

Irvine OKs measures to regulate trucks from asphalt plant

Residents say toxic fumes emanate from the facility, but investigators showed no health concerns after a study.

BY BEN BRAZIL

Following years of pressure from residents, Irvine approved new measures this week to regulate an asphalt plant that may spread toxic fumes into the air.

Trucks carrying materials from the All American Asphalt plant, located near Orchard Hills, will now have new routes away from schools and residential areas.

The city will also require that the existence of the plant is disclosed to people who are looking to buy homes in the area.

The city is also planning on rolling out strategic checkpoints to ensure that trucks are following proper procedures.

The council rejected an idea to create an \$800,000 hotline for residents to report odor incidents to the city due to the expense.

North Irvine residents have been complaining for years of potentially toxic fumes and foul smells coming from the All American Asphalt plant. They've claimed that the fumes harm their health, causing troubling respiratory symptoms and possibly contributing to future chronic illnesses.

For a long time, they felt that their voices were falling on deaf ears.

The city responded last year by filing a lawsuit against the asphalt plant, claiming it's in violation of air quality regulations and local public nuisance provisions.

Then in response to pressure from residents, the South Coast Air Quality Management District, a regional air quality regulator, chose to conduct further testing of the site, and the city of Irvine hired contractors for further testing.

But to the dismay of residents, the investigations found no toxic health concerns from the asphalt plant. Meanwhile, they still report bad smells and health issues.

Earlier this year, residents filed a separate lawsuit against All American Asphalt and have criticized the SCAQMD and contractors for using faulty testing methods during their air quality investigations.

The residents are now making some headway with the City Council's finalizing of the restrictions during a meeting on Tuesday night.

The idea for the truck regulations was raised a few weeks ago after residents reported seeing trucks carrying asphalt through residential areas.

Resident Tom Hazard showed a video during a public comment portion of the meeting showing an asphalt truck driving near Canyon View Elementary School.

"This illustrates the point that it's very hard to enforce this problem without a checkpoint, and I believe a checkpoint at the point of departure where the trucks are can with 100% certainty inform every truck of the

See **Asphalt**, page R3



Photos by Scott Smeltzer | Staff Photographer

WILL SWAIM, the former founder and editor of the OC Weekly, sits on an old newspaper rack in Anaheim.

How OC Weekly's founding editor moved from 'lefty' to right-embracing firebrand

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

Two years ago, a former colleague phoned Will Swaim with bad news: By Thanksgiving, OC Weekly, the alternative newspaper he founded in 1995 and headed until 2007, would halt the presses for good.

By chance, he drove by Coppertree Business Park in Costa Mesa, site of the Weekly's first official office, and mourned.

"The tragedy of being human is that everything ends," said the 61-year-old. "I just didn't see it coming."

Swaim now looks back at those days as nostalgia. He's currently president of the California Policy Center, a Tustin-based conservative nonprofit that rails against public-sector unions and promotes charter schools.

It's a post that has left many who knew him from his OC Weekly days feeling similarly blindsided, if not downright confounded or betrayed.

From his perch, Swaim co-hosts the National Review's "Radio Free California"

podcast, writes opinion columns for outlets like Fox News and found himself at the center of controversy last year over a white paper that inspired the Orange County Board of Education's symbolic vote to return to in-person schooling without masks or social distancing.

"I was a lefty when the county was conservative and I'm a libertarian or a conservative now that the county is moving the other way," Swaim explained. "I simply had to confront that I was wrong. Individuals are best positioned to understand their own needs, dreams and desires."

Swaim grew up in a devout Catholic household in Mission Viejo split among party lines.

He considered becoming a priest before studying journalism and theology at USC. "I used to tell people Jesus led me to Marx," Swaim said. "I still was going to church and joined the Communist Party."

He earned a master's degree in history at UC Irvine

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A RARE OC Weekly street rack in Anaheim has remained empty since the newspaper's closure in late 2019.



Courtesy of Kim Lonte

THE IRVINE City Council has moved to regulate trucks leaving the All American Asphalt plant.

Chargers' Derwin James gives thanks to the Boys & Girls Club

BY SARAH MOSQUEDA

For Los Angeles Chargers safety Derwin James, the Thanksgiving holiday is all about gratitude.

"I remember growing up, Thanksgiving was my favorite holiday," James said. "Because it reminds me of being thankful and the humbleness and the food and bringing people together."

On Tuesday, the NFL player served turkey and mashed potatoes to Orange County families at the Boys & Girls Club of Santa Ana as a part of the organization's annual "Thanksgiving at the Club" event.

James said he was drawn to serve because of his own special connection to the Boys & Girls Club. "I was the guy that always believed in the Boys & Girls Club, I attended the Boys & Girls Club," James said. "It was a lot of fun, and I wanted to come out today and show some love and support."

James was on the injured list in 2019 and 2020, first with a fractured foot and then a torn meniscus, but the strong safety has become a leader in the Chargers defense. James said it is important

See **James**, page R4

A BOY IS served a traditional meal during the annual Thanksgiving meal and turkey giveaway at the Santa Ana Boys & Girls Club on Tuesday.



Photos by Don Leach | Staff Photographer

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS football player Derwin James joins fellow volunteers in the plate-serve line at the traditional Thanksgiving dinner and turkey giveaway at the Santa Ana Boys & Girls Club on Tuesday.

Self-defense claimed in fatal confrontation on the high seas

BY MEGHANN M. CUNIFF

A man facing murder charges in a rare federal trial told a jury last week of a struggle for his life during a late-night lobster fishing trip that left him trying to figure out the fate of a friend who fell into the sea.

Part of Hoang “Wayne” Xuan Le’s solution was to plant a GPS tracker on the man’s van and track its movements. Le testified he did so because he feared if Tri “James” Minh Dao were alive, Dao would shoot him in revenge for the boat fight, but he also testified he was interested in collecting money from an insurance scheme he thought Dao was conducting.

Prosecutors, however, say Le was in reality tracking Dao’s girlfriend Natalie Nguyen because he knew Dao was dead and he hoped to collect on his life insurance policy.

In cross-examination Oct. 19, Le admitted to Assistant U.S. Atty. Greg Staples that text messages he sent about tracking the van to Arizona weeks after the boat fight referred to Nguyen, not Dao.

Le, now 40 years old, also acknowledged quickly returning to his daily routine of rampant drug use, telling Staples he used drugs to try to escape his problems.

“And your problem, sir, was you left your friend out in the ocean to die, isn’t it?” Staples asked.

“I didn’t know what was going to happen,” Le answered.

“Sir, you were more than three miles off shore, weren’t you?” Staples asked.

“I’m not sure how far we were from the shore,” Le answered.

Staples and Assistant U.S. Atty. Greg Scally say Le, Dao and their friend Sheila Ritze

were about 3½ miles off the coast of the Dana Point Harbor on Oct. 15, 2019, on a boat owned by Ritze when Le shot Dao and dumped him into the Pacific Ocean.

Le and Ritze are charged with first-degree murder; Ritze is scheduled to be tried after Le and has not been in the courtroom for Le’s trial. Both have been in jail since their arrests in December 2019.

In direct examination from his lawyer, Craig Wilke, Le described for jurors how Dao threatened him with a gun and a brief scuffle ensued in which Le fired his own gun in self-defense. Investigators only recovered Le’s firearm; Le testified he tossed Dao’s in the ocean and never saw it again.

Staples and Scally’s case for premeditated murder rests on testimony from Ritze’s former mother-in-law, Sandra Ritze, and several associates of Le’s who say the two planned to kill Dao. Sandra Ritze said Dao was with them on a trip to Las Vegas weeks before the murder, and when she asked Shelia who he was, she told him not to worry, that’d they’d be “offing” him soon.

Vinh Doan testified about Le insisting on meeting him three days after the killing at Frogg’s Bounce House in Fountain Valley, where Doan had taken his young daughter to play. Doan said Le told him he’d killed someone on a boat in the ocean and that he never said Dao threatened him or pointed a gun at him as he’s now claiming.

Tony Haung also testified that Le told him he’d shot someone over a \$30,000 to \$40,000 debt, as did another

See **Fatal**, page R3



Don Leach | Staff Photographer

JULIE DAVEY SHOWS the aisles of the children's corner of the Laguna Niguel Library.

Late fees at OC Public Libraries check out

BY SARAH MOSQUEDA

Beginning on Nov. 23, late fees at OC Public Libraries have officially checked out.

The Orange County Board of Supervisors approved indefinitely eliminating library late fines on Nov. 16, asserting the removal of the fines will further provide free and equal access to library services.

“Public libraries play an essential role in providing safe, accessible and free educational resources for every member in our community,” said board Chairman Andrew Do, first district supervisor.

“Eliminating late fines will incentivize residents to take advantage of county library resources once again and not be hesitant to take a book home during their next visit.”

The stated vision of OC Public Libraries is “Open Doors, Free Access and Community,” and the hope is the new policy will better reflect that sentiment.

The FAQ page for the



Kevin Chang | Staff Photographer

THE ORANGE COUNTY Library’s Mesa Verde Branch Library in Costa Mesa.

elimination of overdue fines on the library system’s website states patrons are still expected to return their materials on time so others can use them.

In the past, OC Public Libraries has offered systemwide special fine-free events to encourage patrons to return to the library. Most recently, fines

were suspended during the pandemic.

“During the COVID-19 pandemic, OC Public Libraries implemented the longest removal of late fines to lessen financial disparities experienced by the Orange County community with no negative impact on the library budget,” said 2nd District Supervisor Katrina Foley.

“In reality, the fine system costs more to implement than the fines recovered, and it deters residents from using the libraries. It’s time for change.”

The website states overdue fines are only a small portion of the library system’s budget and not considered a reliable source of

See **Library**, page R3

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City of Hope's new center in Irvine will bring cancer care closer to Orange County residents

BY BEN BRAZIL

City of Hope has a tradition of christening the walls of new buildings with messages of hope and well wishes.

During a tour this week of the building that will become the Lennar Foundation Cancer Center in Irvine, several of these messages were written in permanent marker on the bare walls of the center, which will be the only standalone cancer center in Orange County when it opens next year, according to Lisa O'Neill Hill, a spokeswoman for City of Hope Orange County.

"Here's to all the patients who will heal their bodies and souls at City of Hope," one message read.

Some had written messages in support of loved ones who have struggled with cancer.

During the tour, Dr. Amrita Krishnan wrote "the road to cure myeloma starts here." Krishnan currently works at City of Hope's Fashion Island location and is an expert on myeloma, a rare cancer that attacks white blood cells in bone marrow.

Myeloma will be studied



Courtesy of City of Hope

A RENDERING OF City of Hope's new cancer center in Irvine, which will be the only standalone cancer center in Orange County.

at the new center along with many other forms of cancer.

Annette Walker, president of City of Hope Orange County, said the messages will always be a part of the building.

"It might have paint over it, it might have carpet over it, but it's here," she said. "It's in the bones of this building."

With more than 1,000

doctors and researchers, the 190,000-square-foot cancer center will provide medical care and groundbreaking research when it opens off of Alton and Barranca parkways near the Great Park. Because of the center's focus on research, patients will be able to take part in clinical trials of newer medications.

The center will also

have a substantial supportive care program to help patients with the psychological effects of cancer and an outpatient program, which includes diagnostic imaging and screening and medical, radiation and surgical oncology, among other treatments.

The cancer center is part of City of Hope's \$1-billion campus, which also includes a hospital

that is slated to open next to the cancer center in 2025.

Once it opens, it will be the county's only specialty hospital dedicated to only treating and curing cancer.

City of Hope currently has four locations in Newport Beach, Irvine and Huntington Beach.

The new location will be City of Hope's Orange County centerpiece once it

is completed. City of Hope's main campus is in Duarte.

During a phone interview following the tour, Krishnan said the cancer center is a huge step forward for cancer care in Orange County because 20% of patients have had to leave the county to receive care.

Many of City of Hope's patients are forced to make the trip to the health provider's Duarte location, which is close to an hour away for many residents in Orange County.

The cancer center will also be important to Orange County's expanding senior population because cancer tends to impact older adults.

Krishnan is particularly excited about the facility's clinical research unit, where she and others will be able to research various cancers and potential treatments.

"So there's a tremendous need," Krishnan said. "I have so many patients who drive 50 miles to come and see me."

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IRVINE CITY

Councilman Larry Agran has been supportive of residents who claim an asphalt plant is spreading toxic fumes.



Francine Orr
Los Angeles Times

ASPHALT

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proper route to take," Hazard said.

Hazard and other residents also spoke about the need for a hotline so residents can directly report odor events to the city.

Currently, residents report incidents to the SCAQMD, but residents take issue with the regulator's investigatory process.

SCAQMD needs at least six confirmed complaints before investigating an odor. Hazard said SCAQMD inspectors are "wildly inconsistent," with some quickly working to confirm odors and others not responding in person to confirm incidents.

Instead of the hotline, Mayor Farrah Khan proposed during the meeting that the city should move

forward with adding a function to the city's Access Irvine mobile app that allows people to report odor incidents. Councilman Larry Agran took issue with the lack of a hotline.

"I personally believe, as I've expressed before, that we need more than an app," Agran said. "If it falls a little short, of course I'll be pressing, as no doubt others would, for a beefed up hotline code enforcement mechanism that can be linked also to [SCAQMD] to make sure that it's kind of a one-stop complaint for folks."

Agran has been outspoken in his support for the residents in the All American Asphalt saga.

During the council's last meeting, he said he doesn't believe the air quality issues will be resolved without the shutdown of the plant.

For Kim Konte, founder

of Non-Toxic Neighborhoods, the regulations are also not enough to ensure the safety of her neighborhood. Non-Toxic Neighborhoods is a community group that has been leading the effort against All American Asphalt.

"It's great to see the city's finally providing transparency and proper notification concerning the largest polluter of group one carcinogens in the city with the new real estate disclosures for properties near All American Asphalt," Konte said Wednesday in a text message.

"That said, the truck regulation = a red herring. The fact is our children still do not have any protection from the largest polluter of group one carcinogens in the city."

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FATAL

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er acquaintance of Le's, Shawn Whalin, who also said Le foreshadowed the murder.

Haung later worked as a confidential informant for the U.S. Coast Guard and wore a recorder, though he testified that his recording did not capture the confession and instead begins immediately after.

Haung testified about wanting to contact Dao's brother, Alex Dao, a drug kingpin and former confidential informant, to tell them what Le had done. "What Wayne told me was really gnawing at me. If it happened to my brother, I wish someone would come and tell me what really hap-

pened," Haung said, adding that he was paid \$25,000 by the Coast Guard.

Wilke, who's defending Le with attorney Sheila Sarah Mojtehed, has worked to discredit the testimony by showing jurors that each witness is motivated to lie.

Doan didn't start talking to investigators until after he was arrested on federal identity theft charges on Dec. 23, 2019. He reached a plea deal in July, and he testified that his cooperation in Le's prosecution could earn him a positive recommendation from prosecutors. Whalin was arrested shortly after Le's arrest, too, and has since pleaded guilty to three felonies and is awaiting sentencing.

In his testimony last week, Le said he lied to

Whalin about Dao owing him money because he "just trying to impress Shawn." He said the \$30,000 to \$40,000 debt "just sounded cool." But he denied ever telling Whalin he planned to kill Dao.

Le said he didn't help Dao after he fell into the ocean because "I was just scared of the situation."

"I didn't know how to react," Le said. "I was just still in shock, like, 'What was going on?' and I didn't know what to do."

Le said he didn't learn Dao had died until he was arrested on suspicion of his murder.

Testimony continues Wednesday. U.S. District David O. Carter is presiding.

MEGHANN M. CUNIFF is a contributor to Times OC.

LIBRARY

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revenue.

All overdue fines were waived for all library cardholders on Nov. 23, and those with outstanding items were invited back for a fresh start. Library items will still have due dates and will continue to be auto-renewed, if eligible.

Although late fees are gone, the library will still collect fines for lost or damaged items.

A courtesy reminder will

be sent two days before an item is due, and an overdue notice will be sent one day after the due date if the item is not returned.

Overdue notices will be sent four days, then eight days and 21 days after the due date.

If the item does not make its way back to the library by the 30th day, the patron will receive a bill for lost material. If a patron is able to return an item that has been declared lost, all fines will be canceled.

The American Library Assn. passed a resolution in

2019 asserting that library fines create an economic barrier to access library materials and services. Public libraries in Chicago, San Francisco, Boston and Los Angeles County have already eliminated late fines.

Most recently, one of the largest library systems in the United States, the New York Public Library, did away with late fines in October.

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Girls Inc. of O.C. helps make college accessible

BY SARAH MOSQUEDA

Beckman High School senior Iris Shen admits without the help of Girls Inc. of Orange County's Grad Lab program, she might have turned in her college applications a little late.

"They kept me on time because when I started with the program everyone at my school was already going to teachers for their essays, and I was like, 'Oh I didn't start my essay yet,'" Shen said.

"Having Girls Inc. and College Bound giving me deadlines, it kept me on track."

The College Bound program at Girls Inc. of Orange County is designed to reach local girls at all points on their road to higher education.

"College Bound provides college readiness education opportunities and resources for our girls," said Jessica Hubbard, Girls Inc.'s chief program officer in Orange County.

"It is offered in three main opportunities for girls, so we are providing it year round and we are structuring it so it reaches girls at different phases of their college preparedness and higher education journey."

Girls Inc.'s Summer Boot Camp College program is offered to girls entering the ninth grade.

"That is to make sure girls are thinking about higher education before they even set foot on campus for their first day of high school, because we know that journey to higher education starts early," Hubbard said.

Programs are also available for 11th-grade girls, when their journeys start to get a little more serious, Hubbard said.

"But the program that folks really adore and get excited about is our Grad Lab program," she said.

Grad Lab takes high school seniors at all different levels of readiness and preparedness and gives



Courtesy of Girls Inc. of Orange County

COLLEGE BOUND scholarship recipients, products of Girls Inc. of Orange County, celebrate at the center.

them access to higher education through mentors, education and resources.

The program offers scholarship and financial aid guidance, individual college advising and mentorship and helps with personal statement training and revision.

And as the college application process evolves, so does Girls Inc. Most recently, College Bound has been reworked as a virtual program.

"Our programs have been in person either at our old center or in schools for as long as we have been around," Hubbard said. "Then the pandemic hit and we needed to still stay in touch with our girls."

Hubbard has a background in virtual education and had started conversations with her superiors about moving the program to an online platform before the pandemic. When taking Grad Lab

virtual became necessary, Hubbard was ready.

She said the group was able to take its programs virtual in about a week, putting content on YouTube almost immediately. More robust programs were moved to Canvas, which is the platform many colleges and universities use.

In past years, Grad Lab was limited to 30 students because that was classroom capacity. Since taking the program virtual, Grad Lab has been able to reach 9,200 girls.

"The College Bound Grad Lab program is being offered on Canvas and on Zoom so that when we say we can serve all girls in Orange County, we truly can," Hubbard said. "There are no barriers because of transportation or room size or anything like that."

Any 12th-grade student in Orange County can apply, and a needs assessment is taken at the start

of the program to make sure each girl is provided with any technology or resources she is lacking in order to participate.

"One of the driving forces in all that we do at Girls Inc. is we want to create a more equitable society."

Hubbard said girls are often told their gender shouldn't hold them back, but the reality is it sometimes does, Hubbard said.

"Girls already are a more vulnerable population, and then when they come from less privilege and when they are girls of color, then you are just adding on to the possible obstacles that might stand in their way," she said.

"Our goal is to remove those barriers. The pursuit of higher education should be available to every single individual."

The program also made adjustments when most colleges stopped requiring SAT and ACT scores.

"We had always pro-

vided ACT and SAT test prep," Hubbard said. "We have removed the test prep because that is not where the high need is. We spend far more time on essay prep now."

With the elimination of test scores, Hubbard said more schools are focused on grade-point averages and the personal statement essays.

"They are really looking at the personal statement as a chance for you to jump off that page of numbers and facts and figures and just tell who you are and why you will be successful," Hubbard said.

Writing coaches are brought in for the students, and before the girls even put pen to paper, they get comfortable opening up with a vulnerability exercise.

"We want our girls to find a way to verbalize and articulate who they are, where they come from and more importantly, where they are going," Hubbard

said.

Shen said her time with her writing coach stood out as the most valuable aspect of the program.

"I got paired with a student from UC San Diego and it was really helpful, because that is one of the schools that I applied for. I was able to ask her all about housing, all about the environment at UC San Diego."

Shen said her writing coach was also more accessible than the resources at school.

"Personally, at my school if I wanted to have my English teacher review my essay, we had to make appointments," Shen said. "That was once a month, depending on if you get an appointment in time."

Meetings with her writing coach took place weekly, and Shen said her coach answered questions via email and hosted office hours.

"I was doing my activities list, and it was the day before I was supposed to turn it in, and she stayed up late at night to go over it with me," Shen said.

Shen, who plans to pursue pharmaceutical science or chemistry in college, said her applications are completed and in on time largely due in part to Grad Lab. She highly recommends the program to other local students.

"I think if they have the chance to join the College Bound Grad Lab, they should join," Shen said.

Beginning in January 2022, the program will open up to girls in the ninth through 11th grades, and the program will explore career readiness and mental health along with college planning.

Hubbard said she is confident the program can be valuable to any girl who wants to attend college.

"If you have the will and the drive," Hubbard said. "We can get you there."

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Photos by Don Leach | Staff Photographer

DERWIN JAMES joins fellow volunteers in the serve line at the traditional Thanksgiving dinner and turkey giveaway at the Santa Ana Boys & Girls Club on Tuesday.

JAMES

Continued from page R1

to be a leader off the field too.

"I feel like you are never too big or too busy to get out and help people and show that you care," James said. "That is what we need to do as athletes, especially in our position."

Orange County has been in a vulnerable position lately, with an increase in food insecurity since COVID-19 hit. The Boys & Girls Clubs of Central Orange Coast, which serves Costa Mesa, Irvine, Newport Beach, Orange and Santa Ana, has worked to meet the growing demand for consistent meals through various food donation events.

The "Thanksgiving at the Club" event serves a family-style Thanksgiving dinner that includes turkey, mashed potatoes, gravy, apple cider and pumpkin pie to low-income families and has become a valued tradition for the Boys & Girls Club of Santa Ana.

"Pre-pandemic we would normally serve about 700 people for a Thanksgiving meal," said Kirstle Duran, chief operations officer. "So anywhere from 300 to 400 families coming through. There is normally double the tables in this space."

Safety and social distancing

is still a high priority, and the club hosted a limited number of families served over multiple shifts to ensure their safety.

"This year we have reached our capacity, so we have 15 tables per shift and we are serving 60 families a sit down meal," Duran said.

The Boys & Girls Club also provided a complete take-home Thanksgiving dinner for those families who are not able to dine in due to the limited capacity of the in-person dinner.

"Across the street, we have 100 families coming through for a drive-by pickup of a Thanksgiving meal in a box," Duran said.

The first dinner service began at 4 p.m., followed by a second service at 5, a third at 6:30 and final dinner served at 7:30 p.m.

"We try to keep it very intimate and not have it feel like a food kitchen kind of concept, but more like they are coming to dinner as a family," Duran said.

FROZEN TURKEYS await pickup during the Thanksgiving dinner and turkey giveaway at the Santa Ana Boys & Girls Club on Tuesday.

Families had a photo booth opportunity upon arrival, with one brave little flag football player opting for a photo with James.

Guests were shown to their table by volunteers, who served the food to the families at tables festively decorated with Fall flower arrangements.

Duran said she was happy to see this favored tradition return in person, after the club skipped in-person dining last year due to COVID-19.

"We have always brought in Thanksgiving dinner with turkey, corn and all the fixings, so our families can come in and have a dine-in experience," said Duran.

The dish James is most looking forward to on the Thanksgiving table? "Macaroni and cheese," said James, "with extra cheese."

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Developers eye revamp of Buena Park Mall

BY GABRIEL SAN ROMÁN

A faded imprint of a Sears marquee sign is the only visible reminder of the retail store that once anchored the Buena Park Mall for decades but is now an abandoned appendage. Sears closed in early 2020, right before the coronavirus pandemic, as a harbinger of hardships to come.

After waves of infections and color-coded capacity limits, the mall's corridors have similarly hallowed out; storefronts that once sold perfumes, shoes and sports apparel are now darkened with their fences pulled down.

In an era of online shopping, it's easy to write off the former Sears building and even the Buena Park Mall as retail relics.

But Merlone Geier Partners is hoping to transform the withered west end of the mall into the Village, a vibrant community of residents, ones who will live, shop and dine in the heart of Buena Park Downtown.

And the change will start with tearing down the former Sears building.

"We see the introduction of housing here being a catalyst for new business activity in the area," said Will Geier, vice president of Merlone Geier Partners. "Both residents and surrounding businesses will benefit from being next to each other."

On Nov. 4, a community presentation spelled out the vision for the Village. Residents sat attentively in the basement of the Buena Park Library as representatives for the developers outlined plans to build 1,300 units of apartments and townhomes that will lock into place with the existing mall, Krikorian Metroplex and restaurants.

Merlone Geier Partners first acquired the Sears building in 2019 and leased it to the retail giant for two years until it went out of business. The adjacent parking lot has provided a home for a weekly farmer's market and an occasional traveling circus. But the developer sees much more potential for the property.

"We always did view this as a great housing site," Geier said. "We considered other potential uses prior to pursuing the plan that we've proposed but housing was always at the top of our list here."

In reimagining the traditional mall, the Village shares a similar



Photos by Scott Smeltzer | Staff Photographer

BRANDON TAKANABE is the owner of Burger Monster, a business in Grange Hall 39 at the Buena Park Mall.

DEVELOPERS plan to add 1,300 residential units around the Buena Park Mall's west end called the Village project.



redevelopment spirit with Simon Property Group in Brea. Two years ago, the Brea Mall owners submitted a mixed-use project with the city that included tearing down a dormant Sears building in favor of new housing, restaurants and retail.

Only, the Village dwarfs such plans in residential size and retail necessity.

"The mall has had a very rocky history for decades," said Susan Sonne, a Buena Park city councilwoman whose District 3 encom-

passes the mall. "The Village could be a great thing for the city, if we do this right."

Sonne campaigned on a platform that included reimagining the Buena Park Mall and vows to help facilitate an open process that addresses any resident concerns along the way.

A row of business owners with Grange Hall 39, a new food hall in a pedestrian walkway known as the Krikorian Courtyard, felt particularly invested as they listened to the community presentation



DEVELOPERS HOPE to demolish the old Sears at the Buena Park Mall and replace it with the Village project.

on the Village.

Before the pandemic, the Buena Park Mall hoped that a food hall would attract people, especially moviegoers, to the area. The concept of bringing fast and casual food stalls under one roof

thrived elsewhere — from Stanton's Rodeo 39 to Anaheim's Packing House.

The second food stall to open at Grange Hall 39 was Bill McMul-

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SWAIM

Continued from page R1

and helped start "The County," an underground newsletter on O.C. politics during the late '80s that served as a precursor to the Weekly. The effort revealed to Swaim just how many compelling stories went untold by the existing papers of the day. When offered the opportunity to start OC Weekly as a sister paper of LA Weekly, Swaim pounced on it.

As editor, Swaim imbued his leftist outlook into the Weekly from the start. He greeted reporters at every newsroom meeting with a robust "Comrades!" and made conservatives of every stripe — political, economic, religious — the target of his paper's ire.

It took down a pair of Huntington Beach mayors, hounded O.C. Sheriff Mike Carona all the way to federal prison, unleashed the "Ask a Mexican" column on the county's xenophobes and shined a light on subcultures long ignored.

Swaim also hired Rebecca Schoenkopf as a 22-year-old cub reporter who became a cult figure in early-2000s Orange County with a nightlife-cum-politics column called "Commie Girl."

"He was urbane, elegant and erudite," said Schoenkopf, who's now the owner, editor and publisher of Wonkette, a saucy site of liberal commentary on national politics. "I just completely admired him."

But there were also inklings of conservatism from the start.

In a December 1997 Orange Coast Magazine profile, Swaim described himself as a "Catholic Marxist with a heavy dose of libertarianism." In that same article, Ken Grubbs, a former Orange County Register editorial director who last served as Rep. Dana Rohrabacher's press secretary, presaged Swaim's eventual turn.

"I just think he's trying to square some circles that he can't square, like Catholicism and Marxism, like libertarianism and Marxism," Grubbs said. "Will is struggling with the contra-

dictions."

Swaim points to an experience he had prior to starting the Weekly as the beginning of his evolution, even if he didn't know it at the time. He worked on the campaign of an unnamed Democrat who took him to a meeting with a local police department's union. The politician explained his realpolitik with public employee unions: pledge support for their contract in exchange for an endorsement. After seeing it play out with back slaps and handshakes, the experience left Swaim a disaffected Democrat.

So, too, did the steady exposés of liberal politicians that came across Swaim's editorial desk at the Weekly, a point he raises in conservative circles whenever the Weekly is criticized as having been a left-wing rag.

"We were the paper that really exposed Larry Agran in Irvine," Swaim said. "We were the paper that targeted [Rep.] Loretta Sanchez. There wasn't so much a political agenda as there was a deep desire to tell stories that other people weren't telling."

Swaim's conservative conversion arrived in full after a string of mishaps in journalism.

In 2007, Swaim and an exodus of his former OC Weekly staff members formed the District Weekly in Long Beach, a short-lived newspaper he left after about a year.

When the District folded in 2010, Swaim's wife remained as head of the publishing company. In the messy aftermath, the California Labor Commission ruled that six workers were owed \$70,000 in unpaid vacation time. A judge later found the penalty to be unenforceable under law, since the company was bankrupt.

"Swaim was a great editor," said Dave Wielenga, a Weekly journalist who joined the District and was one of the six workers in the commission's initial ruling. "He was really good for my career until he wasn't. It was really disappointing."

By then, Swaim had already presided over the closing of another alt-weekly, Los Angeles City-

Beat. In a time he described as "miserable," Swaim worked outside of journalism after that as a fraud investigator for a bank. That same year in 2011, he began "The Republic of Costa Mesa" blog to chronicle the city's clash with the Orange County Employees Assn. over privatization, pensions and pink slips.

"All I wanted to do was write about this one thing that continued to trouble me — and that was my affection for unions," Swaim said. "I realized government unions are very different creatures as I learned in Costa Mesa."

He sparred with OCEA over the suicide of a city employee set to be laid off and sided with Costa Mesa's Republican council members more often than not.

His fusillades drew the attention of Steve Greenhut, a former Orange County Register senior editorial writer and columnist who had been the frequent target of the Weekly. Greenhut served as vice president of the Franklin Center for Government and Public Integrity and needed a managing editor when he hired Swaim.

"I don't find [his political evolution] surprising, at all," said Greenhut, now western director for the R Street Institute and an editorial board member for the Southern California News Group.


"As I've seen over the years, he's become more ideologically aligned where I have been but I think he's always naturally been a libertarian."

The two traveled the country discussing politics, free markets and unions. At one conference, copies of "I, Pencil" a pro-market essay by Leonard Reed circulated; Greenhut recalled it having a profound impact on Swaim.

"The common complaint from the left that the problem was about a business class," Swaim said, "just started to strike me as hollow — an excuse."


When Greenhut left for R Street, Swaim took his Franklin Center posts but tired of being away from family for work. In 2016, he

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MALL

Continued from page R5

lan's Egg Slice, which offers upscale breakfast sandwiches at a quick service pace.

McMullan fondly recalls trips to the Buena Park Mall during his West Anaheim upbringing in the 1960s. "When we were growing up, the only mall we knew was Buena Park Mall," he said. "When you wanted desert boots back in the '60s, John Hardy's at the mall is where you came."

After spending years as a corporate chef in Australia, Japan and Europe, he later owned a breakfast sandwich shop abroad before bringing the concept to Costa Mesa as a popup.

Eric Choi, mall owner and leasing manager, visited Egg Slice one morning and offered McMullan the opportunity to check out the future site of Grange Hall 39. McMullan gladly accepted and found himself back at the mall of his youth.

"To come back and see its transformation has been pretty interesting for me," he said. "Of course, as a vendor in Grange Hall 39, we feel thrilled at the possibility of more traffic. I, personally, like the idea of a renaissance of the old medieval villages with housing, food, clothing, entertainment, exercise, and work all within easy walking distance of each other."

In the meantime, McMullan is looking forward to feeding hungry construction crews.

With the movie theater and the mall having suffered on account of the pandemic, Grange Hall 39 remains something of a hidden gem, tucked away at the backside of the mall, away from street view.

Burger Monster, another of its vendors, opened earlier this year. "American Werewolf," "Dracula" and "Lycan" gourmet burgers and specialty fries fill out its frightfully delicious menu. Brandon Takanabe started out as a cook before buying Burger Monster during its food truck



Scott Smeltzer | Staff Photographer

BILL MCMULLAN is the owner of Egg Slice, a business in Grange Hall 39 at the Buena Park Mall.

days; he welcomed the opportunity to be a part of Grange Hall 39, but construction delays meant its opening came amid the pandemic.

"Business hasn't been great," he said. "We're trying to make it more inviting to get people to stay and hang out instead of just getting food and leaving."

The Village hopes to solve those issues by creating a mixed-use experience at the Buena Park Mall, one where Grange Hall 39's location is an asset, not a liability for lost customers.

"It's right at the connection of our site and the existing pedestrian plaza," Geier said. "We see that area as an important node where residential and commercial comes together."

Like his Grange Hall neighbors, Takanabe welcomes the Village's arrival, especially as presenters reassured business owners that the project would be residential only. But it can't

come soon enough as Takanabe signed a 3-year lease and is just hoping to make it through the end of this year, somehow.

Plans for the Village were formally submitted with Buena Park this week, the first step of a long journey. If all goes well, construction could begin as early as 2023 with its first residents poised to move in by 2025.

In addition to residential units, there will also be an acre park with its playground and seating areas open to all.

Geier imagines a place where a future resident can walk their dog at the park, pick up a breakfast sandwich at Egg Slice, shop at the mall and take in a movie later that night after dining at Grange Hall 39.

"It's going to be a unique offering in Buena Park," he promised, "and we're excited to get started."

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SWAIM

Continued from page R5

became communications director for the California Policy Center before leading the nonprofit as president a year later.

According to nonprofit tax filing records, grants and contributions to the nonprofit have increased steadily from half a million in 2016 to more than \$2 million per year.

It now boasts a paid staff of nine. In 2020, Swaim drew a salary of \$142,000 as president — and his harshest criticism to date.

In July 2020, the Orange County Board of Education voted 4-1 to approve guidelines for students to return to class without masks or social distancing amid a pandemic.

It soon emerged that Swaim authored a controversial white paper supporting as much.

Dan Cooper, a professor of pediatrics, criticized the white paper as "poorly annotated" and a "deficient" scientific review of the available evidence in the Daily Pilot, which tied it to Swaim's pro-charter advocacy, reporting that he deems "100% unfair."

After the controversy, Swaim's think tank helped establish the Orange County Classical Academy, a charter school in Orange that opened last year.

Mark Bucher, the California Policy Center's CEO, co-founded the school along with board chair Dr. Jeff Barke, a private physician criticized for promoting coronavirus misinformation. The Lincoln Club of Orange County recently toured the campus and offered its on-line hosannas.

All might as well have been dartboard targets at the Weekly while Swaim was in charge, but they are now counted as charter school allies.

"I was wrong and they were right," Swaim said. "It's also a measure of their openness to have me work alongside them."

Despite Swaim's sweeping political changes, he contemplated going home to the Weekly again.

Prior to the paper's clo-



Scott Smeltzer | Staff Photographer

THE CALIFORNIA Policy Center, a conservative nonprofit, continues to grow under Will Swaim as president.

sure, he met with its owner Duncan McIntosh and offered insights into how to turn the troubled institution's financial woes around. Swaim left the meeting with the impression that McIntosh might also decide to put the Weekly up for sale — and spoke with interested parties in anticipation.

"I just thought he would sell it to somebody else who would do something amazing with it," Swaim said. "I thought maybe I would be the guy."

But the paper's abrupt closure caught almost everyone off-guard.

Now, a Rage Against the Machine poster that hangs from his home office and is visible during Zoom interviews serves as rare reminder of Swaim's rebellious past. He doesn't consider the leftist rock band's poster a contradiction, just a reminder of a "question everything" ethos from his earlier days.

"For me, the pendulum swung the other way," Swaim said. "I don't know where I'll be in five or 10 years. All I know is what I see at the moment — that free minds, free people and free markets produce better outcomes for everybody."

Swaim's former "comrades" who shared his missionary zeal for alternative journalism remain some of his most obstinate skeptics.

"It's an unbelievable contrast," said Schoenkopf, who once resigned from the Weekly in solidarity with her editor's own departure from corporate ownership. "He was young and exciting. You can't be a young, exciting Republican. That'd be crazy — I guess you can if you're Congressman Madison Cawthorn, but he's not stupid. I just can't imagine it's intellectually honest."

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