

Daily Pilot

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NMUSD may return to distance learning for secondary students

Depending on a vote by the school board on Thursday, it could happen with the return from winter break due to the increase of COVID-19 cases.

BY LILLY NGUYEN

Secondary students in the Newport-Mesa Unified School District may be returning to distance learning at the end of winter break due to the coronavirus pandemic, depending on a vote by trustees Thursday.

Notice of a special meeting went out late Wednesday afternoon.

Comments included with Thursday's agenda state that district officials will be considering the possibility of returning its secondary students to the distance learning model when students re-

turn from winter break on Jan. 4. The return would last until Jan. 22 as proposed with students to return to campuses on Jan. 25.

Elementary schools would continue with the hybrid model.

All in-person activities would be temporarily suspended for athletics, arts and other extracurricular programs from the start of winter break through Jan. 22 as proposed.

A statement from the district said the increase of COVID-19 cases across the state, Orange County and local community

See **Secondary**, page A3



Don Leach | Staff Photographer

STUDENTS RETURN to Costa Mesa High School on Nov. 9, the first day back to school for secondary students in the Newport-Mesa Unified School District.

Trustees kill an agreement with the teachers union that would have eliminated one half-day of in-person learning for elementary school students.

BY SARA CARDINE

An agreement between the Newport-Mesa Unified School District and its teachers union — which would have eliminated one half-day of in-person learning for elementary school students to allow for teacher prep time — was rejected by board members, who called the move “unacceptable.”

Trustees were asked in a meeting Tuesday to approve a memo of understanding reached between district negotiators and representatives from the Newport Mesa Federation of Teachers regarding working conditions under

a hybrid learning model.

That agreement contained language regarding parent-teacher conferences, special day classroom teacher compensation and preparation time.

But controversy arose over a portion of the MOU pertaining to the hybrid schedule for elementary students, who currently attend in-person classes for half days in a morning or afternoon cohort four days a week, excluding Wednesdays, learning online the rest of the day.

On Wednesdays, both cohorts

See **Trustees**, page A4

Orange County receives first shipments of COVID-19 vaccine



Screenshot by Lilly Nguyen

MICHAEL LOWMAN, left, receives the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine Wednesday. Lowman works as a nurse at Providence St. Joseph Hospital in Orange.

Five frontline workers become the first in the county to be inoculated during a news conference at Providence St. Joseph Hospital in Orange.

BY LILLY NGUYEN

It's a light at the end of the tunnel for what has been a challenging year all over — the first doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine have arrived in Orange County.

On Wednesday, five staff members were selected from Providence St. Joseph's Hospital in Orange to receive the first vaccinations in Orange County from Pfizer-BioNTech. Jeremy Zoch, chief executive officer at St. Joseph Hospital in Orange, said the doses arrived just hours before a joint news conference at the hospital.

Each inoculation was streamed live and greeted with a round of applause.

“It's been a long road. A lot [of people] have worked really hard to get us to this point. [We're] very, very grateful to Pfizer and, soon,

Moderna, for what they have done,” said Erik Wexler, the chief executive for Providence's Southern California region. “Soon, we will be protecting all of our caregivers in our community and eradicating this horrific pandemic.”

In attendance were Orange County Board of Supervisors Don Wagner and Doug Chaffee and Orange County Health Care Agency Director and Public Health Officer Dr. Clayton Chau in addition to hospital staff.

“On March 25, our county announced our first COVID death. Today, less than nine months after that tragic day, we administer a vaccine,” Wagner said. “Now with the COVID vaccine not just on the horizon, but here in this room in a sub-freezing storage facility waiting to be distributed — we're poised to take the next step in responding to this pandemic.”

Chaffee described Wednesday as a “momentous day for all citizens of Orange County” and urged residents to continue wearing masks, practicing social distancing and washing their hands. Chaffee added that it will be some time before all citizens can be

vaccinated. Chau also called on residents to “not let [their] guards down” and to continue best practices to curb the spread of the virus.

“Most importantly as we are welcoming in the winter holiday celebrations and the new year, please do not — and let me repeat — do not mix households and gather,” Chau said. “It is so important as you know our numbers in our country, in our state, in our county have been rising so high. Today, we celebrate a wonderful milestone and the significance cannot be overstated.”

Michael Lowman, a nurse at Providence St. Joseph's Hospital, was the first nurse vaccinated during the news conference.

Dr. Paul Sheikowitz, who works in the emergency care center and was vaccinated Wednesday, said the greatest challenge has been the burden of the number of patients versus the number of staff that are able to take care of the patients coming in.

“Providence St. Joseph's has done a wonderful job in trying to expand our capacity, I would say, to the limit. We're probably at that

See **Vaccine**, page A2

With the virus at a critical peak, Costa Mesa's Fairview Developmental Center reopens to COVID-19 patients

BY SARA CARDINE

As an unparalleled surge in coronavirus infections outstrips hospital capacities, and with virtually no ICU beds available for Orange County COVID-19 patients, officials announced Wednesday Costa Mesa's Fairview Developmental Center has reopened as a regional alternate care site.

Partially retrofitted in April to accept individuals recovering from COVID-19 and other low-acuity coronavirus cases, the center stopped admitting patients on Sept. 30 after several months of low patient census.

The state-owned facility remained in a “warm close” state, meaning it could reopen within 72 to 96 hours if needed. But this week, as state and county health

officials looked for ways to alleviate packed hospital emergency rooms and ICU units, the site was officially brought back online this week.

The first round of COVID-19 patients has been admitted into an area with a 125-bed capacity, according to Costa Mesa Fire & Rescue Chief Dan Stefano, who acts as a liaison representing the city in matters related to Fairview.

“We'd been hearing for the past month the state's alternate care sites were going to ramp up, and in the past week and a half [the site] has been coming back online,” Stefano said Wednesday, estimating a patient census of about 10 by this weekend.

Meanwhile, another two units

See **Fairview**, page A2



Allen J. Schaben | Los Angeles Times

CLOSED IN SEPTEMBER, Costa Mesa's Fairview Developmental Center reopened this week as an alternate care facility capable of admitting nearly 200 low-acuity COVID-19 patients, with the ability to expand.



Photo by Mark Towfiq

THE BLUE glass lawn art on Bill Gross' Laguna property, as seen from neighbor Mark Towfiq's pool.

Bill Gross denies harassing Laguna neighbor

In the billionaire's testimony Monday, he instead accuses Mark Towfiq of invasions of privacy.

BY LAURENCE DARMIENTO

Renowned bond investor Bill Gross had trouble remembering dates, details and prior testimony when he took the stand Monday in a civil harassment trial against a neighbor.

However, Gross was certain of one thing: That neither he nor his “life partner,” former professional tennis player Amy Schwartz, had harassed their next-door neighbors in Laguna Beach by playing loud music late at night while they were trying to sleep — including and especially the theme song from “Gilligan's Island.”

Rather, he said it was neighbor Mark Towfiq, a wealthy tech entrepreneur, who harassed them by constantly taping the couple on his iPhone — recordings that Towfiq testified were done to capture the loud music.

“I consider him very strange. I consider him dangerous to approach,” Gross said during the hearing, which is considering dueling claims of harassment and is being streamed live on YouTube from Orange County Superior Court in Santa Ana. “We called him ‘Peeping Mark.’”

Towfiq and his wife, Carol Nakahara, have accused the billionaire and his partner of harassing them with loud music after Towfiq complained to the city of Laguna Beach last summer about a blue glass lawn sculpture created by noted artist Dale Chihuly.

Towfiq has testified that the art installation near their property line was unattractive once protective netting was put up, blocking the view from their seaside home on an exclusive stretch of South Coast Highway.

The complaint prompted the city to issue Gross a code enforcement letter July 28 stating that the structures lacked permits, which he needed to get or take down the installation.

Towfiq has testified that the loud music started after the letter was issued.

Gross said he couldn't remember exactly when he bought the sculpture, nor could he recall a letter sent to the city in response

See **Gross**, page A3

THE DAILY COMMUTER PUZZLE

By Jacqueline E. Mathews

12x12 crossword puzzle grid with numbers 1-65 in various cells.

- ACROSS
1 Is required to
5 North & Caspian
9 Not barefoot
13 Green Muppet
15 Metal fastener
16 Ridiculously small
17 Shoot from hiding
18 Haughtiness
20 Initials for Edison
21 Police officer
23 Went separate ways
24 Parts of speech
26 Boston cream

For answers to the crossword, see page A4.

- DOWN
1 Lion's share
2 Annapolis school, for short
3 Albert Einstein & Marie Curie
4 Touch lightly
5 Clothing fasteners
6 Hearing organ
7 Up in the ; unsettled
8 Not as neat
9 Bowler's feats
10 Look for wild game
11 "Fool me , shame on you"
12 Prepared Easter eggs
14 Happens again
19 Puts on weight
22 TV's " _ Life to Live"
25 Kick out of office
27 Biblical wise men
28 Make laugh
29 Piece of tall marsh grass
30 Use weasel words
31 Increase suddenly
33 Ride cost
34 Deli loaf
36 Raw minerals
38 _ stove; roundish heater
39 Good spellers' delights
41 Item in a first aid kit
42 Cut in half
44 Hoboes
45 Cutting tool
47 Ne'er-do-well
48 Competent
49 Fail to keep a secret
50 Leg of ; fancy entre
53 _ up; runs out of
54 Lahr or Parks
56 Pupil's place
57 Mex. wife: abbr.
59 Sup

FAIRVIEW

Continued from page A1

are each being prepared to admit anywhere from 25 to 50 memory care patients and individuals with developmental disabilities.

Costa Mesa Mayor Katrina Foley said Fairview would play an important role in serving the needs of the most vulnerable. "It's critical that we care for these residents in a way that's safe and gets them out of housing situations where they may not be able to socially distance from everyone and allow them to recover with dignity," Foley said.

Orange County Health Care officials recorded Wednesday 3,231 new infections and 23 deaths.

As critical as the shortage of hospital beds is, Stefano said staffing levels are presenting an added challenge to firefighters and paramedics who regularly transport patients to facilities throughout the county.

Recents average patient offload times, aka "wall times" — the time from an ambulance's arrival to the time a patient is seen, so named because paramedics and patients on gurneys are often lined up along a receiving wall — have gone from about 15 to 20 minutes to upward of one hour, Stefano said. The picture is worse in neighboring Los Angeles, Imperial and San Bernardino counties, he added, where medical responders have had to wait up to six or seven hours for a single patient to be admitted.

VACCINE

Continued from page A1

limit right now, but we're doing the best we can," Sheikewitz said. "This is also a challenge among each individual healthcare worker and employee — that challenge is to not get the disease." "It's been very risky," Sheikewitz added. "We use [personal protective equipment]. We're in the rooms constantly and, quite frankly, it's miraculous that so few people have gotten it and that's why we're so grateful to have this vaccine today."

agency. "If you need us, we're there," Stefano said. "[But] if you come in and you're not in an immediate emergency, you're going to have to wait. You don't want to be a part of that." The fire chief said what happens in the next 17 days could determine the course of the pandemic for the first six months of the new year, adding now is the "most critical time we have seen to date."

receive at least 1 million more doses of the COVID-19 vaccine by the end of the month between the additional 393,900 doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine and the 672,000 doses of the Moderna vaccine, if it receives U.S. authorization as expected.

- available. An estimated 68,773 have recovered. Here are the latest cumulative coronavirus case counts and COVID-19 deaths for select cities in Orange County:
• Santa Ana: 21,983 cases; 347 deaths
• Anaheim: 18,865 cases; 368 deaths
• Huntington Beach: 4,515 cases; 94 deaths
• Costa Mesa: 3,666 cases; 49 deaths
• Irvine: 4,008 cases; 18 deaths
• Newport Beach: 1,781 cases; 28 deaths
• Fountain Valley: 1,369 cases; 23 deaths
• Laguna Beach: 407 cases; fewer than five deaths

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GROSS

Continued from page A1

to the permitting problem, saying an attorney may have drafted it.

Gross, who had some trouble hearing the questions posed to him, also could not recall prior testimony by code enforcement officer Ross Corona and Laguna Beach Police Officer Wade Kraus who said the couple told them they would turn down the volume if Towfiq dropped his complaint.

"At 76, I have less of a memory than at 26," said Gross, who retired last year.

However, the billionaire was adamant that he had not harassed Towfiq, despite a text exchange in which Gross warned his neighbor of "nightly concerts" unless there was "peace on all fronts."

Gross contended that the message was intended to stop Towfiq's invasion of the couple's privacy.

He also said he never carried out the threat. "What I did was not a nightly concert, so I guess I didn't make good on my promise," he said.

Gross' remarks in the afternoon followed morning testimony from Schwartz, who also denied the music was played loudly and intended as harassment.

She similarly denied telling Corona and Kraus that the music would be turned down if Towfiq dropped his complaint. "He testified that, but I did not



Patrick T. Fallon | AFP

BILL GROSS and partner Amy Schwartz arrive for a court hearing Dec. 7 at Orange County Superior Court in Santa Ana.

say that," she said, of Corona's remarks.

Schwartz said that the "Gilligan's Island" theme song was special to the couple because last summer they learned that Newport Harbor was featured in the opening credits and the view at another home they own there was identical to a clip from the credits.

That caused the couple to add the song to their playlist.

"I love that song," she said. "It's a very special song."

She also testified that she felt requests made by Towfiq to lower the volume of the music felt like "commands" to her and that he invaded her privacy numerous times by filming her when she was swimming. Towfiq has said he filmed the couple only to document their harassment.

"I'm scared. I feel violated. I feel afraid. I'm in a bikini or less," she said.

Towfiq and his wife last week turned down an offer by Gross to end the dispute by donating to charities in Orange County. Towfiq's attorney, Jennifer Keller, said that if Gross wanted to end the dispute he should take down the statue and netting, apologize to her client and pick up his legal fees.

Gross later issued a news release stating he had made the donation anyway, providing \$500,000 to COVID-19-relief organizations in the county.

The court trial is expected to conclude this week, with final testimony from Gross, Nakahara and two other parties, as well as closing arguments.

Towfiq and his wife are seeking an order ending the loud music, while Gross and Schwartz want Towfiq to stop recording them.

LAURENCE DARMIENTO is a staff writer with the Los Angeles Times.

SECONDARY

Continued from page A1

have impacted the district and its workforce, limiting its ability to find appropriate substitute employees who provide critical services. It also cites warnings from the Orange County Health Care Agency that another surge of cases is expected immediately following winter break and the holiday season.

County health officials

reported Wednesday that case numbers grew by another 3,231 and hospitalizations are now at 1,486.

In Newport Beach and Costa Mesa, the total number of cases have reached 1,781 and 3,666, respectively. Current data reports that available adult beds in intensive care units are now just under 10%.

"We are appreciative of your understanding and recognize the impact any change has on families," the district said in a state-

ment. "This is the most challenging period of the pandemic and we will continue to prioritize the safety of students and staff as our most important guiding principle in our decisions and actions."

Secondary students in the Newport-Mesa Unified School District first returned on Nov. 9. Elementary students returned on Sept. 29.

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