cheap, it's easy to get, and it's killing people who had no idea they were taking it."

"I refuse to let these drug dealers get away with murder. No parent should have to pick out their child's casket or think about what their headstone should read. Many of these teenagers and very young people are dying because they thought they were buying drugs to ease anxiety and instead drug dealers sold them a fatal dose of fentanyl. Not a single drug on the street should be considered safe. It only takes one pill. One time."

The number of fentanyl-related deaths in Orange County and the rest of the country has been on the rise in recent years. Spitzer and other law enforcement personnel mentioned at the news conference that fentanyl can be present in a number of drugs, including pharmaceutical pills like Xanax, Oxycontin and other opioids.

According to the Orange County Health Care Agency, 234 residents died from opioid overdoses in 2011, compared to 499 in 2020.

Fentanyl is a huge contributor to the number of opioid deaths, accounting for 381 of the deaths last year. According to the district attorney's office, Orange County has experienced a 1,000% in-

See **Murder**, page R4



Kevin Chang | Staff Photographer

DAN ALMQUIST stands with his horse, Sailor, at Ortega Equestrian Center in San Juan Capistrano. Almquist is working on a project that will transform the Olympic equestrian practice property in San Juan Capistrano into a public equestrian/park.

Developer has big ideas for San Juan equestrian park

BY LORI BASHEDA

One of Orange County's hottest next-gen commercial developers is putting his stamp on San Juan Capistrano in a big way.

Dan Almquist, founder of Frontier Real Estate Investments, moved his family to San Juan seven years ago.

Since then he has begun four major projects in the sleepy little city, the jewel of which is the River Street Marketplace on historic River Street a few blocks from the Mission.

When completed in early 2023, River Street will resemble an agrarian village, with paved paths for bicycles and hitching posts to park your horse. Almquist calls it a deconstructed public market.

"We always start with 'What's the story?' That's a big part of what we do: Storytelling. There was a lot of farming and ranching on this property — that drove the theme. It drove the architectural style. The buildings will be named. The Hay Loft (which will house a craft brewery) will look like a hay loft."

Another building named the Red Barn will house curated chef-driven food vendors, and a vintage horse trailer will serve as a cocktail bar.

The jewel of River Street will be a farm-to-table market with a butcher, fishmonger and bakery.

Filling in "the village" will be fire pits, a horseshoe court, a flower stall, a veg garden for chefs on the property, scattered seating and heritage citrus and olive trees.

Now Almquist is pitching a fifth project for San Juan.

He wants to transform the Rancho Mis-

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Courtesy of Frontier Real Estate Investments

A MAP of the planned Rancho Mission Viejo Riding Park, an equestrian-centric community hub on 65 acres, proposed by Almquist, founder of Frontier Real Estate Investments.

A RENDERING of the River Street Marketplace on River Street in San Juan Capistrano, a development project already in the works from Almquist.

Courtesy of Frontier Real Estate Investments



Radisson Blu hotel is Anaheim's Four Diamond in the rough

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

A stunning view of the Anaheim Resort's skyline is offered from the heights of Radisson Blu's rooftop where patrons can enjoy fine dining along with it. All of the resort's iconic sights, from the peak of the Matterhorn Bobsleds to the Anaheim Convention Center's dome-shaped arena, shape the atmospheric ambiance, one accentuated by Disneyland's famous fireworks show every night.

The panorama is part and parcel of the hotel's ambitious, and even audacious, vision.

"Our goal was to turn this rooftop into the best rooftop in Orange County," said Steve Lindburg, Radisson Blu Anaheim's general manager, from its perch. "Part of that is location and part of that is how the facility is designed."

The BluSky Restaurant and Bar, which serves Basque cuisine from the rooftop, is just one amenity that helped the 12-story, 326-room hotel earn AAA's coveted Four Diamond designation last month.

It's one of only five such distinguished hotels in the city, but the Radisson Blu stands alone in towering over the other side of the 5 Freeway away from the Anaheim

Resort's official boundaries. When developers broke ground in 2018, a ceremonial shovel plunged into the soil of an odd, triangular-shaped plot that rested for years unused.

"It was what is referred to as a 'remnant parcel' the city inherited from Caltrans," said Mike Lyster, Anaheim spokesman. "It sat empty for two decades. Developers looked at the parcel, but it always proved challenging to develop because of the shape and relatively small size."

But the plot that other developers refused became the Radisson Blu's cornerstone on the way to accomplishing its Four Diamond feat.

"Everybody was saying that the challenge would be that we're on the wrong side of the freeway," Lindburg said. "A lot of our thought before opening was if that would be an issue and, if so, how do we deal with it. Candidly, it has not been an issue."

Lindburg worked at the Radisson Blu in downtown Minneapolis before joining the Anaheim team in December 2019. He brought 36 years of previous hotel management experience with him.

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THE BLU SKYBAR at the 12-story Radisson Blu in Anaheim. The hotel has earned a coveted Four Diamond designation from AAA.

Photos by Scott Smeltzer
Staff Photographer



LEFT: The pool with a hidden Mickey at the Radisson Blu in Anaheim.

RIGHT: Steve Lindburg is the general manager at the Radisson Blu in Anaheim.



Murder trial begins in Dana Point Harbor killing

Hoang ‘Wayne’ Xuan Le is accused of shooting Tri ‘James’ Minh Dao on a boat in October 2019. The pair had been friends and partners in a large-scale marijuana business in O.C.

BY MEGHANN M. CUNIFF

An unusual federal murder trial began this week in a Santa Ana courtroom, with jurors hearing of a midnight boat excursion off the Dana Point Harbor that left one man dead and unraveled an Orange County underworld of drugs, gambling and guns.

Hoang “Wayne” Xuan Le is accused of the gun-shot slaying of Tri “James” Minh Dao on Oct. 15, 2019, in what prosecutors say was a planned execution driven by debt and a life insurance policy Le thought would finally get him what he was owed.

A second defendant, Sheila Ritze, is to be tried separately after Le. Both have been in jail since their arrests in late 2019.

The U.S. Attorney’s Office is prosecuting the case under federal maritime law because Tri “James” Minh Dao’s body was discovered in the Pacific Ocean, and investigators believe he was killed at sea.

But Dao’s lawyer offered jurors another explanation for the federal attention, and it has to do with a brother of the victim who knows the lead investigator well and operates an illegal poker operation out of his upscale home in Irvine.

“Alex Dao used to be a confidential informant for the FBI, and he made this agent’s career with the

biggest case of his life,” said defense attorney Craig Wilke. “When Alex Dao wanted the FBI’s involvement, he went to his friend and got him involved.”

Wilke told jurors Le was defending himself from Dao after Dao threatened him with a gun during a lobster fishing trip because Le refused to lend him money. Wilke said Dao was still screaming, “I’m going to kill you” at Le as he fell into the ocean.

The lawyer noted that while Dao was shot several times, a medical examiner concluded he died from drowning, though his manner of death was still ruled to be homicide.

The men were friends and partners in a large-scale marijuana business who Wilke said were well known in Little Saigon. Wilke described Le and Ritze as drug and drinking buddies who shared a love of cocaine and alcohol but weren’t romantic partners.

Wilke questioned Dao’s girlfriend of 16 years on Wednesday about Dao’s drug use and penchant for gunplay, which included domestic violence reports to police and a 2012 conviction in Nebraska for possessing 75 pounds of marijuana.

Wilke also questioned Nguyen about her meetings with the FBI, and he implied she was pressured into lying about Le’s

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Gina Ferazzi | Los Angeles Times

A MAKESHIFT MEMORIAL for Kurt Reinhold, who was shot and killed by Orange County Sheriff’s deputies last year.

Irvine starts using medical workers for mental health calls

The effort intends to free up police and decrease tensions and confrontations with the homeless or mentally ill.

BY BEN BRAZIL

Irvine has joined other Orange County cities using teams of medical workers to respond to mental health-related calls for service rather than relying on police.

The effort is meant to free up police and decrease violent confrontations between law enforcement and people suffering with homelessness or mental health issues. Many have criticized police responses to mental health calls because they can escalate tensions and provoke violent episodes.

The Irvine City Council on Tuesday night unanimously approved a year-long pilot program, which will run from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., seven days a week, with Be Well OC.

The city will use the first year to evaluate the effectiveness of the program. The city spent the last four

months exploring the program before entering into the agreement.

“A significant benefit of this model is that it relieves our officers from handling non-police-related calls so they can focus their time on activities like proactive policing, crime prevention, community outreach and being available for emergency calls for service,” Irvine police Cmdr. Dave Klug said during the Irvine City Council meeting.

“Arguably the most important benefit of this model is that it’s simply better at supporting members of our community suffering from mental illness. The professionals handling these calls have extensive training and experience in supporting those in crisis. They know the resources that are available and are best equipped to help. This should lead to better outcomes.”

The Be Well OC teams, which are comprised of mental health workers and medical personnel, will be dispatched to calls for service in a way similar to police or firefighters. However, the team will only respond to non-emergency calls related to men-

tal illness, substance abuse, homelessness and family support issues. In addition to the mobile teams, Be Well OC runs the first mental health and wellness campus in Orange County.

The Be Well OC mobile response teams are based on a nationally recognized CAHOOTS mobile-crisis intervention program created in 1989 in Oregon. The model is now used by cities around the country, including Oakland, Portland and Denver, among others.

So far in Orange County, Huntington Beach and Garden Grove are using the program. Last month, Anaheim approved a one-year pilot program with Be Well OC for the mobile response teams.

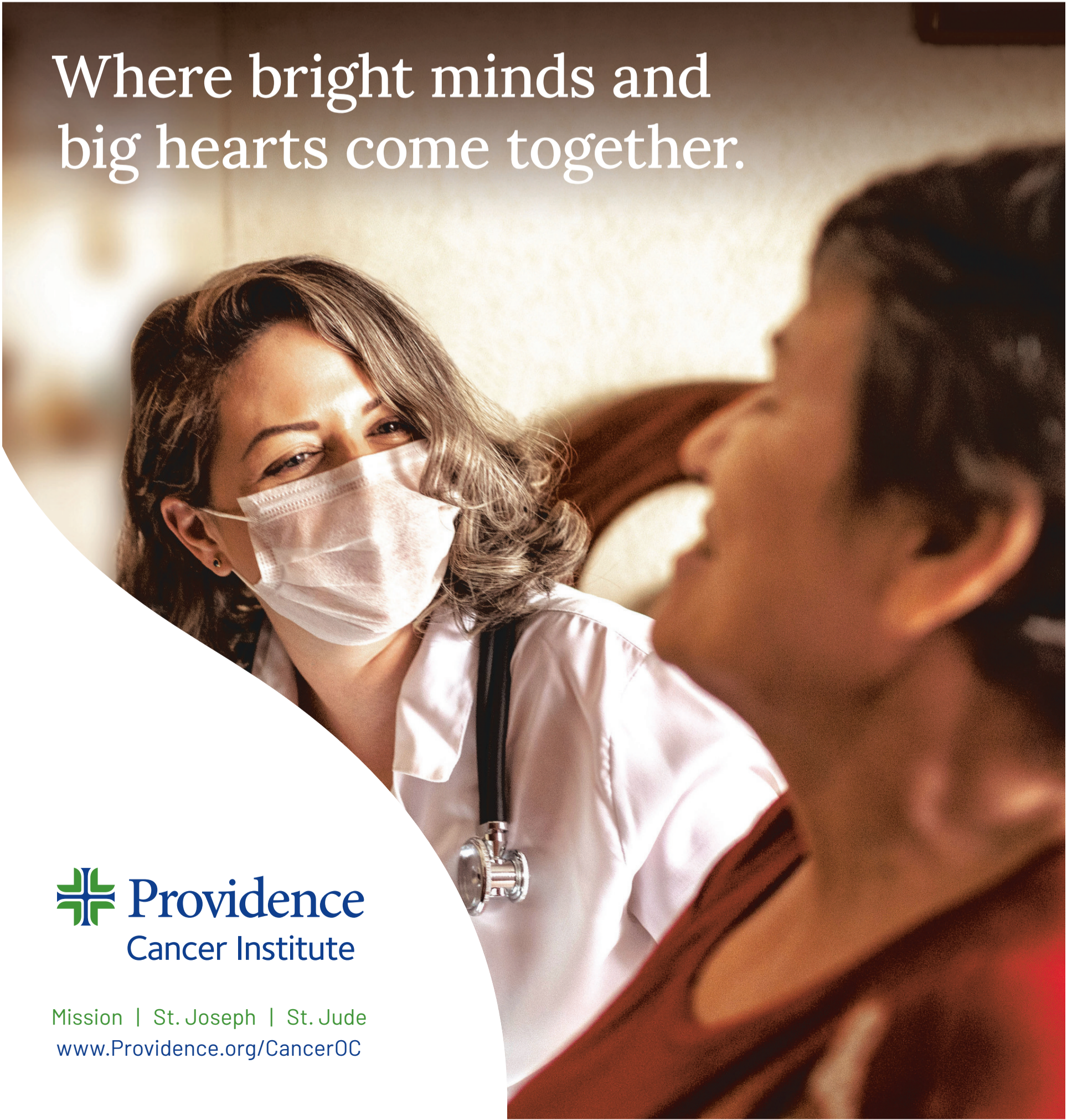
Other cities are exploring the mobile response teams in other ways. Fullerton and Buena Park are partnering together in an effort known as Project HOPE, which is expected to start next month. Last month, Santa Ana unanimously approved a contract with homeless service provider CityNet to provide street outreach and

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Still Colonists for now: Anaheim High students vote to keep name, mascot

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

A century ago, Anaheim High School students voted to become known as the home of the “Colonists.”

A hundred years to the day, the nickname came before another vote amid petitions and protest efforts by some in the community to replace what they see as an “insensitive” moniker given the school’s supermajority Latino student population.

As it turns out, many of those students want to keep the “Colonists” name — and even the mascot, too.

The results of the Nov. 9 vote were revealed during a Wednesday town hall ahead of a scheduled Anaheim Union High School District Board of Trustees meeting that will address the students’ recommendation next month.

“As a school district, we felt that this was a great opportunity for students to partake in a civic engagement project that is relevant to them and unleashes their student voice,” said Dr. Jared Fried, AUHSD’s assistant superintendent.



Gabriel San Roman

ANAHEIM HIGH SCHOOL’S nickname will remain Colonists for now after a vote from the students on Nov. 9.

tendent. “Student voice and civic engagement are important key drivers that allow us to prepare our students to become life ready.”

A year ago, an online petition pushed by two Anaheim High School alumni began collecting thousands of signatures calling for the name and mascot change.

“We cannot keep this mascot as it is a constant reminder of the trauma natives endured at the hands of colonizers,” wrote Laura Luevano.

“Our ancestors did not experience cultural genocide, assimilation and exploitation for us to embrace this racist symbol.”

Protesters also rallied against the mascot outside of the school site this week before the town hall.

J’amie Rubio, an author and historical journalist, started a competing online petition that gathered a few thousand less signatures calling for the school to keep its nickname and

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MURDER

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crease over the last five years in fentanyl deaths.

More than 93,000 people died of drug overdoses in the U.S. last year, nearly 70,000 due to opioids. According to the California Department of Health Care Services, fentanyl accounted for more than a third of overdose deaths between July 2019 and July 2020. Overdose deaths have nearly quadrupled since 2018. In particular, the agency noted that homeless populations are adversely impacted by the rise of fentanyl.

Orange County is currently on pace this year to record the most homeless deaths in its history. Many of the deaths were caused by drug overdoses, with 106 of the 321 deaths involving fentanyl.

Orange County Public Defender Martin Schwarz took issue with Spitzer’s new policy.

“Unlike the ‘Watson’ advisement given in DUI cases, which is mandated by law, there is no legal basis allowing courts to give the district attorney’s proposed advisement in drug cases,” Schwarz said in an email. “In fact, earlier this year, the California District Attorney’s Assn. unsuccessfully attempted to convince the Legislature to pass a law which would have required similar language.

“That bill, SB350, did not make it out of the Senate Public Safety Committee. Unless the Legislature changes course, there continues to be no legal basis

for the courts to allow this. Additionally, the language of the advisement directly contradicts two California Supreme Court opinions which held that furnishing drugs to someone that results in a death cannot support a second-degree murder conviction.”

Spitzer was joined by Riverside County Dist. Atty. Mike Hestrin at the news conference. For about a year, Hestrin’s office has been seeking murder charges against dealers in fentanyl-related deaths. Seven cases have been filed so far, but none have gone to trial yet. Most of the cases have been for second-degree murder.

“Every single community across this country is facing a fentanyl crisis,” Hestrin said.

Under Spitzer’s new policy, the advisement will be given to people convicted of a variety of drug offenses, including possession for sale of cocaine, heroin and opiates, loitering to commit a controlled substance offense and transportation of a controlled substance for sale. While Riverside County is targeting only fentanyl-related cases,

Spitzer said that he is expanding on Hestrin’s policy to all drugs due to fentanyl’s widespread presence.

A few parents of people who have died from fentanyl spoke at the news conference.

Amy Neville, whose son Alex died of an overdose when he believed he was taking Oxycontin, hopes that the community will begin to more openly acknowledge and discuss the

dangers of fentanyl, including dealers and people with substance-use disorders.

“My son, Alex, died without getting to have this conversation, I don’t want any more people to die,” Neville said. “If this admonishment convinces a single distributor to find a different job, then it will have been a success.”

Earlier this year, California lawmakers chose to not approve Senate Bill 350, which would have required that convicted dealers or manufacturers of various drugs receive a written advisory warning that they could be charged with voluntary manslaughter or murder if they are found to have manufactured or sold drugs that led to the death of a person.

The bill was named Alexandra’s Law after the daughter of Matt Capelouto, who spoke in favor of Spitzer’s new policy at Tuesday’s press conference.

Capelouto said his daughter died around Christmas in 2019 after ingesting what she thought was oxycodone. Instead, the pill was filled with a fatal amount of fentanyl.

“In a flash she was gone,” Capelouto said. “She was killed, taken from us, poisoned by a drug dealer, who this very day is still walking the streets.

“These drug dealers know the danger they are peddling. They should be held criminally accountable.”

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A TRIO OF stormtroopers at the Radisson Blu in Anaheim.

Scott Smeltzer
Staff
Photographer

HOTEL

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“We know that one of our challenges is we’re a Radisson Blu and no one knows what that is,” he said. “We were the fourth one to open across the U.S. We have the amenities and the facility to represent an upper-scale hotel, but no one really knows who we are.”

Anaheim and all who visit now have the opportunity to learn as the city is home to the first Radisson Blu on the West Coast. The hotel opened briefly amid the pandemic and ahead of schedule in November 2020. It closed for several months before reopening again in April, just in time for Disneyland’s long-awaited return.

As guests walk through the main lobby, the subtle and overt homages to Disney aren’t hard to miss.

The aesthetic throughout the hotel paints a storytelling portrait of light and darkness. A trio of stormtroopers from Star Wars strike a pose at a favored stop for Instagram photos. Framed collections of Disney Lego figurines are hung by elevators.

The hallway carpet of the seventh floor is a canvass of colorful brushstrokes paying tribute to “Fantasia,” and a ground-level pool is shaped as a hidden Mickey when viewed from above.

When the Radisson Blu opened in earnest this spring, tourists slowly trickled in to enjoy its aesthetic and amenities at first until occupancy rates boomed in July. As part of its cutting-edge business vision, the hotel is courting a sometimes maligned demographic: Disney DINKs, or “dual income, no kids” couples that visit the Disneyland Resort, in addition to vacationing families. In line with the strategy, the Radisson Blu’s rooftop pool and spa are for adults over 18 only.

“It’s a little edgy, and it’s working for us,” Lindburg said. “No one else seems to be targeting them. For

us, the feedback has been very positive.”

Just then, a woman in a Captain America shirt and a man donning a pointy Fantasia hat walked past the BluSky Restaurant and Bar.

“You guys going swimming?” Lindburg asked the young couple.

They shook their head “no” on account of the overcast day.

“It’s a little chilly today,” Lindburg admitted. “But if you’re thinking about dinner, BluSky is really popular so go on OpenTable and select a time. It’s a great experience.”

Service, style and cleanliness are all key points that an anonymous AAA inspector considers when making an unannounced visit to a hotel. The travel agency giant only bestows 4% of about 25,000 hotel properties in the U.S. and Canada with the coveted Four Diamond designation, which now includes the Radisson Blu in Anaheim.

“There’s some unique elements such as the rooftop restaurant and bar,” said Scott Hammerle, director of the AAA Diamond Program, of the hotel. “One of the key things that stood out was the quality, upscale design. They’ve done a pretty solid job.”

Radisson Blu always aspired to be a Four Diamond hotel before breaking ground. Developers also sought to bring the brand to Anaheim without seeking any transient occupancy tax breaks, despite its location on a parcel abutting a 5 Freeway onramp.

For years, such rebate agreements fueled political rifts at Anaheim City Council. A Four Diamond Hotel Incentive Program previously on the books enticed a trio of luxury hotels to the Anaheim Resort with tax breaks set to tally more than half a billion dollars over 20 years.

Since the program ended in 2016, only the Westin is up and operating from the bunch as a Four Diamond hotel across the street from Disney’s Cali-

fornia Adventure.

All remained cordial when BPM Real Estate Group and Greenlaw Partners brought the Radisson Blu project before council in 2018 without seeking any similar tax rebate agreement. The development plan enjoyed a unanimous vote with no contentious debates over subsidies.


“I believed it proved our point,” said Tom Tait, Anaheim’s former mayor and a staunch critic of the incentive program. “But I also didn’t want to bring this developer into a big controversy just because they wanted to do something without subsidies, which I thought was a very good thing.”

What did help complement the project were Greenlaw Partners’ plans to transform a business plaza that neighbored the Radisson Blu into a gated-community of townhomes. Construction crews are busy building the Toll Brothers’ “100 West,” the future site of about 300 units.

Radisson Blu is considering “good neighbor” programs for residents to come, including discounted stays and dining at its restaurants. The hotel is also hoping to stand tall as a pillar for future development on the other side of the 5 Freeway, one that will help serve as a bridge between the Anaheim Resort and downtown.


For now, all involved are celebrating the triumph of turning a triangle plot into a Four Diamond gem. “The commitment of ownership to take the risk on this side demonstrates that they really have seen something of an opportunity and now we want to leverage that into being an anchor,” Lindburg said. “We took a look at everything that differentiates us from our competitors and said we could do it better over here and draw people onto this side. This is a remarkable spot.”

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California Arts Council honors Alicia Rojas as O.C.'s sole Established Artist Fellow awardee

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

A year ago, Alicia Rojas led an all-women crew putting the finishing touches on “Las Poderosas,” a public art mural project in Costa Mesa honoring local Latina heroines, from Sylvia Mendez to Modesta Avila.

Now, the Colombian American artist from Santa Ana is feeling a little like a *poderosa* herself after being the sole Orange County artist awarded an Established Artist Fellow grant from the California Arts Council. Earlier this month, CAC announced its Individual Artist Fellows for 2021. Following the submission of a grant application and art samples that included “Poderosas,” Rojas was selected as one of 66 honorees in the established tier, which entailed winning \$10,000 in grant money.

When she first learned of the news, it summoned an immediate flashback.

“The grant took me awhile to write,” Rojas said. “It’s pretty much an essay about my art and life throughout these 10 years as an established artist. I thought back on everything, how I got started, the challenges, the highs and lows.”

Rojas’ family immigrated from Bogotá, Colombia, during the 1980s to escape a decades-long bloody civil war. They arrived in North Arlington, N.J., where Rojas, an undocumented 12-year-old at the time who didn’t know any English, enrolled in public school. She recalled being bullied, told to go back where she came from and even spat on by classmates.

After a few years, the family moved to O.C. where other relatives resided. As a Mission Viejo High School student, Rojas realized people thought she had a “funny” accent, again — this time, a Latina Jersey one. But acculturation came easier, thanks to Santa Ana.

It didn’t take long for the city to feel like a home away from home. Within days, an aunt took her to Fourth Street, or La Cuatro, a thoroughfare of Latino shops and services. In time, downtown Santa Ana also proclaimed itself a home to the arts during the 1990s.

“I didn’t know there was an Artists Village back then,” Rojas said. “I wasn’t even an artist yet.”



Scott Smeltzer | Staff Photographer

ALICIA ROJAS, a longtime Santa Ana artist, painter and muralist, was recently named an Individual Artist Fellow by the California Arts Council.

Rojas grew up around a lot of artists and musicians in her family, but it wasn’t until a post-partum depression spell after becoming a mother that a series of self-portraits became a form of therapy; she painted more than a hundred in one year.

“I found myself painting to heal, to communicate things that weren’t allowed in my family,” Rojas said. “Art helped me through all of that.”

With newfound creativity, she frequented downtown Santa Ana’s Artists Village, whether at an open mic at the Den or in the basement of the Santora Arts Building. But as a single mom, she never had the privilege of attending art school, nor being a full-time artist.

“I’ve been criticized for that,” Rojas said. “I’ve been called a hobby artist.”

Rojas much prefers the term

“community artist.” In whatever free time existed away from her day job as an accountant, she almost always involved her talents in service to community, whether participating in mural projects around town or helping establish the Santa Ana Artist(a) Coalition, a grassroots group that advocated for them.

In considering all applicants for its fellowship program, CAC kept a keen eye on artists, like Rojas, whose work engages directly with themes of race, diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility. In the past, CAC awarded arts organizations and nonprofits with grant money but decided to reopen direct support for artists this year. A trio of Emerging Artist Fellows from O.C. joins Rojas in representing the county from the current crop of awardees.

The grant money will allow Rojas to balance and blend commu-

nity-based art projects with more introspective ones. Even before being honored by CAC, Rojas became an artist-in-residence at Grand Central Art Center in Santa Ana, a program that’s a beneficiary of recent Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts grant funding.

Without divulging too many details, she’s hoping to create an exhibit around the migration of bees as a metaphor for her own life between Colombia and California.

“There’s so much power in sharing your vulnerability,” she said. “It took a lot of courage the first time. I’m in that place again, of sharing my vulnerabilities and my immigration story.”

Rojas is planning to visit Colombia soon for research, a country she’s only returned to once since immigrating, and is especially eyeing the annual *Feria de*

las Flores (Flowers Festival) next year.

But before that, she’ll be joining the restoration effort of the fading “La Raza” mural in Santa Ana’s Artesia-Pilar neighborhood and hopes to continue bringing “Poderosas” mural to new communities.

It’s a palette of possibilities that’s felt like a long time coming for the artist.

“I’m turning all my struggles — the bullying, the lack of belonging — into art, unapologetically,” Rojas said. “Santa Ana is the city that has adopted me. It’s the only place where I felt I belonged. That’s why this city is so special to me because I’ve always been in this constant search for belonging.”

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PARK

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sion Viejo Riding Park, a 65-acre plot of city-owned land, into an equestrian-centric community hub.

The riding park is currently leased by the Ridland Group. Robert Ridland is USA’s Show Jumping Coach and led his team to a Silver Medal at the Tokyo Olympics this past summer.

Under Ridland’s stewardship, the park hosts internationally recognized equestrian show competitions, bringing elite horses and riders from all over the world. The events are free for public viewing.

The city, however, wants the property to be more community-minded and invited bidders, including Ridland, to come up with a more inclusive vision.

Almquist is the only one other than Ridland to take a shot. He presented his proposal to the City Council in September. A vote is expected next month.

For the Riding Park project, Almquist brought onto his team Kathy Holman, a San Juan resident since 1972 who owns the Ortega Equestrian Center just down the street and founded the horse shelter/rehab Otra Mas.

Holman, 69, says word on the street is a thumbs up for Almquist’s vision.

“People really like it, they’re really excited,” she says.

The project involves building barns to board up to 125 horses, as well as educational opportunities such as 4H, horsemanship, ranching and homesteading.

In addition to Western riding lessons and English equestrian events, the grounds would host concerts, festivals, antique shows and farmer’s markets.

An elevated food and beverage concession stand would also be added, along with picnic benches, a dog park and a pavilion with a treehouse and community camp fire.

A portion of the grassy area would be set aside for youth sports fields.

“Think of what a typical



Kevin Chang | Staff Photographer

KATHY HOLMAN joins her horse, Dixie, at Ortega Equestrian Center in San Juan Capistrano. Holman is the longtime owner of Ortega Equestrian Center and Otra Mas Equine, an assisted therapy and horse rescue.

Saturday could look like,” says Almquist, who is 44 and the father of four.

“You could have trail rides going on, an event in the arena, kids playing soccer. Then the game is finished — let’s go get something to eat and hang out.”

The proposal also mentions cattle grazing on a knoll, public artwork and the creation of a Flag Hill to fly the largest American flag in South Orange County.

“San Juan is a very patriotic city,” says Almquist. “We have a big military presence.”

A trail would ring the site for pedestrians and horseback riders alike.

Councilman Sergio Farias says he hasn’t decided how to vote yet but is impressed with everything else Almquist has done in the city.

“He’s able to bring in people who are passionate about what they do,” he says.

One of Almquist’s latest San Juan recruits is Heritage Barbecue’s pitmaster Daniel Castillo, who since setting up shop across the street from the Mission has been written up in Food & Wine Magazine and awarded a coveted Michelin Bib Gourmand.

And he is partnering with the architect who designed the Musco Center for the Arts at Chapman University to build a Performing Arts Center in San Juan from scratch.

“He’s brought some energy to town,” says Farias, adding that he recently took a call from a council

member in another city where Almquist is pitching a project. “The council member asked me if he was too good to be true.”

Almquist’s forte is breaking out of the traditional shopping center mold, instead curating a collection of shops and eateries that are “experiential,” creating a community hangout.

His Rodeo 39 Public Market opened in Stanton one year ago to rave reviews. A Rodeo 72 Public Market is now under construction in Whittier.

The developer also prides himself on handshake deals. He figures he met with over 100 community members, one or two at a time, over cups of coffee when he was putting together his River Street proposal.

“My world was coffees,” he says.

Almquist has since moved his office from Newport Beach to San Juan’s historic Los Rios District, the oldest residential neighborhood in California, working on a farmhouse table out of a bathhouse built in 1890.

“It has become very personal,” he says. “I’m super grateful to live in San Juan. I got a bunch of handshake deals with guys, and that’s meaningful. I said this is the way we’re gonna do it. They put their trust in me. With that comes a lot of weight and responsibility. I don’t want to let them down.”

LORI BASHEDA is a contributor to TimesOC.

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New Pie Hole to mark ‘Pies-giving’ this weekend

BY SARAH MOSQUEDA

It’s pie season, people. Those who consider dessert the main event at Thanks-giving dinner will be thank-ful for Pie Hole, the sweet and savory pie and coffee concept, opening its sec-ond Orange County loca-tion at the Anaheim Pack-ing House.

“Our brand recognition in Orange County has been really strong since we opened in Old Towne Or-ange,” Sean Brennan, co-founder and CEO of the Pie Hole said, referring to the company’s first O.C. loca-tion. “We have had a lot of demand to open up more retail locations in Orange County.”

The concept began in 2011 in the Arts District of downtown Los Angeles, with crowds drawn to unique and popular pies like Earl Grey Tea, made with the brewed beverage, and Cereal Killer Cheese-cake, made with fruity breakfast cereal.

The demand for the sought-after slices helped the concept expand to nine locations that include two in Japan and one in Saudi

Arabia.

Throughout its growth, Brennan said the company has always aspired to a lo-cation at Anaheim’s Packing House. “Since the Packing House was developed and opened, we have always had our eye on it,” he said.

Brennan said the Pie Hole looks specifically for locations that are an exten-sion of why the company serves pie and coffee in the first place, which is to bring people together. He said the Packing House’s ability to curate communal culinary experiences and create community, even during lockdown, was encourag-ing.

“They were very success-ful in staying open and hav-ing strong sales perform-ance during the pandemic, that was really validating to us and our decision,” said Brennan. “They showed that they knew how to weather the storm and have a great sense of curating brands.”

To mark the grand-open-ing weekend, a “Pies-giv-ing” ceremony began yesterday and continues to-day, with the first 100 guests each day receiving a free



Courtesy of the Pie Hole

MOE’S PUMPKIN PIE, one of many pies at the Pie Hole in Anaheim and Old Towne Orange.

slice of the Pie Hole’s most popular pies.

If you’re looking to score pie for actual Thanksgiving, you can preorder for local pickup or delivery and nationwide shipping online and at all locations, includ-ing Anaheim, until Nov. 19.

“Our holiday menu leans heavily on the classics,”

Brennan said. “People have come to know us for the holidays as the place to go for pie, and we will not dis-appointment them.”

The holiday menu in-cludes Moe’s pumpkin pie, Mom’s apple crumble pie and salted, caramel pecan pie. Savory pies, like a 9-inch turkey pot pie with a

side of cranberry sauce, are available too.

Besides the new Ana-heim location, the Pie Hole recently celebrated its 10-year anniversary by an-nouncing the Pie Lab, a three-month accelerator culinary program in South-ern California designed to help underserved and mar-

ginalized bakery entrepre-neurs evolve their own food retail concepts.

“We want people in the communities around Pie Hole to be excited about going through a program where they can be men-tored to develop their own baking brand, and we will support them all along the way,” Brennan said.

The Pie Lab selects eligi-ble applicants through a lottery system and a need-based criteria.

The Pie Lab provides as-sistance with the business infrastructure and re-sources to help those se-lected build their own brand and products, with access to in-house retail, marketing and PR from the Pie Hole. Any entrepre-neurs in Orange County who sign up to be a part of the Pie Lab program will have the opportunity for shelf space at the Anaheim location too.

Interested entrepreneurs can submit their applica-tion online at the.pieholela.com/the-pie-lab.

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TRIAL

Continued from page R2

interest in Dao’s insurance policy because prosecutors needed a motive for their murder case.

Wilke was building on what he told jurors in his opening statement: Dao was a seasoned gangster whom Le admired, and Le embraced their lopsided relationship by accepting the nickname Wangster, which means wannabe gangster.

“He looked at James like an older brother and was always willing to help him,” Wilke said.

Wilke said Le was afraid to tell authorities about his act of self defense because he feared Dao’s brother, Alex.

“If Alex learned Wayne had gotten in this fight with James and left him out in

the ocean, there would be retribution,” Wilke said.

But prosecutor Greg Scally said Le murdered Dao over a debt he believed could be paid through a life insurance policy that ben-efited Nguyen, and he and Ritze spoke of their plans to friends, some of whom will testify.

Authorities arrested Le nearly six weeks after an- other fisherman found Dao’s body floating in the ocean, based on a conver-sation Le had with a man who was secretly working with investigators.

They also found his DNA on a GPS tracker placed on Nguyen’s car; Nguyen testi-fied Wednesday that she learned of the tracker through TV news reports.

In his opening state-ment, Scally described for jurors conversations Le had in which he bragged about

the boat being a perfect place to “off somebody.”

He said Le placed the GPS device on Nguyen’s car “to track her every move” as he tried to monitor the life insurance situation.

“But when James didn’t return from the boat trip with Wayne and Sheila, Natalie wasn’t concerned about settling up James’ ac-counts with Wayne,” said Scally, who’s prosecuting the case with Assistant U.S. Atty. Greg Staples.

“She was naturally con-cerned about what had happened to her longtime boyfriend and the father of her two children.”

The trial is expected to continue into next week at least. U.S. District Judge David O. Carter is presid-ing.

MEGHANN M. CUNIFF is a contributor to Times OC.

IRVINE

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care to homeless people, particularly those suffering with mental illness. The pilot program will steer calls for service away from the police department.

At the meeting, Klug and Be Well OC chief exe-cutive Marshall Moncrief referenced the benefits that Huntington Beach and Garden Grove have been seeing since the pro-grams were implemented.

Klug mentioned that during a ride-along he saw a team effectively deescalate a situation with a young man in Huntington Beach who agreed to be taken to a mental health facility. Moncrief said that a Be Well OC team re-sponded to a call in Gar-den Grove and was able to resolve a situation with a woman because members of the team could speak Vietnamese.

“The intervention was able to be done in her lan-guage, in her cultural style, and we got to resolution much more quickly,” Mon-

crief said. “So we’re look-ing forward to bringing that same sensitivity to the diversity of Irvine.”

Irvine City Council members did not discuss the item much other than asking a few clarifying questions for Klug and Moncrief. Vice Mayor Tammy Kim said she was “really excited” about the program. Councilman Larry Agran said he was “very hopeful.”

The programs are being rolled out as the California Department of Justice scrutinizes Orange County law enforcement agencies for the killings of Brandon Lopez and Luis Manuel Garcia, who were both re-portedly suffering from mental health issues.

Lopez, the cousin of Santa Ana City Council-man Johnathan Hernan-dez, was killed on Sept. 28 by Anaheim police after a car chase and hours-long standoff at a construction area on Santa Ana Boule-vard in Santa Ana.

Santa Ana Mayor Vicen-te Sarmiento criticized po-lice for acting like “a firing squad” in Lopez’s shoot-

ing.

Garcia was shot and killed by Tustin police in August. He had been homeless for many years and had been exhibiting symptoms of schizophre-nia, though an attorney representing his family said he was undiagnosed.

It is believed that both men were unarmed be-cause the state is investi-gating the cases under As-sembly Bill 1506, which re-quires the department to investigate all police shootings resulting in the death of an unarmed civil-ian in the state.

Last year, Kurt Reinhold, a homeless Black man with mental health issues, was shot and killed during a confrontation with Or-ange County sheriff’s dep-uties in San Clemente.

The incident provoked outrage similar to the highly publicized Full-erton police killing of Kelly Thomas, a schizophrenic man who was beaten to death a decade ago. AB 1506 took effect in July.

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COLONISTS

Continued from page R4

mascot in the “once a Col-onist, always a Colonist” spirit.

“The term ‘Colonist’ has always represented the early settlers who founded the ‘Mother Colony’ of Ana-heim,” she argued in the petition.

According to “The Ger-man Settlement at Ana-heim,” by Jean Paule, im-migrant Germans pur-chased land from Juan Pacifico Ontiveros in 1857 and established a wine-making colony that be-came Anaheim. By 1884, Mexican, Chinese and In-digenous labor in the vineyards helped trans-form Anaheim into the largest wine-producing community in California at the time until a crop disease crippled its for-tunes.

To this day, the residen-tial “Anaheim Colony” neighborhood near the school is one of four such historic districts in the city and pays homage to the heritage.

“I am very happy that common sense prevailed today,” said Rubio of the vote.

“The student body at Anaheim High has proven today that school spirit is alive and well, and that they know the true history behind the Colonist name is not one that is offensive, or racist, as a small group has tried to claim. Instead it is a symbol of the founders of Anaheim who came to the area from a foreign land and literally built something out of nothing.”

The school was estab-lished in 1898.

Prior to the vote, Ana-heim High School stu-dents considered all the is-sues at hand during a five-day lesson focused on whether to keep, rebrand or replace the nickname and mascot.

The project took place during social studies and English courses.

Three students at the town hall spoke on behalf of each position.

“We learned that Ger-man immigrants wanted to establish a colony in Southern California to grow grapes,” said Daniel Escobar, an Anaheim High School junior. “Modern-day Anaheim ended up being the place they set-tled and founded. Because Anaheim was founded as a colony, it’s appropriate to call us Colonists.”

Escobar stated that the blunderbuss-bearing mas-cot has been misinter-preted as a colonizer re-sponsible for the slaughter of Native Americans.

Brianna Gurrola, an Ana-heim High School senior, favored a compromise so-lution by keeping the name but scrapping the mascot to avoid any such confusion.

“The current Colonist imagery does not look anything like the colonists that settled Anaheim,” said Gurrola.

“Instead, the images used throughout our school’s history look like the pilgrims or American colonists that founded the United States. By remov-ing the weapon from our logo and bringing it more in line with our city’s his-tory, we will show the true meaning of a Colonist.”

Favoring all-around changes to her high school’s identity, Anahi Rico spoke last during the student town hall.

“Many may argue that the original Anaheim colo-nists, after which our school was named, had done nothing wrong, that we were only named the colonists because of the colony that they had peacefully settled, and that the definition of a col-onist is a settler in or an inhabitant of a colony,” said Rico, an Anaheim High School junior.

“But that definition is no longer valid when you take everything into his-tory into account.”

The student also argued that being a Colonist didn’t convey school spirit and only served as a glori-fication of genocide.

Brandi Hoxworth, Ana-heim High School’s ASB president, presented the student vote after all youth speakers addressed the town hall. The school’s 2,400 students had the op-portunity to weigh in.

As the results showed, 41% voted to keep the name and mascot. 34% voted to keep the name but rebrand the mascot. Only 25% voted to scrap both the name and mas-cot.

“We’re upset, obviously, with the result but more than anything with the process itself,” said Ivette Xochiyotl, an activist who protested this week for the name change. “The way that the school ap-proached the situation was completely wrong.”

Xochiyotl claims that the educational material surrounding the vote made no mention of Tongva indigenous people. The group of activists she belongs to plans to speak out at future school board meetings.

Anaheim High School assistant principal Ruben Calleros touted the vote as an exercise in democracy and civility.

“The students at Ana-heim High School voiced their opinions through a schoolwide vote and sent individual student letters representing multiple per-spectives to the Board of Trustees,” he said to close the town hall.

“Ultimately, the Board of Trustees will decide whether or not to take ac-tion with these recom-mendations in mind.”

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