Daily Pilot

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2021 /// Now including Coastline Pilot and Huntington Beach Independent /// dailypilot.com

Costa Mesa beefs up salaries at City Hall

City Council members dedicate up to \$640,000 annually to create competitive packages for hard-to-fill jobs.

BY SARA CARDINE

Costa Mesa city officials are beefing up compensation for hard-to-fill staffing positions to entice top-notch candidates to work and stay on the payroll, including a \$40,000 annual bump in pay for City Manager Lori Ann Farrell Harrison.

In a meeting Tuesday, City Council members dedicated up to \$640,000 annually to create competitive pay packages for part-time and full-time positions across departments. Positions include engineers, building inspectors, police communications, community services leaders and lifeguards.

Human Resources Manager Kasama Lee said staff compared Costa Mesa's pay rates, benefits and employee retirement contributions to those in Huntington Beach, Newport Beach, Santa Ana, Irvine and Fountain Valley.

The adjustments would bring long-term benefits to the city, while the \$320,000 price tag for fiscal year 2021-22 could be absorbed by adjustments to the city's adopted budget.

'There will be savings from fewer position recruitments, less employee turnover, fewer temporary staffing contracts and less reliance on consultant services," Lee said. "In addition, there will be increased productivity and operational efficiencies across the organization."

Finance and Pension and Ad-

See **Salaries**, page A2

Laguna Beach ready to pick next mayor

In its only meeting this month on Tuesday, the City Council is expected to choose a new member to lead its panel.

BY ANDREW TURNER

The Laguna Beach City Council is scheduled to meet for the only time during December on Tuesday, and will determine the city's next mayor and mayor pro tempore.

For the first time in three years, the expectation is that the coastal town will have a new mayor.

Bob Whalen, who has served as the mayor of Laguna Beach in three consecutive terms since 2019, indicated that he believes that there will be a transition with a new council member leading the five-person panel in the year to come.

"It's the meeting where we do transition mayors," Whalen said on the Laguna Beach City Chats podcast on Thursday.

"We haven't done that in the last couple of years. I've been, three years running now, the mayor, but I'm confident there will be a change Tuesday night, and most likely, our mayor pro tem Sue Kempf, I think, will be the likely choice of the council."

Whalen was asked to look back on the defining moments of his tenure as mayor.

"The most memorable, I think, has to be just dealing with the re-



Photos by Don Leach | Staff Photographer

KALIE PETERSON hits the bull's-eye as she throws hatchets at the West Coast opening of Stumpy's Hatchet House in Huntington Beach.

Stumpy's Hatchet House opens in H.B. after being temporarily axed

BY MATT SZABO

Stumpy's Hatchet House is an established franchise on the East

Throwing a hatchet into a wood target somehow is a reminder of a rainy climate with lumberjacks.

Southern California doesn't really have either of those. Huntington Beach native Eric LaShelle hadn't thrown a hatchet since he was in Boy Scouts, but he and his wife, Adriana, were still intrigued by the idea of opening a new lo-

"It just seemed fun, and nobody had heard of it in California," Eric said. "It was a cool challenge ... There's not a lot of California lumberjacks. We have

our hipsters."

All are welcome at the first Stumpy's to exist on the West Coast. The Huntington Beach hatchet-throwing venue opened its doors this week at 7225 Edinger Ave., Unit A.

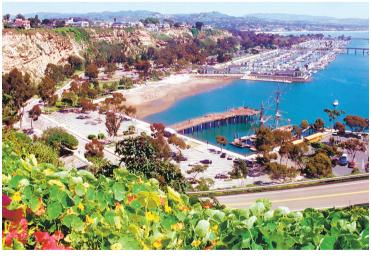
The business houses nine pits, each with two boards. Customers need to sign a waiver and there are "pit bosses" that go over the rules, which include wearing closed-toe shoes and no trick shots. There are also commonsense rules, like not going into the pit when someone else is ready to throw.

Hourlong sessions go for \$30 per person, with discounts for longer amounts of time and for

See Hatchet, page A4



OWNERS ERIC and Adriana LaShelle with their son, Nikko, at one of the throw pits of Stumpy's Hatchet House in Huntington Beach.



DANA POINT HARBOR is shown. A man was convicted in the death of a friend who drowned after being shot three times off the coast.

Orange County man guilty in maritime murder trial

BY MEGHANN M. CUNIFF

A jury on Friday convicted an Orange County man of first-degree murder for the death of a friend who drowned after being shot three times during a late-night boat excursion off the Dana Point Harbor in 2019.

The verdict rejected a self-defense case put forth by Hoang "Wayne" Xuan Le 40, who testified he didn't know Tri "James" Minh Dao had died until he was arrested for his murder two months later.

It follows three weeks of testimony that included acquaintances, some paid informants, who spoke of Le discussing plans to kill Dao, then boasting of the murder afterward. It also follows the removal of a juror who, during the fourth full day of deliberation, said pressure from other jurors was hurting her mental health, then later in the day said she was considering harming herself if forced to continue.

U.S. District Judge David O. Carter authorized the juror to receive free counseling through a federal court employee assistance

See **Trial**, page A3

Art fans flock to Winter Fantasy in Laguna Beach

BY ANDREW TURNER

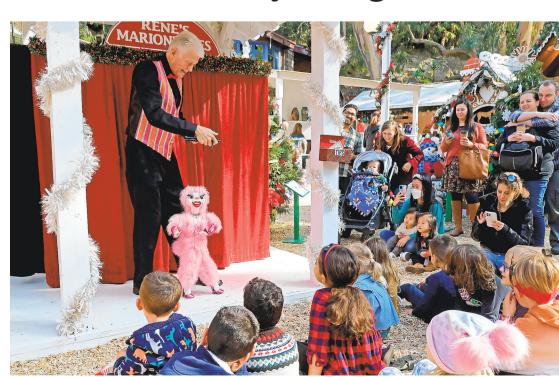
It felt a lot like Christmas at the Sawdust Art Festival on Saturday, as guests walked through the gates into an enchanting outdoor marketplace with festive holiday reminders throughout.

Winter Fantasy, which runs through Dec. 19, offers an opportunity for art collectors and enthusiasts to, once again, interact with more than 150 artists and shop for their work.

The winter showcase, now in its 31st year, has seen the return of the public to the Sawdust Art Festival grounds following the traditional festival season.

Winter Fantasy opens its doors weekends only, making it a hot commodity with a total of 11 days of access. There will be three days remaining as of Sunday.

"I feel like it's been a really popular season," Franky Duschane, director of marketing and public relations for the Saw-



Kevin Chang | Staff Photographer

See **Fantasy**, page A4 **JOE SELPH** entertains the crowd on Dec. 4 during Winter Fantasy at the Sawdust Art Festival in Laguna Beach.

See Mayor, page A2

THE DAILY COMMUTER **PUZZLE**

By Jacqueline E. *Mathews*

ACROSS 1 Fish tank wall buildup 5 Sand particle 10 As _ as a baby's bottom 14 Ice cream scoop holder 15 AM/FM device 16 Remedy 17 Leave out 18 Not feeling well 20 Selleck or Arnold 21 Table supports 22 Plucked instruments 23 Show to be true 25 Way off 26 Desert illusion 28 Lifts with effort 31 Put on a pedestal 32 Baby's utensil 34 Grown-_; big 36 Speak wildly

people 37 Gave walking papers to 38 Annoying faucet sound 39 "_ Loves You"; Beatles song 40 Alfalfa bundles 41 Early autumn baby 42 Most peculiar 44 Slow graceful dance 45 Polish off 46 Hut 47 Goblet parts

50 Achy 51 CD followers 54 Disloyal 57 Joint with a cap 58 Broadcasts 59 Tenant's contract 60 __ tea 61 All _; used up 62 Kick out

DOWN

63 Disarray

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SUDOKU

By The Mepham 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.

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For answers to the crossword and Sudoku puzzles, see page A3.

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before 4 Bumped into 5 Mourn 6 Andes or **Rockies** 7 _ up; totals 8 Three, in old Rome 9 Refusals

10 Scrubs 11 Remove from power 12 Unrestrained 13 Kennedy & **Koppel** 19 Unadorned 21 Theater box 24 Extraordinary

25 Vittles 26 One of the planets 27 Montana's neighbor 28 Does garden work 29 Reason for a bumpy flight 30 Church topper 32 Gritty residue 33 Prefix for school or paid 35 Quarrel 37 Swift 38 Enjoy a feast 40 Cruel man 41 Not taped 43 Death 44 Tidbit 46 Monopoly player's purchase 47 Antlered animal 48 The Bee Gees, e.g. 49 Make money 50 Daytime serial 52 Charges 53 Diploma equivalents, for short 55 Vaudevillian Olsen 56 Actor Harrison 57 Novak or

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Don Leach | Staff Photographer

LAGUNA BEACH Mayor Pro Tem Sue Kempf, from left, Mayor Bob Whalen and Councilwoman Toni Iseman begin an in-chambers meeting on April 6.

MAYOR

Continued from page A1

sponse to COVID," Whalen said. "It was otherworldly in March of 2020 when we were looking at staying home and shutting down the city.

"We shut down the beaches for 41 days. We were interfacing with the governor's office and got those back reopened, and just responding, too, on a daily basis to decide what's the right thing to do here for our community to keep us safe, but to keep our businesses at the same time alive."

Under its consent calen-

dar, the council plans to consider a resolution that would allow for the city's public meetings to continue to be virtual.

The resolution says that public meetings are being held during a state of emergency and that if meetings were held exclusively in an in-person manner, it "would present imminent risks to the health and safety of attendees.'

The council will also consider a 60-day extension of the city's emergency declaration with respect to the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the local emergency was declared on March 17, 2020, there have been 11 extensions.

Approval of the resolution gives the city manager, Shohreh Dupuis, the ability to issue and enforce regulations designed to mitigate the spread of the virus.

The Omicron variant has become a new cause for concern for the health community.

The regular meeting will begin at 5 p.m. with options to participate in person and online.

The meeting can be viewed on Cox cable channel 852, as well as via Zoom.

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SALARIES

Continued from page A1

visory Committee Chair Ralph Taboda suggested the council look beyond the current fiscal year when making a determination.

"Those are costs you should know, I believe, before you vote, because that's going to be a recurring cost for the rest of the life of this city," he said. Ultimately, the council

approved the increases in a 7-0 vote. Councilman Manuel Chavez said it was important to show city employees are valued.

We understand on this

dais that when we vote on things, it's you who implements them," he said. "This is one small step, one small token, for us to fully demonstrate how much we care about you."

Also Tuesday, council members approved a raise in base pay for Farrell Harrison, from \$260,000 to \$300,000, along with an increased employee retirement contribution and the option to use a city-owned vehicle or accept a \$575 monthly vehicle allow-

The move follows a performance evaluation conducted last month by an ad-hoc committee, which included a salary survey of comparable city managers.

It was Farrell Harrison's first evaluation since she started in July 2019. Mayor Pro Tem Andrea

Marr said, even with the most rigorous search process, it can be rare to find a city leader who matches council's mission, goals and values. "With Ms. Farrell Harri-

son, we've been able to accomplish a tremendous amount in the last 29 months," she added.

"I don't think there's anybody who could do it better.'

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TRIAL

Continued from page A1

program before moving in an alternate juror and ordering deliberation to begin anew. He extended the offer on Friday to all jurors.

Carter scheduled Le's sentencing for Feb. 28. Le's codefendant, Sheila Ritze, is to be tried next; a pretrial conference is scheduled Monday morning. Both have been in jail since their arrests in December 2019.

Dao's mother, who attended every day of the trial, cried after the verdict and told a reporter she was grateful for the hard work of the prosecutors, assistant U.S. attorneys Greg Scally and Greg Staples.

The jury's verdict embraces prosecutors' theory that Le and Ritze plotted Dao's murder, with a conviction for conspiracy to commit murder as well as using a firearm during a crime of violence.

Jurors had the option of second-degree murder or manslaughter, but Scally said in his closing argument Dec. 3 that the evidence clearly showed a premeditated conspiracy.

"I want you to call this what this is: murder," Scally told jurors.

Le's lawyers, Craig Wilke and Sheila Sarah Mojtehedi, declined to speak to reporters after the verdict, but they pushed in trial a self-defense narrative that worked to cast Dao as the aggressor. Wilke

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described Le as "not the sharpest knife in the drawer" during this closing argument Dec. 3, reminding jurors of an expert's testimony that he had a mental impairment and lacked the ability to

The case was brought in federal court under maritime jurisdiction law, but Wilke argued federal authorities were essentially doing a favor for Dao's brother, who was an FBI informant and was close with the lead investigator.

He also emphasized that key witnesses didn't come forward until after Le and Ritze's arrest and that their stories simply parroted a narrative that had been provided to them through a U.S. attorney's office news release and related news reports, including a Los Angeles Times

Ritze's mother in law, Sandra Ritze, used in her written statement to prosecutors the same word the news release used to describe the lobsterfishing trip Ritze and Le took Dao on — "guise" — but she misspelled it.

"Usually the conclusion follows the investigation. The conclusion doesn't start the investigation. But I submit to you that's what happened here with the FBI's investiga-

But Scally reminded jurors that the witnesses who said they heard Le talk of plans to kill Dao didn't believe him until after they learned Dao's body had turned up in the Pacific Ocean.

"A body turns up, and you

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reconsider whether you should keep that information to yourself," Scally said.

Le took the stand in his defense, testifying that the trip was a genuine lobsterfishing trip that took a scary turn when Dao lost his temper and pointed a gun at Le when Le refused to loan him

Prosecutors said Le was actually motivated by Dao's life insurance policy. They said Le had discussed killing Dao because Dao owed him \$30,000 to \$40,000, which he thought he could recover from a life insurance policy through Dao's longtime girlfriend, Natalie Nguyen.

Le placed a GPS tracker on Nguyen's car and testified he did so because he wondered where Dao was and wanted to try to find him, but he admitted in cross-examination that the tracker was for Nguyen, not Dao.

Prosecutors also said Le's claim that he thought Dao might have swam back to shore was unbelievable. The boat was 3 miles off the Dana Point Harbor when Le shot

"Ironman triathlons don't even involve a 3-mile swims. I think they're 2.4," Scally told the jury. "And in Ironmans, they don't do them fully clothed, in the middle of the night with nobody else around, with two bullet holes in them, bleeding profusely from blunt-force trauma wounds."

MEGHANN M. CUNIFF is a contributor to Times OC

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BRUCE FREUND

heats up a glass

creation as he gives a glass-

demonstration

during Winter

blowing

Fantasy.

FANTASY

Continued from page A1

dust Art Festival, said. "Everybody's hungry for unique art, for unique gifts, and of course, people are coming together for the holidays again.

"They're seeing families and their loved ones again, so I think they're trying to commemorate them with special unique gifts, and espeexperiences, they're coming here and having a lovely experience outside in the canyon with the arts."

Nikolai Erngren, who said he has shown his work at the Sawdust Art Festival for more than 20 seasons. had an assortment of mixed media creations, including heart-shaped magnets, nature's creatures and clocks, some with wagging tails ticking off the seconds.

"I learned fairly early, when I came to this country, I had to invent a job for myself," said Erngren, who is Swedish. "I've never been employed, nor will I ever be, because the thought is awful. I made myself an artist. I made a decision that I'm going to try to live off

"I also realized that in order to sell a lot easier, it helps if it's immediately obvious what it is I'm selling. I



CHILDREN PLAY with animals at the Itty Bitty Petting Zoo.

NIKOLAI ERNGREN, shown in his booth during Winter Fantasy in Laguna Beach.



made peculiar shapes that I couldn't sell if they didn't have a function, and then I realized when I put the clockwork in, then they become a functional thing that people can immediately relate to."

Suzi White and Courtney Finch shared a booth after operating as neighbors at

prior festival appearances. Their stand drew a crowd. as White had colored Santa hats furnished from yarn, and Finch had an assortment of handcrafted jewelry available. "The Santa hats started

about four or five years ago," said White, who added she has shown her work

Photos by Kevin Chang Staff Photographer

at Winter Fantasy for nine

"Ever since then, it's just taken over, and it was actually a lot of the artists who were wearing them, which was kind of cool. It's just so fun seeing people walking around with some. It just makes it so festive and just super fun and cute."

Admission to Winter Fantasy is \$10 for adults, \$7 for seniors and \$5 for children between 6 and 12. Attendees also have the opportunity to take pictures with Santa.

Live musical performances take place from three different stages, with space dedicated for an audience to sit and watch.

A crowd stood next to the entrance on Saturday afternoon, as the El Morro Elementary Honors Chorus lit up the facility with its rendition of various holiday singalongs, including "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" "Jingle and Bells.'

Eric Smith of Monterey Park shared his experience at Winter Fantasy, indicating that it was a case of both mutual and independent interests driving his trip to Laguna Beach.

While his partner comes for the shopping, he enjoys taking photos of the atmosphere and the artwork on display.

"My significant other is shopping for herself," Smith said. "I do a little shopping. I'm a photographer, so I walk around, take some candid shots and sit and listen to music while

she's shopping.' Smith also remarked that Winter Fantasy is returning to form, leaving parking spots in high demand for those looking to attend the

"It's surprising," Smith said. "Last time, we came down around the same time, around 10 o'clock, and we found easy parking. This year, we came down the same time, and we had to park in one of the lots and take a shuttle, which is fantastic and easy, but I'm surprised at the number of people that showed up this

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HATCHET

Continued from page A1

group play. There are a restaurant and bar inside, as well as a "mosh pit" in the back that features a larger TV, a big set of Jenga blocks and a more lounge type of vibe.

Stationed in each area is "bull's-eye bell." The LaShelles' son Nikko, 12, has gotten quite good at throwing bull's-eyes.

Stumpy's Technically throwers must be at least 18 years old, but there are plans for a family night in the future, as well as a Wednesday night league.

Beer and hatchets may not seem to mix, but not to worry, customers have supervision.

The Stumpy's corporate website emphasizes social distancing between groups, private pits and sanitized surfaces.

"When it gets rowdy in here, it's actually really Adriana LaShelle cool, said.



Don Leach | Staff Photographer

A PLAYER lines up the bull's-eye on the target boards at Stumpy's Hatchet House.

The staff of 12 people includes general manager Fawn Rinalduzzi, a longtime family friend of the LaShelles with a back-

ground in startup companies and hospitality. "I think we're going to kill

it," Rinalduzzi said. "I think this is kind of the trend nowadays, beyond just going out to have a bite or going to a bar. Having an experience or an activity. I know that's what I look for now when I go out. It's a date night, it's good for bachelorette and bachelor parties, team building. It's endless. We can do birthday parties, we can do retirement parties, we can do your ex' divorce 'axe

parties. Whether it's just for fun or for letting off steam, the LaShelles believe in the product. They're happy to finally open for business, after the coronavirus pandemic almost put an axe to the business.

Getting all the paperwork complete during COVID-19 was problematic, Adriana said, and construction took about seven months.

The unit was formerly a mattress store.

"There was no plumbing, there was no electricity everywhere, there was no framing," she said. "I mean, there was nothing. We created that kitchen out of nothing. When we

hopefully open an old restaurant. Then it will be a lot quicker." Yes, maybe Stumpy's will take off in Southern California. Kaylista Desa, who was

open another one, we will

hired as a pit boss, wouldn't bet against it. "I had never thrown, but

I had seen all of the videos that are online," Desa said. "It's a lot more fun than I thought it would be.'

Reservations are encouraged and can be made online by visiting the Huntington Beach location's website, Facebook page or by calling (714) 980-1402.

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