

'Life of Pi' roars to life at Segerstrom



Don Leach / Staff Photographer

PUPPETEER Aaron Haskell leads the tiger puppet "Richard Parker," during a demonstration of the life-like puppets as used in the production of "Life of Pi" at Segerstrom Hall in Costa Mesa.

A special look at the Royal Bengal tiger puppet that stars in the production.

BY SARAH MOSQUEDA

When Richard Parker slinks into the room, it is difficult not to catch your breath. The Royal Bengal tiger puppet is the star of the stage production of "Life of Pi" and the puppeteers who operate him — Aaron Haskell, Anna Vomacka and Anna Leigh Gortner — have mastered the feline form. They move the 35-pound puppet with realistic movements and sounds that mimic a real tiger, making you wonder how safe you are when he breathes into your lap.

"We really try not to Disney-fy the animals," said Taha Mandviwala, who plays the role of Pi in the production. "We want to give them the physics that animals have, that sense of ferocity, that sense of weight, the sense that this thing has the capacity to kill at any moment."

On stage at Segerstrom Center for the Arts in Costa Mesa now through June 15, "Life of Pi" is based on the 2001 novel by Yann Martel of the same name, adapted for the stage by Lolita Chakrabarti. The story follows 16-year-old Pi, who gets shipwrecked in the middle of the Pacific Ocean when the boat carrying his family and the animals in their zoo from India to Canada sinks. Stuck on a lifeboat for 227 days, he is joined by a hyena, a zebra, an orangutan

and a tiger named Richard Parker.

The animals play key roles in the storytelling and, in addition to Richard Parker, the touring cast and creative team bring an entire zoo to life using the captivating puppets. The day after opening night, Segerstrom hosted a demonstration of the tiger puppet at the Judy Morr Theater, where the famous feline purred and chuffed at a nervous crowd.

Movement director and puppeteer Betsy Rosen and John Hoche, associate puppetry and movement director for "Life of Pi" U.S., joined Haskell, Vomacka and Gortner for the demo along with Mandviwala. The production is a decorated one, with three Tony awards, the Olivier Award for Best Play and the 2022 Best Supporting Actor award for a group of puppeteers' portrayal of Richard Parker.

"That means not only was a tiger nominated for an award, but a puppet was also nominated for this award and the team of puppeteers that brought Richard Parker to life were all nominated," said Hoche. "The incredible thing is [that] they won, so that is a huge step forward for understanding and appreciating the art form of puppetry."

Operating the tiger puppet is a task that requires skill and finesse

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Math prodigy, 14, to graduate from UCI, will seek doctorate

BY SARA CARDINE

Tycho Elling just turned 14 but already has his sights set on earning a doctorate degree. He simply needs to get one ceremonial detail out of the way — graduating with UC Irvine's class of 2025.

The teen math prodigy from San Juan Capistrano will walk in a June 14 commencement with hundreds of twentysomething undergraduates earning their bachelor's degrees in engineering, computer and physical sciences.

He's not looking forward to the pomp and circumstance, perhaps because he's a little shy by nature but also because Tycho's intellectual pursuits, as impressive as they are, are not born from a desire to win, achieve or accomplish something, but out of an irrepressible desire to learn.

That's why the college grad, not content to rest on the laurels of

his bachelor's degree, is taking his talents to USC's doctoral program in the fall. After that?

"I don't know yet," the teen said in an interview Monday. "Maybe I'll look at [postdoctoral work]. I haven't thought that far ahead yet."

In the crowd at next Saturday's ceremony will be Tycho's parents, Tim and Christina Elling — who earned their respective doctorates in applied computational mathematics and urban issues in education relatively late in life, in their 30s — and sisters Athena, 12, 10-year-old Zora and Nova, 4.

This isn't the family's first rodeo. The Orange County party of five attended similar ceremonies at Irvine Valley College in 2023, when a just-turned-12-year-old Tycho earned his associate's degree as the campus' youngest

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Don Leach / Staff Photographer

TYCHO ELLING, a 14-year-old mathematics prodigy, walks the pathways at UCI, where his is set to graduate with his bachelor's degree.



Don Leach / Staff Photographer

GUESTS pore through musical offerings at Sound Spectrum, which first opened in 1967.

Orange County's oldest music store reopens in Laguna Beach

Siblings James, Audrey and Sadie Wilcox will run Sound Spectrum, which has served the Laguna Beach community since 1967.

BY ANDREW TURNER

Wave Baker, a longtime employee of Sound Spectrum, will tell anyone who listens that the place has "an energy of its own."

So when the Laguna Beach-based record shop, which opened on South Coast Highway in 1967, closed in October, Baker had a feeling it wasn't over.

Whether it was more than a feeling, what happened next was more than he hoped for.

A music-oriented family came forward with a bid, planning to revive the business and restore the building. James, Audrey and Sadie Jean Wilcox, siblings who grew up in the nearby city of Tustin, worked together to reopen Orange County's oldest music store.

After spending more than two decades working under the original owners, Jimmy and Edith Otto, Baker was asked to remain

See **Record**, page A6

Lawsuit alleges discrimination against Vietnamese women nail techs

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

The fight for licensed manicurists to be able to work as self-employed without passing a test is going to court.

Backed by Vietnamese American nail technicians and nail salon owners holding protest signs, including “stop Asian hate,” Republican Assemblyman Tri Ta announced Monday morning the filing of a discrimination lawsuit outside of the Ronald Reagan Federal Building and U.S. Courthouse in Santa Ana.

“Earlier this year, our office received many concerns from Vietnamese American manicurists and nail salon owners,” Ta said at a news conference. “Their lives were turned upside down overnight when the independent contractor status expired on January 1.”

“It is not just unfair, it is discrimination,” he added.

Licensed barbers, cosmetologists, estheticians and electrologists can still work as independent contractors under state labor law without being subjected to a rigorous test.

But exemptions under Assembly Bill 5 expired this year for manicurists.

The change has left manicurists and nail salon owners alike confused as to whether non-employees can continue renting booths for their businesses — a decades-long industry practice.

Ta, whose 70th Assembly District encompasses Little Saigon, said 82% of manicurists in the state are Vietnamese, with 85% of those being women.

The federal discrimi-



Gabriel San Román

ASSEMBLYMEMBER Ta spoke at a press conference for a lawsuit alleging discrimination against Vietnamese nail techs.

nation suit, filed on May 31, represents several Orange County nail salon businesses as well as individual manicurists.

Gov. Gavin Newsom and the heads of five state agencies and boards are named as defendants.

“This lawsuit seeks only one thing — to make sure that all professionals in the beauty industry are treated equally and to eliminate the obvious discrimination against the Vietnamese community,” the complaint reads.

Attorney Scott Wellman, who is litigating on behalf of the nail salon owners and manicurists, held up a copy of the complaint during the news conference. He claimed the equal protection rights of his clients

under the U.S. Constitution are being violated by the lack of an exemption.

“This wrong has to be righted,” Wellman said.

The suit represents a change in strategy for those fighting on behalf of aggrieved manicurists and nail salon owners.

In February, Ta introduced Assembly Bill 504, which aimed to reinstate the exemption for manicurists, but later claimed the proposed legislation couldn't even get a hearing from the committee on labor and employment. He followed up in March by calling for the U.S. Department of Justice to launch an investigation into alleged racial discrimination codified in California labor law, before ultimately turn-

ing to federal court.

“These hardworking professionals deserve the same freedom to set their own hours, to choose their own clients, to rent their own booths and to run their own businesses on their own terms just like other peers in the beauty industry,” Ta said Monday.

Ta and the suit cite statistics from a UCLA Labor Center report on California's nail salon industry that was published last year. Co-authors of the report, though, have been publicly critical of Ta's efforts to have the exemption reinstated.

“As an industry predominantly consisting of Vietnamese and female manicurists, AB 5 protects the community from misclassi-

fication and labor violations that have long existed at the workplace so that they can receive the wages, benefits and protections that all workers deserve,” said Lisa Fu, executive director of the California Healthy Nail Salon Collaborative and report co-author.

The report found that 80% of nail salon workers are considered low-wage earners, with 30% of manicurists in the state classified as self-employed, which is triple the national rate.

Assemblywoman Lorena Gonzalez, who authored the sunset provision in AB 5, previously told TimesOC that the nail salon industry has a long history of high misclassification rates that needed added guardrails for labor rights “while still

allowing individual business owners the ability to work as a sole proprietor and simply rent space from a salon.”

Manicurists who back the federal discrimination suit spoke out at Monday's press conference.

“I want to be able to continue to work as an independent contractor,” said Loan Ho.

“It gives me more flexibility. I have time to raise my children.”

Emily Micelli works out of Blu Nail Bar at Fashion Island in Newport Beach, which is the lead plaintiff in the suit. She has more than 20 years of experience as a nail technician and doesn't want to be a nail salon employee.

Micelli left the previous nail salon she worked out of when the owner wouldn't allow her to continue as an independent contractor.

“I cannot keep clients on my phone, make appointments and come up with my own custom design packages,” Micelli said after the news conference. “I have to abide by the salon's rules. It will make me lose business.”

Micelli believes that while the law may be well-intended, it otherwise serves to discriminate against Vietnamese American women like herself.

“I know the law wants to protect us as workers,” she said, “but being a W-2 [worker] is better for office workers not for people like us, who are artists. I'm actually an artist — a nail artist.”

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Nurses' union wins pay boost, security upgrades

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

Registered nurses who work at the Anaheim Regional Medical Center voted to ratify their first-ever labor contract with the hospital on Wednesday night, an agreement they claim will improve patient care.

As negotiations carried on, safety remained a top priority for nurses represented by SEIU Local 121RN. The union in April held an info picket outside of the hospital to draw attention to such issues.

In the past, nurses and their aides have screened people for weapons and drugs at the hospital's emergency room entrance.

While nurses did not gain the walk-through metal detectors they pushed for in bargaining, the hospital has agreed to staff security guards with metal detector wands at different entry points within six months to a year.

Security staff will also take over bag searches and provide identification for visitors.

“That's something we're not responsible for anymore,” said Liza Lorenzo, a telemetry nurse who has worked at the hospital for the past 15 years. “We have more time to do bedside care, as opposed to going through people's belongings, which was not safe for us, as well.”

When reached, a spokesperson for AHMC Healthcare, the company that owns the hospital, declined to comment on the contract.



James Carbone

UNION NURSES picket outside their hospital Anaheim Regional Medical Center during contract negotiations to draw attention to what they say is unsafe staffing levels and widespread disrepair at the AHMC Anaheim Regional Medical Center.

The security changes come before Assembly Bill 2975, which the union advocated for and requires hospitals throughout the state to have weapons detection screening policies by March 2027.

Nurses also won a minimum 19% pay raise over

the four years of the contract.

The salary boost comes with additional measures to ensure there are four nurses for every patient at a specialty unit, a ratio mandated by state law. For telemetry units, the nurse-patient ratio is five-to-one.

Lorenzo claimed that during the pandemic the hospital stretched its nurse-to-patient ratios beyond their limits but nurses now have protections in place to hold management accountable.

“We made sure that we have a resource nurse for

every five nurses or more,” said Lorenzo, who helped negotiate the contract. “If there's five nurses in the unit, we will have a resource nurse dedicated for that unit alone. Obviously, better staffing leads to faster response, reduces medical errors and prevents staff

burnout.”

Nurses are hopeful that the boosted salaries and ratio protections will go a long way toward addressing what they called inadequate staffing at the hospital.

The union also proposed forming a pandemic task force following the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic that overwhelmed hospitals in Orange County. The contract guarantees that nurses will have enough personal protective equipment for three months while following U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention guidelines.

“We're more prepared in the case of another pandemic, as opposed to just scrambling,” Lorenzo said.

As nurses also complained about broken-down MRI machines and the lack of running hot water at times, the hospital has also pledged to make timely repairs to medical equipment while addressing other maintenance issues.

Lorenzo beamed with pride when speaking about critical provisions of the newly ratified contract, which arrived in less than one year's time since safety concerns first prompted nurses to unionize.

“Our efforts have paid off,” she said. “Now we have our first contract. This is not only for us, but also for our patients and the community.”

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Hilbert Museum partners with Pageant of the Masters to tell a story of California art

BY SARAH MOSQUEDA

When Diane Challis Davy, director of the Pageant of the Masters, was first invited to tour the Hilbert Museum of California Art in Orange last year, she was struck by the many images she knew would be a fit for Laguna Beach's famed living picture show.

Mark Hilbert, who co-founded the museum with his late wife Janet, walked Challis Davy through the museum personally and sent her home with art books to look through. She came across a painting in one of those books that she knew had to be included in the Pageant.

"Mark gave me some of his beautiful books and I took them home and right away, I knew that 'Monday at the Crab Cooker' was perfect for a Pageant tableau," said Challis Davy.

The work by local artist Bradford J. Salamon depicted three men having dinner at the iconic Newport Beach restaurant. Challis Davy knew the scene inside the popular seafood eatery fit well with the 2025 Pageant of the Masters theme, "Gold Coast: Treasures of California," which is intended to be a tour of some of the most notable works of art on view at California's coastal museums.

Unbeknownst to Challis Davy, she had just selected a piece that documents the beginnings of the Hilbert Museum itself.

"I chose it before Bradford told me he is [one of the men] in the picture, Mr. Hilbert is painted in the picture and Gordon McClelland is in the picture," said Challis Davy.

On Monday nights the three art lovers would get together over a fish dinner and discuss the idea of opening a museum that could display the collection amassed by Mark Hilbert and his late wife, Janet.

"We would just get together and talk about art until we were deaf," Hilbert said.

The meeting of the minds was the first imagining of the Hilbert Museum as it stands today and Salamon said he recognized his-



James Carbone

MARK HILBERT, the founder of the Hilbert Museum of California Art, points to himself painted in the painting "Monday at the Crab Cooker" by Bradford J. Salamon at the Hilbert Museum of California Art.

tory was being made.

"I felt privileged to be watching the soup being made with Mark and Gordon and the idea of a museum," said Salamon. "As we kept going every Monday and talking, I realized I was really dealing with people who could pull this off, I was dealing with a visionary who is going to do this; and I thought I should document it."

Salamon joined Challis Davy, Hilbert and Hilbert Museum director Mary Platt on the evening of June 4 in a panel discussion at the museum discussing the painting and other works selected from the Hilbert Collection that will be featured in this year's pageant.

The Pageant of the Masters has been a tradition at Laguna Beach's Festival of Arts since 1932, when a few living pictures were presented as the "Spirit of the Masters Pageant."

"It grew over the years," said Challis Davy. "Thanks to a fellow by the name of Roy Ropp, who was a builder in town and a painter. He is considered the father of the pageant because he gave us our name, Pageant of the Mas-

ters."

Ropp used his expertise to add painted backdrops on a larger stage and incorporated music and narration in the show. He is also responsible for introducing "The Last Supper," as the finale, a tradition that continues today.

Each year the show follows at theme, such as last year's "A La Mode: The Art of Fashion," which put the spotlight on popular styles of dress in various periods. Challis Davy works closely with her team to find the right works of art to present that best represent the theme.

"Proportion of overall canvas to figure is very important to us and how the figures are aligned," said Challis Davy. "We are going to take this two dimensional painting and we are going to turn it back into 3D, so it's all about the proportions."

Challis Davy said she also keeps an eye out for works with meaningful narratives, something the Hilbert Museum prides itself on.

"We specialize in what we call California narrative art, which is art that tells a story," Platt said of

the Hilbert. "You can also call it representational art or figurative art. It certainly has people in it, or the work of people. You might see a boat, or a pier or ranch or road."

In addition to "Monday at the Crab Cooker," the pageant has also selected Phil Dike's "Afternoon at Diver's Cove," Lee Blair's "Mary by the Sea," and another of Salamon's oil works, "Seal Beach Nighthawks," which depicts a cold night at a seaside corn dog shack.

The Millard Sheets mosaic "Pleasures Along the Beach," which is the crown jewel of the expanded Hilbert Museum and was relocated from a Home Savings & Loan building in Santa Monica, will also be featured in the pageant along with a third Salamon painting, commissioned by the pageant.

Since the segment on Salamon will include the Crab Cooker and the corn dog stand, Davy was hoping to include a third work that depicted a restaurant or bar.

"I thought there is got to be a third one and I look and looked and I couldn't find one that was

suitable for our stage, so I thought 'OK, let's take a leap of faith and let's commission an artwork' and that painting is now in the Festival of Arts' permanent collection."

Salamon was given a choice of painting the landmark Sandpiper lounge in Laguna Beach — affectionately called the "Dirty Bird" by locals — the Swallows Inn or the Marine Room Tavern on Ocean Avenue in Downtown Laguna Beach. The artist went with the Marine Room, painting a scene of patrons at the bar and in front of the fireplace.

"I put different little Easter eggs in there regarding art history; on the far left there is "Folies-Bergère" by Monet, there is Winslow Homer's "Breezing Up," which they have done at the pageant for many years," Salamon pointed during the panel discussion.

There is also a small cat peeking out from behind a bar stool, a reference to the "McSorley's Cats" by John Sloan, and a balloon dog on one patron's hat, a nod to Jeff Koons.

"These were all little things that I thought would be fun to put in," Salamon said.

Mark Hilbert will also get in on the fun this summer, joining the cast of volunteers at the pageant on "Hilbert Museum Night at the Pageant" on July 9 to play himself in the "Monday at the Crab Cooker" painting.

"We are not going to ask him to shave for this but he will have to be subjected to the make up application process," Davy said.

The 2025 Pageant of the Masters opens July 5 and recipients of the Hilbert Museum e-newsletter will receive a 20% ticket discount. For more information on the 2025 Festival of the Arts and Pageant of the Masters, visit foapom.com. For details on the Hilbert Museum exhibitions and the five works selected from the Hilbert Museum collection go to hilbertmuseum.org.

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Playground revamp aims to rebuild connections

BY MATT SZABO

Roberto Alcaras has a fondness for the place he's lived his entire life, but even he admits that the Bishop Manor townhome community in Santa Ana was not safe.

Former Santa Ana Police Chief Paul Walters reportedly once called it the worst neighborhood in the city. Violence, gangs and drug dealing were commonplace.

"This was the ghetto," said Alcaras, who turned 38 on Friday and has lived in four different residences in the 164-unit townhome community over the decades. "This was bad."

He said the community has become racially divided over the years. Latino Americans live on the north end and Cambodian Americans on the south end of the property, a mix of renters and homeowners.

The playground in the middle of Bishop Manor could have served as a unifying element. Instead, the dilapidated space served more as a litterbox for neighborhood cats.

"There were broken swings [and] hazards," said Alcaras, who lives in the community with three of his seven children. "[There were] broken glass bottles. I don't know if I can use big words other than 'trash.'"

Alcaras became the president of the Bishop Manor homeowners association a couple of years ago, but the community also needed outside help.

Enter the Orange County chapter of Community Associations Institute, a nonprofit organization that advocates for HOAs and other community associations.

CAI broke ground on a Bishop Manor playground reconstruction project on Thursday. CAIOC President-elect Mike Perlof said that on Saturday, many of the nonprofit's members would join in a big work party at the property.

It's all part of a new CAIOC program launched in January that's called CAID.

"Our sole purpose is to identify communities that need help with whatever," said Perlof, a Santa Ana resident who serves as the committee chair. "It can be anything. This is our first pilot project. I think this one really pulled on the heartstrings of our board and our membership, not only because of the playground."

Kidworks, a play-based learning nonprofit based in Santa Ana,



James Carbone

SHERYL ROTH, an artist from Brea, draws a mural at the playground at Bishop Manor in Santa Ana on Thursday.

was using the Bishop Manor clubhouse as a meeting place until roof damage forced them to relocate years ago. Perlof said that Scott Kutner, a CAI member and philanthropist who runs the HOA Community Reinvestment Fund of Orange County, wanted to help out.

"His organization had done a lot of legwork identifying Bishop Manor in specific, but just communities in need in general throughout Orange County," Perlof said. "It's like the perfect fit."

Due to insurance issues, CAID was limited in how much it could help with the clubhouse, so it focused its attention on the playground.

Conor Ross is a construction manager volunteering his time to lead the entire build. He lives just a few miles away from Bishop Manor, which makes the project a bit more personal for him.

"This playground being right in the middle [of the complex], this is the chance for the cultures to mix," he said. "It's like oil and water, if it weren't for the kids. Having this super-cool, beautiful playground makes that possible. I can't think of a much better use of our time than helping out here."

Donations from a long list of project partners are making it possible, with BEHR Paint and Precision Painting donating a deep blue for a pair of mural walls. Ross' office manager, who operates her own Sheryl Bale Photography business, is designing murals on each wall.

Gone will be graffiti and what Ross called a "deerly post," a short post that was formerly the bottom of a slide that could seriously injure or kill a child that fell on top of it.

Perlof, a licensed general contractor, said he was so excited to start the process that he couldn't

sleep on Wednesday night.

"They're just dealing with keeping the homes habitable," he said of the Bishop Manor homeowners association. "The playground and clubhouse are on the back burner, and they have been for it seems like a long time ... [The kids] all have their own agendas for the playground, which is adorable. Mostly it's been a lot of, 'Fix our soccer field, can we get grass?'"

Turf will be installed on roughly half of the playground, where the children indeed already play soccer, using the gates on each side as goals. Wood chips will comprise the rest of the area.

Perlof said he anticipates having a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the playground later this month. He credited CAIOC executive director Denise Kennedy for supporting the project.

"This is totally out of the box for CAI," he said. "It's something that's new and different, and she's

leading the charge."

Perlof said that CAID hopes to work on a significant project each year, uplifting other neighborhoods around the county.

Meanwhile, Antis Roofing is working on repairing the Bishop Manor clubhouse roof. Alcaras said the goal is for Kidworks to return by mid-August.

That, combined with the new playground, could transform Bishop Manor. Alcaras, a successful youth soccer coach in the area, will soon have a safe place for his youngest child to play.

"I'm grateful that there's people out there willing to help the community like this," he said. "I was joking around that it's not Bishop Manor, it's residential Bishop Manor now ... I consider this residential. I consider this a place for families to live."

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San Clemente bides time protecting sewer from landslide

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

A collapsing coastal bluff is imperiling a key part of San Clemente's sewer system, the Linda Lane pump station, like never before.

Ten years ago, the city put up a retaining wall to guard the pump station. An active, ever-encroaching landslide has since forced San Clemente to scale the wall up to 8 feet in height and reinforce it with raker system supports.

Despite all efforts, the slow-moving landslide has breached the wall around the pump station and the city now faces the threat of a sewer spill.

The San Clemente City Council on Tuesday weighed whether to approve a \$2.3-million emergency contract to armor the pump station with caissons and tiebacks before the arrival of significant rainstorms or gamble by delaying the project for a few months to solicit competitive bids.

"It's at its limit with soil and material that's going over the top

of the wall and starting to push up against the pump station," David Rebensdorf, San Clemente's public works director, told the City Council. "The concern is, if we have another rainy season — not necessarily like last year, but the year before — we're going to continue to have more slope movement and then, potentially, damage to our building."

According to a city staff report, the pump station and beach trunk sewer line transport about a million gallons of raw wastewater every day to San Clemente's water reclamation plant to be treated.

San Clemente contacted two local contractors in April and received a \$2.3-million bid from Alliance Diversified Enterprises to begin work on protecting the pump station.

At the meeting, council members debated declaring the situation an emergency, which would give City Manager Andy Hall the ability to approve the contract on that basis.

Rebensdorf noted that an

emergency designation would allow construction to begin in August and wrap up before the next rainy season. By contrast, competitive bids would delay it.

"If you have a car that's about to break down, and you've got a long trip coming up, do you try and make that long trip with the miles that you have on it, or do you get the repairs done up front in that timely manner?" Councilmember Mark Enmeier asked rhetorically. "I'm leaning more along the lines of doing the emergency repair."

Enmeier found himself in the minority as his council colleagues cited concerns about the cost of the emergency contract.

"This fence, I'm convinced, isn't going to break tomorrow or next week," Mayor Steve Knoblock said. "We're balancing the risk of it failing versus the cost savings to the taxpayers. I'd rather have the taxpayers save a little money, get a competitive bid, get the best price possible and get the job done."

Knoblock's threat assessment

contrasted with an emergency coastal development permit issued to San Clemente by the California Coastal Commission in February.

"It is the city's opinion that it is not a matter of if, but when the landslide will fully topple the wall, which can happen at any time," the permit stated. "The city has stated that if no action is taken, the lift station will likely be severely damaged or completely destroyed which may lead to potential untreated sewage reaching the beach [and] ocean which is less than 100 [feet] away from the lift station."

Such a breach could also send sediment from the landslide closer to the San Clemente Beach Trail and even the Lossan railroad tracks, which are already under emergency erosion repairs led by the Orange County Transportation Authority and Metrolink through this week elsewhere along the city's coastline.

Councilmember Zhen Wu said he was confident that with La

Niña conditions over, San Clemente could afford to bargain the fate of the pump station for a few months in hopes of securing a cheaper contract without any harm to nearby infrastructure.

"The chance that we have very heavy rain in this winter isn't great," he said. "There's always risk. I'm willing to take that risk. It's going to save us money."

San Clemente would have to have its emergency permit extended in the meantime while securing necessary railroad permits.

"I believe the staff report," Councilmember Rick Loeffler added. "But if we can save some money on this, it might help us in other public works projects that we have going and that we have to do."

At the end of the discussion, the council voted unanimously to put the project out for competitive bids.

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PUPPETS

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from three players, who each operate the head, the heart and hindquarters of the animal. Haskell, Vomacka and Gortner operate the tiger during about three of the eight weekly shows, since the role is quite physically demanding. The head puppeteer operates the head and cage of the animal, or the ribs, via a handle on the spine.

"Their primary objective is to keep the head active; there are ear triggers and a jaw trigger there," said Rosen.

The heart puppeteer manipulates the front paws of the tiger and creates breath within the tiger while the hind puppeteer operates the back paws and tail, maintaining the gait and walk of the tiger and using the tail to express emotion.

"I find a lot of personality in the tail," said Gortner. "Just like any animal, when Richard Parker is scared, his tail will tuck. If he is feeling aggressive or angry, it will lift. If he is hungry, it might wag a bit."

Sounds the tiger makes also

signal emotion.

"All three puppeteers are mic'd live which means we are making all of the sounds live, and that goes for all of the puppets in the show," said Rosen.

Mandviwala said acting with a puppet has two sides to it.

"One side is very technical and one side is artistic. On an artistic level, you are acting alongside a puppet, you really need to treat it completely in the same way you would treat working with another actor," said Mandviwala. "On a technical level of acting with it, you also have to keep a lookout for your fellow coworkers, the puppeteers in the boat."

While Mandviwala and the other actors are very aware of the puppeteers, the audience is less so, especially as the story goes on. It seems we notice them less and less as our imaginations take us through the story. The amount of emotion Haskell, Vomacka and Gortner evoke from the audience with a puppet is incredible. As a viewer, you are aware you are not really seeing a goat get eaten by a tiger for example, yet the crowd gasps and grimaces as if they are.

"A teacher told me once that the audience, just like you, came



Don Leach / Staff Photographer

MOVEMENT director Betsy Rosen, and puppeteers Anna Leigh Gortner, Anna Vomacka and Aaron Haskell, from left, answer audience questions.

here with your imagination open," said Haskell. "You wanted to see something good and see something come to life and so a lot of that is on us to make sure you stay in that imagination. You want to believe, we allow you to believe and we make you continue to believe."

Rosen said the team achieves this partly by hiding in plain sight.

"We are not trying to disappear completely, we are not dressed in all black," said Rosen. "I think there is this mentality and physicality of serving this greater over-

all character, that we are all doing at the same time and we recede into the background, in service of bringing this other character to life."

Haskell said the three puppeteers all pay attention to each other, while also all jointly focusing on the tiger's view point, which helps them become the puppet.

"One of the major ways we do that is our focus into the puppet. We use a lot of our peripheral vision because we want you to see our focus is on the head, which

psychologically somehow really does make the audience also go there with you," said Haskell.

Vomacka and Gortner both said maintaining healthy habits and exercise routines, like yoga and gymnastics, help them keep up with the physically demanding work of crouching inside the puppet for a two-hour show.

"Humans are incredible," said Vomacka. "You put a challenge in front of us, we train for it and we acclimate."

Hoche said that while the show's puppeteers demonstrate great skill and talent, their passion is one born from storytelling play, something everyone in the audience can relate to.

"Everyone at some point in your life has played with a doll or played with an action figure or made a stick come to life," said Hoche. "Everyone is a puppeteer."

"Life of Pi" is showing now at Segerstrom Center for the Arts at 600 Town Center Dr, Costa Mesa through June 15. Tickets, which start at \$44.07, are available at scfta.org.

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RECORD

Continued from page A1

on staff. "In a sense, I'm a bridge from the old to the new," Baker said. "I met with them, and we got along, and they wanted my help. I said, 'Well, I come with one condition — my left and my right arm. Travis [Garman] and Niloo [Aghaseyedalji] were part of the old, and now we're all three part of the new.'"

James, 28, recalled visiting Sound Spectrum during surfing trips to Laguna Beach. In December, when he learned the iconic record store had closed, he called Wave. Within a week, the family had submitted an offer that was accepted.

"At the end of the day, a record store sells music," James said. "The special thing about this store is that it has sold music for so many decades. It sold music through the vinyl era, through the cassette era, through the CD era, and then all the way back again. In my opinion, the special part about this store is that it's past trends. It doesn't need to sell off of these trends. It can just keep selling music that touches people's hearts."

As for the responsibility that goes with inheriting a legacy of 57 years of service to the community, James said that Jimmy Otto created a business that could stand on its own.

"Jimmy was very much someone who could stand on his own, and he made his store stand on its own," he added. "We hope to keep that same energy, really forever. We believe that this store is so sacred and special. The special thing about music is that it does last forever."

James also called it a "special moment" to have the keys to Sound Spectrum passed on to his family by Edith Otto, who also gave them a tour of the store. Audrey, 30, who is due to be married this year, compared the commitment to preserve a community sta-



Don Leach / Staff Photographer

CO-OWNER James Wilcox and longtime employee Wave, from left, during the re-opening night party at the store.

ple to a wedding.

"There's like this union," Audrey said. "I have this connection with the former owner. ... I feel like the Sound Spectrum itself is like a being of its own. I feel less that I'm the one that's deciding what happens to it and more that I'm listening to what it needs, being more like a steward to what the store wants, listening to that and making it happen. That's been my biggest source of inspiration is just what ... everyone needs."

The Wilcox family's music industry experience has been driven by a burgeoning career for Sadie Jean, 23, as a singer-songwriter. James and Audrey, both of whom have business backgrounds, have helped manage her career. She has nearly two dozen shows lined up in Europe this fall, and she's preparing to release her first album later this year.

Sadie Jean revealed she has been writing songs from a young age, but she was unsure if her family would embrace that side of her.

"It was so funny because once I told people I could sing and write songs, my family was like my biggest champions," Sadie Jean said. "Now they manage me, and my siblings manage me. My career became like a really big family thing, and my parents go on tour

with me. All of a sudden, we're like a music family after being so like not at all.

"I think it just made so much sense when we found out that the record store in our community that we love was about to be gone forever. It felt so serendipitous. It was like a calling that we had to take it on and save it because music is built into our family culture now."

The return of the record store was celebrated with a ribbon-cutting ceremony on Thursday evening, music pumping as people perused the aisles stocked with selections of vinyl, CDs and posters spanning the decades.

Local artists also collaborate, leading restorative efforts at the store. Amanda Burke touched up a mural by Bill Ogden, and a display by Brigid Burnes in the front window depicts musicians jamming away on various instruments.

"I saw many fathers or mothers say to their kid, 'I bought my first record here in the '80s,'" Baker said. "I want that little kid to be able to say that to their kids 30 years from now, long after I'm gone. I know the importance of that feeling. ... That's what I want to keep. That's part of what I want to help survive."

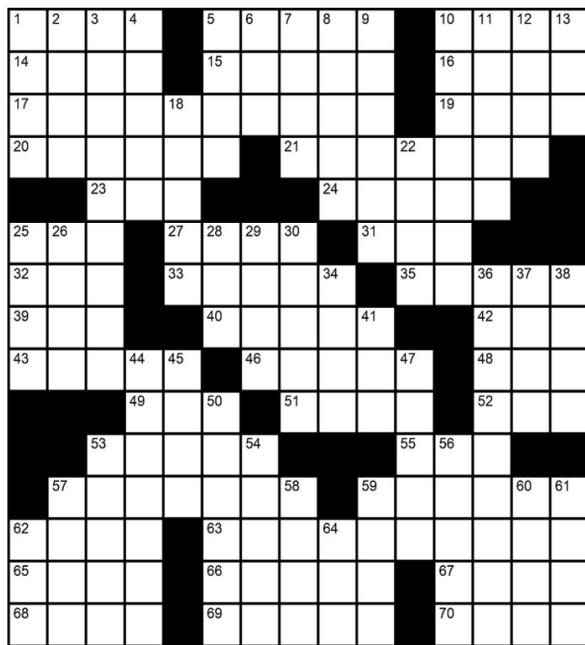
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THE DAILY COMMUTER PUZZLE

By Stella Zawistowski

ACROSS

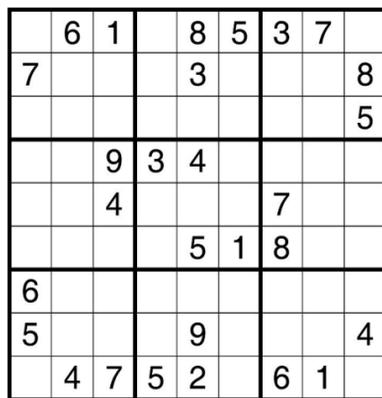
- 1 Police officers
- 5 Caesar or Cobb
- 10 Hammer's target
- 14 Actress Jennifer
- 15 Banishment
- 16 Natural Black hairstyle
- 17 "Taken" star: 2 wds.
- 19 Snowy-day footwear
- 20 Soothing skin application
- 21 Price of education
- 23 Approximation: Abbr.
- 24 Certain believer in God
- 25 Gateway Arch city: Abbr.
- 27 Per item
- 31 "Wait one _!"
- 32 Palette color
- 33 Saliva
- 35 Lighthearted movies
- 39 Unwanted picnic insect
- 40 Metric weight units, for short
- 42 Sales agent
- 43 Shocked sounds
- 46 Allowed by law
- 48 Prefix with "political"
- 49 Canadian resource
- 51 Fizzy drink
- 52 Make a selection
- 53 Odometer units
- 55 Ghost's shout
- 57 Bach musical work
- 59 Line between countries
- 62 Courage
- 63 Susceptible to harm
- 65 Three squared
- 66 Finished
- 67 Young lady
- 68 Rideshare brand
- 69 Facts and figures
- 70 German



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.



For answers to the crossword and Sudoku puzzles, see page A8.

sausage

DOWN

- 1 Monastery room
- 2 The Buckeye State
- 3 Blood component
- 4 Big rigs

- 5 Observed
- 6 Chopping tool
- 7 Shopping reminder
- 8 For all to hear
- 9 Says "It's not true!"
- 10 Oreo company
- 11 "The game is _!"

- 12 Element in steel
- 13 Auction unit
- 18 "Duly _"
- 22 Pricing plan level
- 25 Layered haircut
- 26 Sashimi fish
- 28 Noah's vessel
- 29 Spiral shape
- 30 Golf course parts
- 34 Corporate emblem
- 36 Chocolate-peanut candy: 2 wds.
- 37 Marshmallow candy
- 38 Notice
- 41 Unhappy
- 44 Hunting dog
- 45 Fine dirt
- 47 Physical work
- 50 Departs
- 53 The Pine Tree State
- 54 Daredevil's feat
- 56 Dental care brand
- 57 Corn holder
- 58 Actor Alan
- 59 Hotel furniture
- 60 "Frozen" queen
- 61 Take a breather
- 62 Bearded antelope
- 64 Take-home

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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 Cve 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.



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MAILBAG

Fighting back against H.B. City Council

It's hard to fight City Hall. Yet here we are again.

The Huntington Beach City Council would have you believe two things. First, for 50 years, our city librarians have been secretly providing pornography to your kids, and nobody ever noticed it. Second, that a 0.02% savings on the city budget will somehow prevent a budget crisis. When put in this factual context, the arguments against Measures A and B are utter nonsense.

To debate City Council on the facts is a losing strategy; they have unlimited time and resources and the public gets one minute. They will get the last word and that's often all that is heard or reported. It is not a fair fight.

What you need to know is this — our city's libraries are no longer safe. The City Council's tactics have enabled and rallied their supporters to attack our citizens. Our neighbors. Your friends.

Don't believe me? You've seen the signs put out by the City Council. But you probably don't know:

- Most of our city librarians have left because they're called pedophiles and groomers.
- Our city volunteers, mostly retired seniors, have been called pervs (and worse).
- Volunteers canvassing in support of Measures A and B are afraid to go to certain houses for fear of a confrontation.

This is what our city has become. The City Council is hurting real people — librarians, volunteers and kids — these are not images placed on a sign. What I do not understand is why we accept this — why do our citizens allow the City Council to do these things? How can we fight back? The City Council encourages these things to happen. In their malicious attempt to control the city they show no mercy to those innocent people who serve our community. Ask yourself — what's next?

I am asking you for help. It's simple, really. You have your ballot; just check both boxes "yes" and drop it in the mail. It takes two minutes but would mean so much to those who participate in this community.

The City Council is counting on your apathy to allow their agenda to continue.

Stop the lies. Stop the hate. Stop City Council.

"Yes" on Measures A and B.

Larry Hersh
Huntington Beach

When I was a girl growing up in Brooklyn, my mother and I would visit our nearby library at least once a week. A special time, though, was when we went to the huge (in my child eyes at least!) Arlington branch of the Brooklyn Public Library near Highland Park or the New York Public Library. These libraries, with their imposing size and thousands of books, became almost sacred places to me, much like a church. If I wanted to find books about topics that interested me, a kind librarian could always point me in the right direction. This experience instilled in me a great love of libraries and I was so thrilled to move to Huntington Beach in 1973, where there was an award-winning city library system.

This is why what is occurring with our wonderful libraries has touched me so very much and what is at stake is so much more than a book banning. It is a matter of control, control over what we can read and taking that control from parents and giving it to an appointed committee.

I was very disheartened to learn that Texas just passed Senate Bill 13, which gives public school boards or parent review groups control over banning books that contain "harmful" or "indecent" material according to "community values." Librarians would have no say in the matter. This could lead to broad censorship banning "Romeo and Juliet" (citing premarital sex) or even the Bible (if you ask what could be considered "indecent," look no further than the story of how King David lusted after Bathsheba when he saw her bathing!). And this is just the beginning...

That is why I urge you to vote "yes" on Measures A and B to protect our beloved libraries from privatization and the appointment of a review committee. Let's vote to keep our libraries in the sacred place they hold in our hearts!

Kathleen Bunge
Huntington Beach

Municipal codes are laws that take priority over resolutions, which can be rescinded. Huntington Beach Resolution #2025-45, is



James Carbone

PEOPLE APPLAUD to comments addressed against the Huntington Beach City Council during a meeting to appoint a new council member to replace Tony Strickland on March 18.

more smoke and mirrors under the guise of "protecting the children."

In the event a majority of the City Council votes to outsource any services provided by HBPL to a private contractor, or to sell the library, a "yes" vote on Measure B requires a majority vote of H.B. residents before outsourcing or sale of the library can happen. If the city declares a fiscal emergency, a vote of H.B. residents will not be required. The resolution fails to state that library services will not be outsourced.

The idea promoted by opponents of Measure A, that just one person will make procurement decisions, is a false narrative. Several individuals are, have been, and will continue to be involved in the procurement process if Measure A passes.

There is a policy in place to request reconsideration or removal of library materials, and Municipal Code Section 2.66.110, gives the Book Review Board the authority to relocate existing books or reject purchase of children's books deemed inappropriate for children, based on "community standards." Seven "inappropriate for children" books have been relocated to the adult section, and several others have been identified. It is curious that neither reconsideration policy was expedited to protect children from the additional "inappropriate books identified by 'residents.'"

Municipal Code Section 2.66.110 creates a Book Review Board consisting of no more than 21 political

appointees with the authority to review and relocate any books children have access to, based on undefined "community standards" to be defined by the board. Their decisions are unappealable and not limited to materials with sexual content. This is book banning. It is censorship. The resolution stating books shall not be banned fails to include the City Council's definition of book banning.

"Inappropriate" children's books can be removed and sold or donated to other city libraries. How does this protect children?

"Yes" on Measure A will allow parents, not politicians, to choose reading materials for their own children, and to protect children from being used as pawns to promote political extremist agendas.

Judy Morris
Huntington Beach

Huntington Beach Public Library will hold its annual all-ages Summer Reading Kickoff Carnival in front of the Central Library on June 24 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. There will be games, crafts, activities, shows and plenty of food. Participants can also register there for the 2025 Summer Reading Challenge. Last year, about 3,000 participants signed up for the reading challenge and about 15,000 people attended the events throughout the summer!

This program would not be possible without support from a team of dedicated volunteers from the Friends of the Children's Library of Huntington Beach. If our public library

is outsourced to a for-profit corporation, there's a good chance this long-standing program will end. Why? The library volunteers who donate time and money to support this program will not make similar contributions to a for-profit corporation with wealthy investors.

If you want the Huntington Beach Public Library to be free from corporate outsourcing as it has been for over 100 years, vote "yes" on Measure B. And if you want the Huntington Beach Public Library to be free from political interference regarding book selection, vote "yes" on Measure A. Election Day is June 10.

Carol Daus
Huntington Beach

For several election cycles, Huntington Beach has been plastered with large political signs by both sides of the political spectrum. It is a political sign war aimed at low information voters. Thousands of residents are over it, especially the signs for the June 10 special election that included the word "porn." Those signs exposed more young children to porn than any book in our public libraries. Parents were forced to have unplanned and, for most adults, uncomfortable conversations with their children.

Let's start a campaign to create a new political sign policy. It is time to limit political signs both in size and where they can be displayed. Other cities manage to hold successful elections without the sign blight that overtakes Huntington Beach for several

weeks for each election. Let our elected officials know that you want a change to our current sign policy. Your vote shouldn't be based on a political sign. Read the ballot. Read the political statements. Make an informed vote. Most know my vote for the June 10 special election. It will be "yes" and "yes."

Cathey Ryder
Huntington Beach

PROTECTING HEALTHCARE RESOURCES IN O.C.

As a reproductive rights advocate and Orange County resident for more than 20 years, I want to thank my Congressman, Rep. Dave Min, for voting "no" on the recent budget reconciliation bill. Rep. Min's vote, along with the votes of Orange County Representatives Linda T. Sanchez, Derek Tran, Lou Correa and Mike Levin, accurately represent their constituents' desire to maintain Medicaid funding and keep Planned Parenthood health centers open.

Representative Young Kim's vote, however, does not.

By voting "yes," Rep. Kim voted to gut Medicaid and cut access to vital healthcare for tens of thousands of people in Orange County. That's 130,000 people in our communities relying on Planned Parenthood for healthcare, and for many of them, Planned Parenthood is the only provider they see. Over half of Planned Parenthood patients use Medicaid to get services like birth control, cancer screenings, STI testing, regular checkups and abortion care. This bill puts 200 health centers nationwide at risk of closing and millions of Americans at risk of losing access to essential care.

The attack on Medicaid and Planned Parenthood health centers is an attack on any Californian's ability to choose their own healthcare provider. Everyone deserves affordable, high quality care from providers they trust. Do you really want your elected officials to make that decision for you?

There is still a chance to help protect Medicaid and access to Planned Parenthood. Call Young Kim and urge her to vote "no" on any bill that cuts Medicaid or "defunds" Planned Parenthood.

Jenna Ross
Irvine

See *Mailbag*, page A9

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CROSSWORD AND SUDOKU ANSWERS

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MAILBAG

Continued from page A8

WHAT NMUSD NEEDS NEXT

Pardon me if this comes across strongly, but I am deeply concerned by the rationale offered for supporting Andrea McElroy's election as a Newport-Mesa Unified School District trustee — namely, the endorsement by the mayor of Newport Beach and the endorsement of the Newport Beach Police Department.

As a former NMUSD board president, I can say with confidence that school resource officers (SROs) were never a point of contention during my time on the board. There was broad support from all trustees I served alongside, making this a non-issue. Equally irrelevant is Ms. McElroy's involvement in the high school drama program her daughter participated in. While community involvement is important, this alone does not qualify someone to serve on a school board responsible for decisions that impact all students.

What's notably absent from her background is meaningful PTA leadership involvement or broader community service. The claim of being a "businesswoman" also raises concerns, considering the outcomes of her association with several ventures.

This appears to be a poor vetting decision by her backers, driven more by political influence than by genuine focus on student needs. It's disappointing to see a former trustee and others seemingly prioritize political alignment over educational leadership.

Our students deserve board members committed to serving their best interests, not the mayor's agenda.

Vicki Snell,
former NMUSD trustee
president
Costa Mesa

There's a tiny little local election on June 10 and it is

costing the Newport-Mesa Unified School District more than \$400,000!!!! You only have to check one box, and you don't have to think about national politics to do so, but because candidate Andrea McElroy forced a special election after she didn't earn a board appointment we all have to vote for that temporary seat, which will have to be contested all over again next year.

That makes me mad. That is NOT fiscally conservative, and that's why I'm out canvassing for Kirstin Walsh, the candidate who was appointed by the board in the first place. I met Ms. McElroy and she's lovely, but when I asked her why she didn't just wait until next year to run, she said, "It's not that expensive to run the special election." What? More than \$400,000 is not expensive? That money could have been spent on education, infrastructure, art supplies, books and much-needed equipment for our kids.

I was blessed to raise my boy and girl twins here on Balboa Island where they attended Lincoln Elementary and Corona del Mar Middle and High School. They were provided with an amazing education. As a PTA volunteer, I can tell you it was always a privilege to help out, but always a battle to raise funds for our kids. With more than \$400,000 coming out of the school budget for this election, it reminds me of how hard PTA members have to work for every single dollar.

Speaking of PTA, the other reason I'm out talking with my community about Kirstin Walsh, is she is one of those special people that steps up to service. She comes from a long line of those who have served in the military and taught her that giving back matters. She is currently Newport Harbor PTA president, served that same high position at Ensign, and has spent years on Harbor Council. That experience matters.

Please vote for Kirstin Walsh because she is a

doer, a volunteer, a public servant and, on a personal note, a water polo mom like me.

Summer Bailey
Balboa Island

As our community approaches the school board election, I urge voters to see through the desperate tactics of the Walsh campaign and support Andrea McElroy, the only candidate who stands for parents' rights and school safety.

The Walsh campaign continues to claim that she's not partisan and won't get involved in statewide issues in our schools. That prompts a few questions though: Would a non-partisan candidate be backed by the progressive teachers union to the tune of nearly \$10,000 and a progressive women's group to the tune of \$5,000? Would a non-partisan candidate proudly accept endorsements from state and local progressive elected officials?

I'd like to know what the Walsh campaign is afraid of. Are they afraid to admit that she's an agent of a liberal agenda in a voting area with a decades-long history of electing conservative school board members?

In contrast, Andrea McElroy has been clear from the start. She is a conservative, determined to stop the leftist majority on our school board. She is not afraid to say it because it reflects her values and the values of our community. Andrea McElroy is endorsed by our police and fire associations because they trust her commitment to school safety. Community leaders have endorsed Andrea McElroy because they trust her commitment to stand up to the leftist majority on the school board. If you value school safety, parental trust and fearless leadership, vote for Andrea. Let's protect our schools and reject the tactics of a desperate campaign.

Mary Sue Pedicini
Newport Beach



James Carbone

MORE THAN 100 teachers and counselors from the Santa Ana Unified School District gather to protest consideration of a mass layoff at the Santa Ana Unified School District.

PATRICE APODACA

California population reveals harsh reality for education funding

The decline in K-12 public school enrollment across California, as predicted, is forcing many school districts to make some painful decisions.

We saw an example of this recently, when Santa Ana Unified School District, facing a \$154-million budget deficit and 28% fewer students than a decade ago, announced it would lay off about 262 employees, including teachers, counselors and other staff members.

Decreasing enrollment isn't the only reason for Santa Ana Unified's budgetary bind. Most acutely, as with other districts, it is grappling with the loss of federal COVID bailout funds, which ended last fall.

Still, there's no question that the steady loss of public school students is putting Santa Ana Unified, and most districts throughout California, in a tough place financially.

Public schools are funded through a mix of federal, state and local money, but in California the state by far accounts for the largest share of education dollars.

Those state funds come from income

taxes, property taxes and sales taxes, and a relatively tiny proportion from the state lottery.

The number of students in a district influence how much state funding it receives. That's why enrollment losses often lead to reductions in the amount of money allocated to each district by the state.

The picture can get a bit complicated, though. Under California's Local Control Funding Formula, which began in the 2013-2014 school year, some districts throughout the state receive additional funds if it's determined that they have a large share of "high needs" students.

And a small number of the state's public school districts are so-called "Basic Aid," or "Community Funded" districts, meaning that the revenue collected from local property taxes is more than sufficient to cover the districts' expenses; therefore, they don't rely on state aid.

Newport-Mesa Unified School District, for example, is a Basic Aid district.

Despite such exceptions, however, most districts are struggling with the

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PRODIGY

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graduate to date. That record was broken the following year when Athena, then 11, walked the stage. But she wouldn't hold the title for long; Zora just graduated with her associate's degree last month.

Mom Christina Elling explained the kids' educational journey when Tycho was in kindergarten and having a tough time with the other kids. They enrolled him in the online charter school Connections Academy. There, he could work at his own pace (super fast) and roll through multiple grades in a single year.

By the time he was 9, he'd taken all the math classes the curriculum could offer and so enrolled in community college, maxing out there as well before transferring to UC Irvine. Now, his sisters are following in his footsteps; while Athena is more interested in acting, dance and social sciences, Zora is a math whiz, just like her brother.

In fact, Tycho's seat at classes in UCI's math department will hardly have had a chance to cool before his 10-year-old sibling takes her brother's place, starting with a couple of summer



Don Leach / Staff Photographer

TYCHO ELLING with his family support from sister Athena, dad Tim, sisters Zora, Nova, and mom Christina, left to right, is set to graduate with his bachelor's degree from UCI.

classes ahead of full enrollment in the fall.

"I think of this kind of as the 'Tycho effect,'" Christina Elling said of her children's post-secondary pursuits. "Because Tycho had done it we felt a little more comfortable with the idea of Zora going."

Despite the constant comings and goings from college classes to acting gigs to Taekwondo, the Ellings are a tight-knit family.

Evenings or weekends might find them playing board games together, and they are currently turning

Tycho and Zora's bedrooms into an escape room. Athena and Zora are working their way through the Top 100 most frequently banned books, while the family often reads or watches movies together.

Tim and Christina Elling don't demand excellence

from their children but do hold an expectation that their kids explore their interests and, when they land on something, give it their all.

"I think there are sometimes differences in nature, but so much comes down to nurturing and your environment," Tim Elling said. "Different opportunities and what chances you get — that's what makes such a big difference."

"It's the part you can control," Christina agreed. "You can't control the nature, like if you have allergies..."

"Or if your brother boops your nose," Zora interjected, casting a sideways glance at Tycho.

"...but you can control the effort you put in and what your attitude is."

Maybe that's why, despite a pretty big age gap, Tycho doesn't feel much disparity between himself and his older UCI classmates. Whether working in classrooms, doing labs or participating on a research project, his primary focus is math.

Coming to campus mainly on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, the teen worked his way from the graduate-level Complex Analysis at 9 a.m., through Partial Differential Equations, Probability,

Number Theory and Differential Geometry and ending some days with a Logic Seminar, from 4 to 6 p.m.

If anyone on campus found it odd learning alongside someone whose age would place him in eighth or ninth-grade, Tycho wouldn't know.

"I just don't notice, or I try not to notice," he said.

UCI Associate Professor Asaf Ferber began teaching Tycho two years ago and is now working on a research project with him. Ferber recalled first meeting the teen during office hours and being struck by his unbridled enthusiasm for the subject matter.

"He came to my office, this little kid," he recalled Tuesday. "I asked him 'what type of math do you like' — I didn't know his background knowledge, so I wanted to give him some books to read based on his natural attraction. And he looked at me with a naive face and a little smile and said, 'I love everything.'"

"Even though he's moving to USC, he's still part of my group," the professor continued. "I'm sure he will be amazing wherever he goes and whatever he decides to do."

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EDUCATION

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financial pressures tied to declining enrollment.

Last fall, the state Department of Finance reported that the number of public school students had fallen for the seventh straight year.

There are many reasons behind the slide.

Enrollment took a big hit during the COVID pandemic, and some students never returned. Some moved out of state, while others migrated to private education or homeschooling.

California's high cost of living — particularly the state's stratospheric hous-

ing costs — are cited as a contributing factor. And critics from both the right and left of the political spectrum have taken aim at what they see as misguided priorities, both financial and social.

But the biggest factor, many analysts say, is declining birth rates, which have steadily fallen in the United States over the last 15 years.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently reported that the total national fertility rate was 1.6 children per woman, far below the 2.1 rate needed to naturally maintain the population.

Simply put, that means we have fewer kids entering, or who will enter, our

schools. Some experts have referred to this as "a demographic cliff."

Growing enrollment in transitional kindergarten is mitigating the overall declines in enrollment numbers, at least somewhat. But the long-term picture isn't great.

The state Finance Department projects that in the coming decade "if current trends in fertility and migration hold," total enrollment will fall further.

The federal government projected California will lose another one million public school students by 2031.

The hits will affect different schools and their districts in different ways, and each one will have to navi-

gate a path forward to maintain solvency without, hopefully, sacrificing educational goals. It won't be easy.

Last year, Anaheim Union High School District announced plans to lay off more than 100 teachers amid plummeting enrollment, but it later backtracked and instead made other cutbacks.

Other districts throughout Orange County are also considering closing schools or consolidating campuses.

For instance, Saddleback Valley Unified School District plans to close San Joaquin Elementary this year, and Anaheim Union High School District is closing Orangeview Junior High and shifting the mid-

dle school students to Western High School.

In announcing its plan to jettison some employees, Santa Ana Unified Supt. Jerry Almdendrez said in a statement, "Staffing adjustments are part of a long-term strategy to align our resources with student enrollment trends and financial realities."

That rather dry statement doesn't mask the harsh reality that district administrators and school boards are increasingly faced with excruciating choices.

It's terrible that valued teachers are being laid off, and parents are understandably upset at the prospect of losing their beloved community

schools.

The uncertainty and disruption alone are difficult to cope with.

Unfortunately, we must brace ourselves because we're sure to see more tough times for public schools in the coming years.

More strained budgets, more layoffs, more school closures.

In a perfect world, all of our public schools would be assured of a steady, predictable and sufficient level of funding to ensure that all students have access to a quality education.

But that's not the world we live in, and the impact of population changes provides us with a stark reminder of that fact.



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