

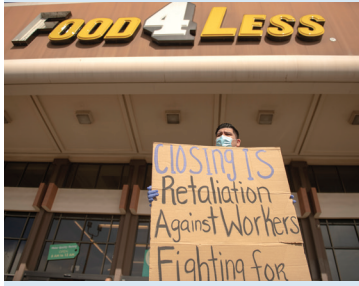
Long Beach Business Journal

February 9, 2021

an edition of the Long Beach Post

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Meet the 10-year-old CEO who nailed her business plan in the middle of a pandemic



Khiley Braxton, 10, shows off the Cali color polish from her own Long Beach-based polish line. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

■ By **ALENA MASCHKE**
Senior Reporter

When Khiley Braxton appears on screen, as she does often these days, it seems as if the pixels can barely contain all her energy. The 10-year-old, who also goes by her nickname Sissy B, has no problem being in front of the camera, whether it's for a TikTok video, a virtual school appearance or a Zoom interview with a reporter.

As a freshly-minted CEO, that talent serves her well.

Like many kids right now, Khiley is experiencing one of the most formative years of her life locked indoors, with nothing but her phone and laptop connecting her to the outside world.

But unlike most other kids, Khiley has used the past six months to start a business of which she is the CEO, social

media manager and brand ambassador. She's quite literally the face of the brand, a kid-friendly line of nail polish with each bottle carrying a tiny sticker featuring her smiling likeness, framed by a crown of curls.

The junior entrepreneur founded Sissy B Nails with her mother, Krystle Braxton, who helped her start the company as a birthday present, replacing a planned trip that was canceled because of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

Since then, the company has sold over 5,000 bottles of nail polish through its website and a beauty supply store in Rose Park, amassing an equal number of followers on TikTok.

The line consists of 18 different shades, designed especially for youngsters: The nail polish easily peels off with-

out chemical removers, dries quickly and doesn't exude the same pungent smell as traditional polish. All of the colors were picked by Khiley and named to reflect her personal experiences, from the shimmering "Santorini," inspired by a family trip to Greece, to "Brown Skin Girl" in honor of girls like her.

"I want to support Black little girls and Black people," Khiley said. Her mother said she's happy that her child is proud of her community and her culture. "I value my culture and I want my child to value her culture," Krystle said.

On Sissy B's TikTok channel, Khiley shares videos of a typical day in her life and answers followers' questions about owning a company.

"I'm trying to inspire other kids to start their own busi-

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In its neighborhoods and businesses, southeast LA finds itself pounded by the pandemic

■ By **ALENA MASCHKE**
Senior Reporter

About 20 miles up the LA River from Long Beach sits the tiny town of Vernon. The city's history has been marred by corruption and concerns over hazardous waste from its many factories. And, as of late, it can add another unwelcome distinction.

Vernon tops Los Angeles County's list of cities with the highest per capita rate of coronavirus cases over the span of the pandemic. According to data published by the county's public health department, the city of just over 200 residents has seen 121 cases of coronavirus so far—a stunning case rate of more than 56,000 per 100,000 people.

But those high rankings for Vernon and the nearby City of Industry, which ranks second in the grim tally of cities, don't actually reveal the kind of viral siege among their residents that the county's numbers would suggest.

Instead, the high infection rates are largely the result of positive tests administered and recorded at their densely populated businesses and reflect the multifaceted coronavirus challenges faced by industrial and residential communities across southeast Los Angeles County.

Despite the extremely small nighttime populations of Vernon and Industry, tens of thousands of workers travel there every day for jobs in meatpacking plants, mail distribution centers and other densely populated, essential businesses. An outbreak at a Farmer John meatpacking plant in Vernon left 153 infected with the virus. At one FedEx distribu-

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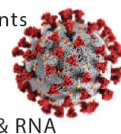
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Kroger Co. announces it will close 2 stores after city’s ‘hero pay’ mandate



Grocery food worker Jose Rocha joined other employees, union representatives and city leaders Wednesday, Feb. 3, 2021, in protest over The Kroger Co.’s announcement that it will close two Long Beach stores. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

■ By **BRANDON RICHARDSON**
Senior Reporter

The Kroger Co. announced Monday, Feb. 1, it is closing two of its Long Beach grocery stores in response to the city’s recently adopted mandate requiring local grocers to pay employees an extra \$4 per hour in “hero pay.”

The national grocery giant is closing one of its Ralphs stores, located at 3380 N. Los Coyotes Diagonal, and one Food 4 Less store, located at 2185 E. South St. The permanent closures will happen April 17, the company said, adding that the stores were “long struggling” locations.

“This misguided action by the Long Beach City Council oversteps the traditional bargaining process and applies to some, but not all, grocery workers in the city,” the company stated in its announcement.

The city’s law affects companies with 300 or more workers nationally and more than 15 employees per store in Long Beach. It will remain in effect for at least

120 days.
Kroger Ralphs Division spokesman John Votava said the closures will impact nearly 200 employees between both locations and may involve layoffs.

“As always, we will do everything we can to take care of our associates,” Votava said in a text to the Post. “We may not be able to take care of every individual and it may result in layoffs.”

The company has four other Ralphs stores and two Food 4 Less stores in Long Beach that will continue to operate.

In a statement following Kroger’s announcement, the city acknowledged the potential job losses, stating the city’s Pacific Gateway Workforce Innovation Network would assist anyone who is laid off with unemployment benefits and other services.

The statement did not address Kroger’s criticism of the city’s pay mandate.

However dozens of Kroger workers and city leaders gathered on Wednesday, Feb. 3, to condemn the move by the national grocer.

“It’s devastating,” said Robert Gonza-



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lez who has worked for the company for 26 years. “This is so wrong and evil.”

The closure could exacerbate food insecurity in North Long Beach, Councilman Rex Richardson said during the press conference. He said he is working with city staff and local organizations to prepare a food insecurity plan to assist impacted residents.

“It’s an unfair choice to ask the North Long Beach community to make a choice: jobs in the community or food on the table,” Richardson said. “A community of Black and Brown people, working families trying to put food on the table. These workers deserve hazard pay.”

Long Beach was the first city to enact a law requiring more pay for grocery workers. The Los Angeles City Council Tuesday, Feb. 2, voted to support a \$5 “hero pay” initiative, and in January the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors approved a similar mandate be drafted for the county.

Numerous other cities have approved or are considering “hero pay,” including Seattle, Santa Monica and Oakland.

The Long Beach City Council noted in its resolution passing the new ordinance that while other businesses have struggled during the COVID-19 pandemic, supermarkets have seen a surge in customers.

“Grocery workers working during the COVID-19 emergency merit additional compensation because they are performing hazardous duty due to the significant risk of exposure to the COVID-19 virus,” according to ordinance. “They are working in these hazardous conditions now and will continue to face safety risks as the virus presents an ongoing threat for an uncertain period, potentially resulting in subsequent waves of infection.”

Throughout the pandemic, profits



Kroger employees and UFCW Local 324 protest in front of Food 4 Less in North Long Beach, Wednesday, Feb. 3, 2021, calling on The Kroger Co. to reverse its decision to close the store. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

soared an average of 39% in the first half of 2020 at supermarket chains and other food retailers nationwide, according to a recent study by the Brookings Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank.

At Kroger Co., the parent company of both Ralphs and Food 4 Less, profits for the first two quarters of 2020 were up 90%, according to the report. Kroger saw

its net earnings for the first two quarters jump to more than \$2.031 billion compared with \$1.069 billion in the same period of 2019.

The report found that the average pay for a cashier is \$10 an hour nationwide. The company gave employees a nearly 10% pay raise at the start of the pandemic, which expired in May. The company also

offered a \$400 “thank you” bonus in June.

The company said in its statement it provided additional benefits like paid emergency leave and a \$15 million “Helping Hands fund” that provides financial support to associates experiencing certain hardships due to COVID-19.

Kroger said the “irreparable harm” that will come as a result of the city’s decision is “deeply unfortunate.”

The day after the city council unanimously approved the hero pay mandate during its Jan. 19 meeting, the California Grocers Association filed a lawsuit against the city, asking the Los Angeles federal court to declare the ordinance invalid and unconstitutional.

In a statement on Feb. 1, the association said Kroger’s decision to close two stores is “truly unfortunate” for the community—and grocery workers in particular—but went on to say it is not surprising.

“A \$4 per hour increase represents about a 28% increase in labor costs for grocers,” the association wrote. “There’s no way grocers can absorb that big of a cost increase without an offset somewhere else, considering grocers operate with razor thin margins and many stores already operate in the red.”

The Long Beach Area Chamber of Commerce opposed the mandate from the beginning, President Jeremy Harris said, due to the lack of dialogue between the city and grocers in the crafting of the ordinance. With the pandemic ongoing, Harris said the potential job losses come at the worst time for employees.

“This is a worst-case scenario,” Harris said. “This is an example of government overreach and it’s ultimately employees paying the price.” ■



Howard Simmons, who has been a Ralphs supermarket employee for 40 years, protests in front of a Food 4 Less in North Long Beach, Wednesday, Feb. 3, 2021. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

GameStop stock craze helps make dreams come true for these 2 Long Beach locals



Senay Kenfe, co-owner of Play Nice, shares a screenshot of his GameStop earnings at Martin Luther King Jr. Park on Thursday, Jan. 28, 2021. Photo by Crystal Niebla.

By CRYSTAL NIEBLA
Staff Reporter

Long Beach millennial Senay Kenfe saw his GameStop shares skyrocket recently, and he plans to use his earnings—valued at more than \$163,000, he tweeted—to buy the apartment building where he lives, and grew up in, in Central Long Beach. Kenfe said he purchased the video game stock at just \$12 a share in early December. On Jan. 28 the shares peaked at \$468,

according to MarketWatch, a stock market data tracker. Many investors, however, had already cashed out on their earnings a day earlier, causing a stock market kerfuffle on Wall Street between hedge funds and average-Joe stock traders on Reddit who capitalized on buying low and selling high. For now, Kenfe said he is holding off on selling in hopes that GameStop share value increases. He’s been investing in the stock market for nearly a decade, and his GameStop earn-

ings are just one example of his success in this complex Wall Street gamble. A month ago, Kenfe said he put 10% down on a house for his mother, also in Central Long Beach, using money earned from his past investments. “I don’t understand how this is a reality,” Kenfe recalled his mother saying. His mother, who has never lived in a house before, didn’t think owning a home was something attainable, he said. Two years before that, he bought two apartment buildings in Flint and Detroit, Michigan, both of which he converted to Section 8 housing, he said. “Getting rich is not a goal of mine,” he said. “The goal is stability.” Like Kenfe, a Long Beach social media influencer who goes by the moniker “Horseshoe Horseshoe” invested in the GameStop shares in November and promptly sold on Jan. 27 for \$5,000. He first bought his shares at about \$7 each. Horseshoe declined to give his real name out of fear of jeopardizing his employment in the healthcare industry. The same day Horseshoe sold his stock, he used his earnings on a \$4,000 engagement ring for his girlfriend and plans on using other investments to buy a home for his parents. “In the Wall Street Bet community, we call our earnings, ‘tendies,’” he said about the sub-Reddit he relies on for stock market advice. The two Long Beach investors also use

Reddit for help on their sells and buys, as well as free apps such as Fidelity, Webull and Robinhood. Young people have begun playing the stock market, Horseshoe said, largely due to social media influencers advising their followers to invest in the future instead of splurging on items or services made to enhance one’s appearance. “Stop trying to buy all this jewelry and live this high-end lifestyle when you know you can’t afford it,” he said. While many other traders playing the market have already capitalized on GameStop, Horseshoe and Kenfe said they don’t recommend that anyone hop on the bandwagon now. It’s too risky, they said. “It’s not a get-rich-quick plan,” Horseshoe said Wednesday night. “This is only a once-in-a-lifetime kind of thing.” (Although, Horseshoe did reveal that he rebought a few shares and is holding off on reselling them.) He recalled having lost \$2,000 once, and recommends that anyone investing in any company should be financially prepared to lose that money. He said he heard a story about a man who killed himself after losing his life savings in a gamble with the stock market. Kenfe said, with disappointment, that someone told him they just bought a GameStop share because they heard about how people made money from it. “The FOMO (fear of missing out) is dangerous,” he said. ■

Southwest to offer service to Maui, its seventh new destination out of Long Beach

By BRANDON RICHARDSON
Senior Reporter

Southwest Airlines on Jan. 28 announced service from Long Beach to Maui beginning in March. The announcement comes after the company saw strong interest in its Honolulu route, which was announced in November and also begins in March. The new service is another move to increase competition out of the municipal airport. In early December, Hawaiian Airlines—previously the only carrier to offer direct flights from Long Beach to Hawaii—announced daily service to Maui after only offering flights to Honolulu since 2018. “It’s exciting to see our airport continue to grow in its role as a Southern California launch point for trips to the Hawaiian Islands,” said Mayor Robert Garcia. Travelers to Hawaii must quarantine upon arrival but may be exempted if they obtain a negative COVID-19 test result within 72 hours of their flight. To assist customers, Long Beach Airport and Hawaiian Airlines have established testing sites on the airport property. Maui marks the seventh new destination out of Long Beach announced by Southwest since the airline was awarded 17 flight slots at the noise-controlled airport that were vacated by JetBlue Airways. In December, the airline announced daily service to Chicago Midway, Dallas Love Field, Houston Hobby, Reno and St. Louis. While Southwest has 34 daily flight slots

at Long Beach Airport, the sum of all its recent announcements is 35: Austin (1), Chicago (2), Dallas (1), Denver (3), Honolulu (1), Houston (2), Maui (1), Oakland(5), Phoenix (4), Reno (1), Sacramento (4), San Jose (3), St. Louis (1), Las Vegas (6).

With the addition of seven destinations in March, the airline would be utilizing 33 of its flight slots. The second daily flights to Chicago and Houston are not slated to begin until April. It was not immediately clear which up-

coming daily service would be scrapped to make room for the Maui flight but Southwest spokesman Brad Hawkins said it is likely a destination with multiple daily flights would be trimmed based on demand, rather than cutting out any cities. ■



A Southwest aircraft lands at Long Beach Airport. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

Restaurant that defied COVID-19 rules takes city to court, seeking return of health permit

■ By JEREMIAH DOBRUCK
Staff Reporter

A Long Beach restaurant owner who defied local coronavirus rules wants a judge to force the city into letting her reopen now that a ban on outdoor dining has been lifted.

Dana Tanner, owner of Restauration on Fourth Street, refused to close down her patio during state and local stay-at-home orders and—as a result—city officials pulled her health permit and cut her gas, leaving her with no avenue to operate legally even after other restaurants were allowed to reopen outdoor dining.

But Tanner argues the process that shut her down was unfair. On Monday, Feb. 1, she filed a petition in Los Angeles Superior Court against the city of Long Beach and its health department, seeking the return of her health permit.

“The city of Long Beach public health data provides no support for the shutdown of outdoor restaurant operations,” the petition states. “There is no reliable data which tracks the spread of COVID-19 in restaurant settings that provide for only take out or delivery as opposed to outdoor dining only.”

Allowing major retailers and manufacturers to remain open while restricting restaurants to take-out or delivery only is “without justification and is arbitrary (and) capricious...,” the petition alleges.

A representative for the Long Beach City Attorney’s Office did not respond to a re-



A Long Beach police officer and gas department employee walk past Restauration as they make their way around to the back of the building to examine what turned out to be an illegal gas connection, Sunday, Jan. 24, 2020. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

quest for comment, but city and local health officials have said they chose to shut down restaurants during the height of the coronavirus surge because they were one of the few places people were allowed to congregate for long periods without masks—making them uniquely risky.

According to Tanner’s petition, a city health inspector cleared the restaurant of any violations during a Jan. 8 visit, but then returned an hour later.

“The inspector stated he saw two people in the back patio area, without masks on, and immediately posted a notice of closure on the door and left,” the petition states.

This was during the worst of the local coronavirus outbreak when Long Beach was seeing almost 5,000 new coronavirus infections per week and hospitals were preparing guidelines for how to ration care.

Tanner tried to appeal the closure and has complained that the process was rushed and biased. In the petition, she alleges her attorney was not allowed to fully cross-examine a key city witness at an administrative hearing nor provide argument over the evidence presented. The city emailed Tanner a notice on Jan. 22 that her health permit was being immediately revoked, four days before the city began allowing outdoor dining at restaurants

to resume, according to the petition.

City officials have said they cracked down on Tanner because of “continued flagrant violations” of local health orders.

Tanner openly refused to shut down outdoor dining and hosted a meeting in January encouraging other restaurants to join her in breaking the rules.

Long Beach has fined Tanner at least half a dozen times and filed a host of misdemeanor charges against her accusing her of operating without a health permit and running an illegal gas line to her restaurant after her service was shut off. Crews removed the line after neighbors complained about a gas leak. Tanner says a supportive neighbor hooked up the line for her without her knowledge.

This week, city officials continued to escalate the fight by removing a parklet that had been installed in front of Tanner’s restaurant for outdoor dining.

“They tore it up Monday and took everything with it,” said Tanner, who plans to appeal that decision, too.

Tanner has said she chose to stay open during the shutdown to try to provide a paycheck to her employees even though she wasn’t making any profit for herself.

Even without the parklet, a permit or gas service, Tanner says she is still serving diners on her back patio and will continue to do so.

“I’m just working through it,” said Tanner, who says she’s also applied for a new health permit but has yet to hear back from the city. ■



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LBCC board’s legal costs swell as it continues investigation into trustee, former head of college



Long Beach City College’s Liberal Arts Campus is devoid of students amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

■ By **JASON RUIZ**
Staff Reporter

The Long Beach Community College District Board of Trustees voted to increase the cost of a contract with its board counsel to nearly 18 times its original amount as it continues to feud with and investigate a current trustee and the school’s former superintendent-president.

The 3-0 vote on Jan. 27 approved a second amendment to the contract with Alvarez, Glassman and Colvin for the services of Vincent Ewing. The lawyer was originally retained by the board in September 2019, about five months prior to the board’s vote to fire former Superintendent-President Reagan Romali, a week after she accused members of the board of corrupt behavior.

The change to his contract now

allows for up to \$350,000 in public funds to be spent. The original contract amount in 2019 was set at a maximum of \$20,000.

Internal figures estimate that the college has spent over \$192,000 on the investigation through November.

Trustee Sunny Zia, who is a target of the investigation, abstained from the vote and was joined by Trustee Virginia Baxter, who abstained from a separate procedural vote involving the legal costs.

“I think my constituents would be very concerned that we’re spending this great deal of money for legal services,” said Baxter, who made the motion to restrict the original contract amount.

Ewing was originally retained by the board in part due to anticipated legal action in the wake of Romali’s firing, according to sources close to the decision-making at the time. Romali has yet to file a lawsuit.

The scope of his work has now been expanded to include an investigation of Romali and Trustee Zia.

When asked to explain what his work for the board entails, Ewing said he has offered a variety of services including advising the board and staff on legal issues and interacting with board members, the superintendent-president, staff and outside counsel, as well as investigators.

An investigation completed in August by an outside firm looking into allegations that Romali was abusive and had possibly misused public funds was expanded to include Zia and allegations that she inappropriately sought political contributions from a contractor at the Port of Long Beach, where she works as a program manager.

The college has yet to release the contents of the report to the Post, which filed a Public Records Act request for a copy more than six months ago. It’s unclear when or if the college will release any of its findings.

Portions of the unreleased report were used in a court filing in November that sought to block Zia from closed session meetings regarding the investigation.

However, a Los Angeles Superior Court judge denied the board’s request to bar Zia from closed session meetings, noting there was insufficient evidence to support keeping her out and that Zia had volunteered to recuse herself from votes involving any potential legal action against her.

Zia, who has maintained her innocence, said the board is wasting public money to pursue a political vendetta against her.

“This is basically a cash cow for this guy,” Zia said referring to the attorney involved.

Zia has in the past said that President Uduak-Joe Ntuk has targeted her with the board’s ongoing investigation. Ntuk did not comment on the board counsel’s contract, and has previously denied comment on the matter due to ongoing litigation.

The board, which has been marked by infighting for years, held a discussion earlier in the meeting Wednesday on ways it could improve the flow of meetings.

Trustee Vivian Malauulu said that the board could work on its collegiality. She said when she prepares for the board meetings she feels like she’s “walking into the lion’s den” and said that the board has been “catty” and has developed a “tit for tat” approach to business.

“We make people cringe,” Malauulu said. “Our board makes people wince and it shouldn’t be like that.” ■



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Spurred by a pandemic, economic devastation and mass protests, overall crime rose in 2020

■ By VALERIE OSIER
Staff Reporter

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting economic fallout have touched nearly every aspect of life, and Long Beach police say their latest data shows crime is no exception.

Overall, crime in Long Beach rose in 2020, and—most notably—criminal homicides, aggravated assaults and property crime were up, according to year-end statistics released at the end of January.

Crime in Long Beach had generally been on a downward path for several years prior to 2020, but that trajectory changed in the year of the pandemic.

In a statement, the LBPd said the coronavirus likely played a significant role in the shifts in crime, particularly in the late spring when more people were home during lockdowns.

Although total crime rose, the category of violent crime actually dropped by 1.4%. That number was driven by a significant decline in the number of robberies, which were down by 24.7%. Other types of violent crime including criminal homicides and aggravated assaults rose 5.9% and 18.6% respectively.

Of the 36 total criminal homicides in the city, LBPd attributes about 31% of them to “disputes that escalated into violence.” They also attribute the rise in aggravated assaults, which are assaults likely to cause serious injury, to a rise in gun violence, which was significant. The number of aggravated assaults rose from 1,131 in 2019 to 1,341 in 2020.

2020 showed a huge jump in shootings compared to years past, according to an analysis of shooting data. The year ended with 381 total shootings, while 2019 saw only 222 reported shootings. These include shootings that did not hit any victims, which account for a little over half of the incidents.

According to the data over the past five years, the number of shootings typically fluctuates slightly, but 2020 was by far the most violent, with shootings increasing each month toward the end of the year.

Last year, criminal homicides continued on their upswing after hitting a record low in 2017 in Long Beach. There were 36 killings in 2020 compared to 34 in 2019 and 30 in 2018. However even with the turmoil of 2020, the current numbers are still well below what was seen in the 1990s when Long Beach could see up to 100 homicides in a year.

In the yearly data reported by the LBPd, the categories are all defined by the FBI and the criminal homicide statistic doesn’t include all killings, such as justified homicides in self defense or traffic deaths.

Meanwhile, overall property crime



Mya Pech crouches in front of a roadside memorial for her 14-year-old friend, Arthur Touch, who was killed in a shooting. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

jumped 12.1% in 2020 compared to 2019, when it had been trending down for years. Residential burglary initially dropped at the beginning of the pandemic when most people were home, but once the city started opening up again, the numbers began to rise, breaking even in October and continuing to rise in the final months of the year. Overall, residential burglary rose 3.3% in 2020, despite the stay-home orders in place for most of the year.

The East Division, which includes East Long Beach, Belmont Shore and parts of Central Long Beach, saw a significant rise in residential burglaries with a jump of 25.6% while the North and West Divisions, which include North Long Beach, Bixby Knolls, Wrigley and the Westside, each saw a decrease of about 20%.

Garage, commercial and auto burglary rose dramatically in 2020: by 22.6%, 26.2% and 28.9% respectively.

The South Division, which includes Downtown primarily, saw the largest jump in garage and commercial burglaries, with 127.3% and 82.7% increases respectively. The increase in commercial burglaries appears to correlate with the May 31 civil unrest when dozens of businesses in Downtown were looted. The LBPd counted 94 total commercial burglaries reported in June of the 148 total for the year.

The North Division actually saw little to no change in garage and commercial burglary, but a 41.7% increase in auto burglaries.

One crime that is notably down citywide is rape. In 2019, Long Beach saw a rise of 17.8% in reports of rape, which experts attributed to the #MeToo movement and the increased awareness of what constitutes sexual assault. Just one year later, after statewide stay-at-home orders were in place most of the year, reports of rape have dropped by 3.6%—from 251 incidents in 2019 to 242 incidents in 2020.

Arson also continued on the upward

trend it’s been following the last five years with 126 incidents in 2020, compared to 114 in 2019. A fire department spokesman said then that the department was seeing more “spree arson,” meaning one person was starting multiple small fires in a row and each one is counted as a separate arson. In late 2020, an apartment building in Central

Long Beach was victim to four suspicious fires in three months.

These crime fluctuations aren’t unique to Long Beach. They’ve been felt all over the country and in nearby Los Angeles. LAPD Chief Michel Moore said on Jan. 25 that overall crime decreased by 9% in his jurisdiction,

(Please Continue to Page 8)

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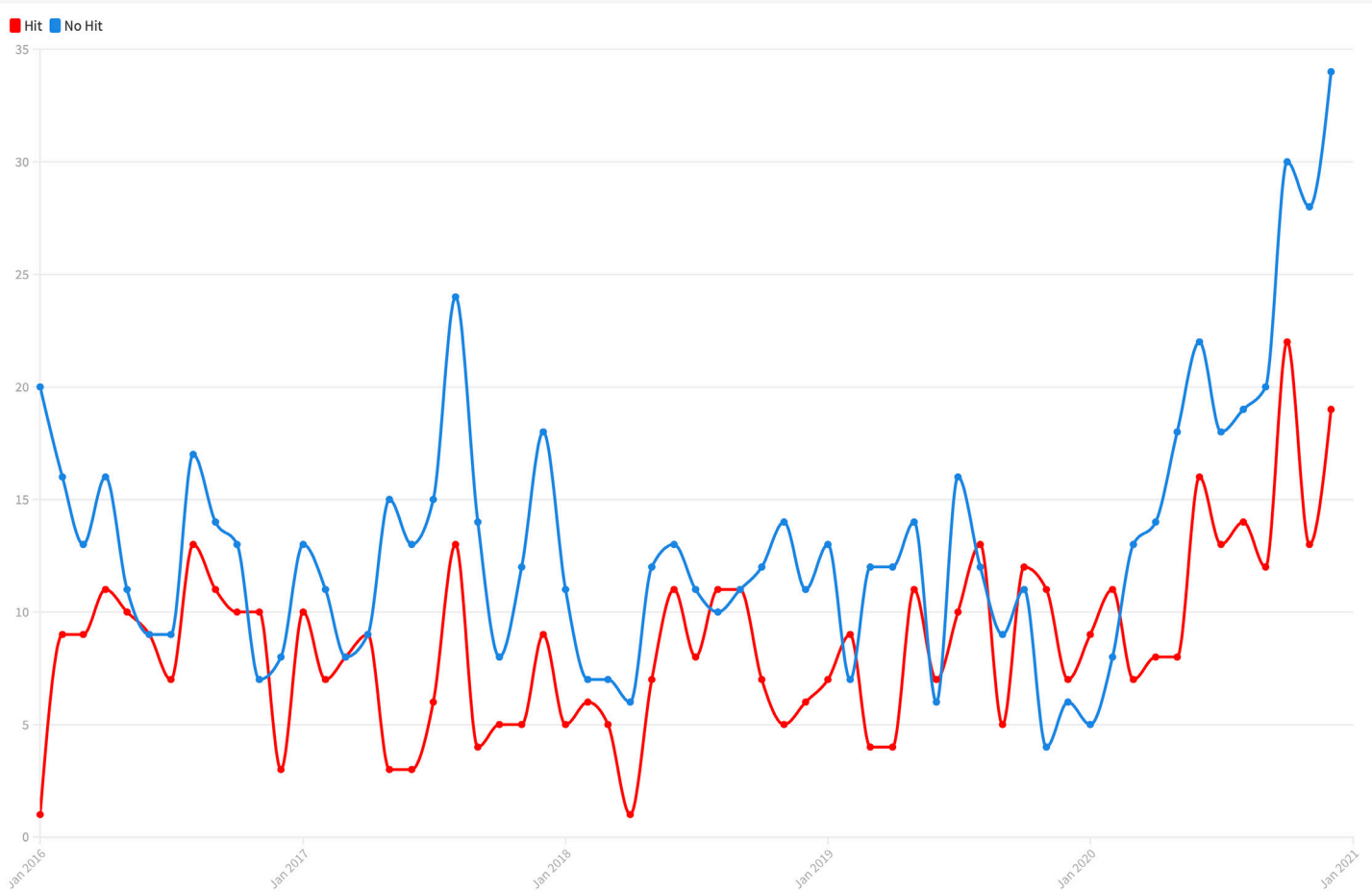
(Continued from Page 7)

including property crime by 11.1%, a stark difference from Long Beach where those two categories increased. However, LA saw a much steeper increase in homicides at 36.2%, Moore said. Long Beach’s number of homicides increased by 5.9%.

In a report from the National Commission on COVID-19 and Criminal Justice, which is a nonpartisan criminal justice think tank, the commission analyzed crime statistics from 28 cities across the country from January through October. Similar to Long Beach’s numbers, the commission found that residential burglaries and larcenies fell while vehicle thefts and violent crimes increased.

“Quarantines reduced residential burglary,” the authors wrote in their conclusion. “When businesses are closed, there is no shoplifting. Selling drugs on the street is more difficult when there are fewer people on the street, and drug arrests fall when police priorities divert them from drug enforcement.”

The report’s authors pointed to pandemic measures as a possible hindrance to crime prevention, such as social distancing requirements preventing outreach workers from engaging with those at risk of violent crimes on the streets. They also noted how mass protests seemed to coincide with the rise in violent crime.



A graph showing the increase of hit and no-hit shootings in Long Beach from January 2016 to January 2021. Infographic by Alena Maschke.

“The precipitous rise in homicide and assaults in the late spring of 2020 coincided with the emergence of mass protests after George Floyd was killed

by a police officer in Minneapolis, although the connection, if any, between the social unrest and heightened violence remains uncertain,” they said.

It’s not clear where exactly the violence in Long Beach is coming from. While social media commenters are quick to blame shootings and crime on

International City Bank celebrates President’s retirement and an exciting future



“I wish everyone much success in the years to come and it has truly been a pleasure to serve as the CEO of ICB for the past decade.” – International City Bank’s Retiring President & CEO, Mr. Michael C. Miller

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International City Bank (“ICB”) announces the retirement of its President & CEO, Mr. Michael C. Miller, and celebrates his leadership and service. At the

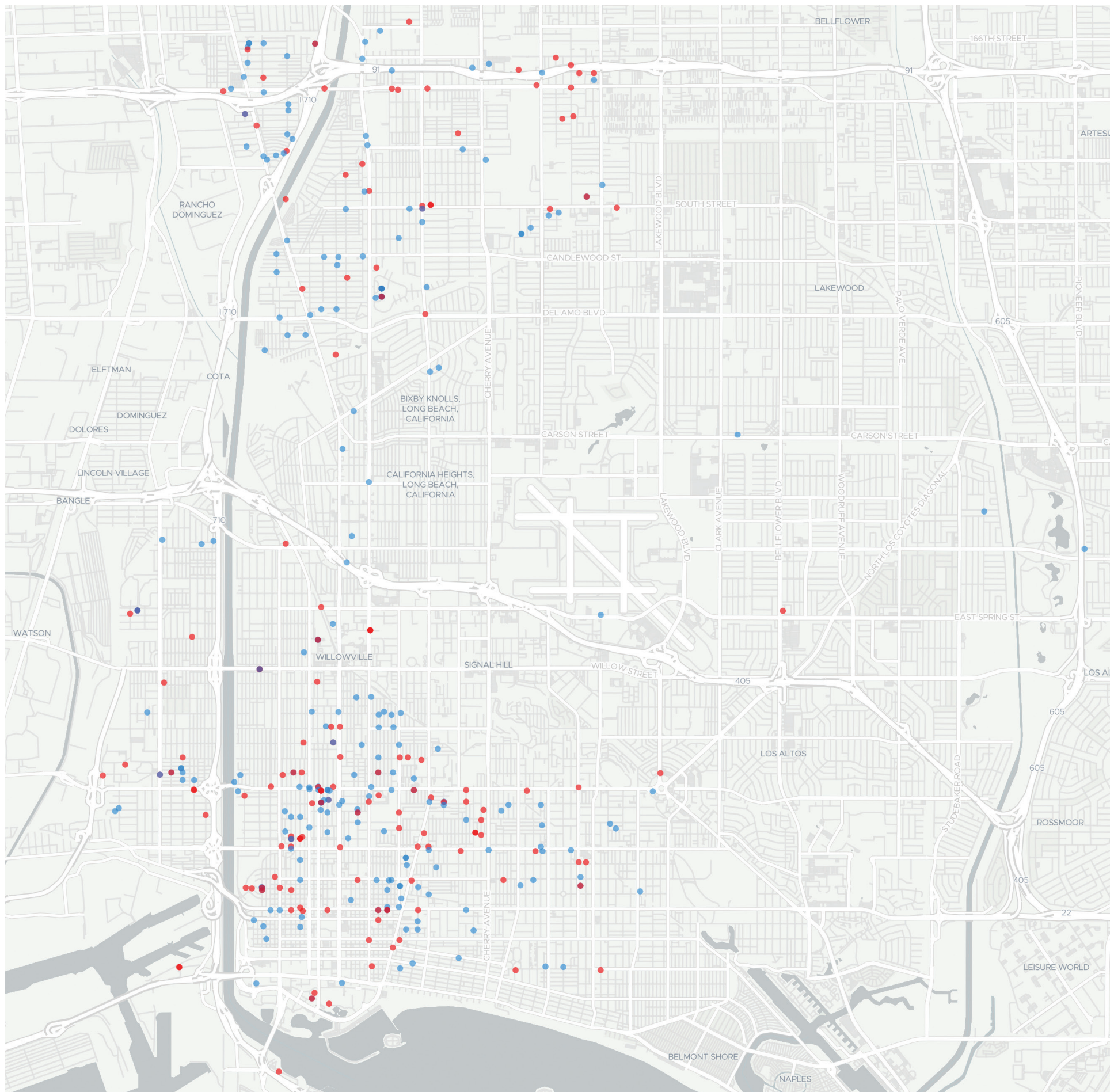
helm for over 10 years, Mr. Miller navigated International City Bank through both smooth and choppy waters, and through his stewardship has embodied the Bank’s commitment to its clients. Every strategy, tactic, and project he led was designed to support the Bank’s loyal clients and com-

munity. Most recently, Mr. Miller led the Bank’s Paycheck Protection Program, a service designed to aid struggling small businesses impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Later this year, International City Bank will merge with its sister-bank United Fi-

delity Bank (“UFB”). Mr. Miller stated “for over two decades ICB has partnered with UFB on many real estate and related transactions due to the common ownership held by the Pedcor Companies. This relationship has been very beneficial for business clients of both banks. As a result, combining the banks will enable ICB to offer much larger loans, while preserving its local identity and focus. ICB and UFB’s mutual commitment to the Long Beach community is supported by the fact that several ICB Board members have been offered director positions for the combined bank. I wish everyone much success in the years to come and it has truly been a pleasure to serve as the CEO of ICB for the past decade.”

Following the merger, ICB’s current CFO Ms. Paula-Rose Wihongi will serve as Long Beach Community President. Ms. Wihongi stated, “I have enjoyed the opportunity to work with Mr. Miller for the past 13 years, and will endeavor to exceed client and community expectations as Mr. Miller did. We will be able to offer larger loans and broaden our customer base while maintaining existing staff to assure that we continue to serve our clients in a way that has made ICB Long Beach’s preferred community bank.”

The team at International City Bank would like to thank Mr. Miller for his leadership and commitment to everyone: employee, customer, and community alike and we look forward to carrying on your legacy in the years to come. ■



A map showing the location of each hit and no-hit shooting in Long Beach during 2020. The red dots represent hit shootings, and the blue dots represents no-hit shootings. Infographic by Alena Maschke.

rising gang tensions, those involved in the neighborhoods aren't totally convinced.

Ninth District Councilman Rex Richardson said at a recent virtual meeting for the DeForest Park Neighborhood Association that he doesn't believe all the recent shootings are related to gangs.

"What I can tell you is there is no indication that this is some growing, escalating organized criminal situation that's happening," Richardson said of recent shootings in North Long Beach. "It seems like there have been individual violent events. Not OK, but very different from when there's been some

big gang war brewing. Having been engaged in the community for over 10 years now, I know the difference between the two."

The LBPd says as of now, about 44.4% of criminal homicides were connected to gang violence, while 8.3% were connected to domestic violence. A police spokeswoman noted the percentages are evolving and could change as cases are investigated and motives are determined.

Dan Pressburg, president of the DeForest Park association, said in an interview that he believes the rise in crime is because of a "perfect storm" of the pandemic and economic crisis with what

was already there: a lack of communication, not enough police officers and a lack of consistent division commanders. He pointed out that the commanders for each police division change about every two years, making fostering relationships with the community difficult.

"We need to have that community relationship and we don't," Pressburg said.

After calls to defund the police during protests over the killing of George Floyd and a pandemic-fueled budget shortfall, the LBPd had about \$10 million cut from its approximately \$260 million budget. Much of that came from eliminating unfilled positions in

LBPd's traffic unit and converting 16 officer positions to civilian positions.

Early on in the pandemic, state and county officials also released thousands of inmates early and ordered \$0 bail for lower-level offenses to ease overcrowding and try to prevent COVID-19 outbreaks in jails. Those released included nonviolent offenders, those with less than a month left on their sentences and those awaiting trial on nonviolent offenses.

Staff reporters Alena Maschke and Sebastian Echeverry contributed to this report. ■

Seventh Street Armory could be transformed to housing, office space under new proposal

■ By JASON RUIZ
Staff Reporter

The Seventh Street Armory, known for its Art Deco design and connection to World War II, could soon be repurposed as the city continues its push to find a developer that could adaptively reuse the building that has sat vacant since 2018.

The City Council on Tuesday, Feb. 2, agreed to allow city staff to enter into exclusive negotiations with Gundry Partners, LP, a group that includes Howard CDM, Pacific 6 and St. Anthony High School. The armory is located between St. Anthony and Gumbiner Park on Seventh Street.

Howard CDM has been involved with a number of projects in the city including The Pike shopping center and Steelcraft in Bixby Knolls.

Martin Howard, CEO of Howard CDM and spokesperson for the project, did not respond to request for comment.

The group has proposed an adaptive reuse and restoration of the armory building as well as construction of residential housing on the parking lot to the south of the building. Under the preliminary proposal, the armory could be transformed into office space, meeting rooms and studios as well as a performing arts center and garden.

A new development on the parking lot could introduce 86 new studio and one-bedroom housing units, 40 of which would be



City council approved city staff to enter into exclusive negotiations for the sale of the Seventh Street Armory Building in Downtown for redevelopment. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

reserved for households making 60% of the area’s median income. Based on figures from the state’s Department of Housing and Community Development, a household of two in Los Angeles County making 60% of AMI would earn about \$37,100.

The plan, as proposed, would serve as a joint-use space in which St. Anthony High School could use the performing arts spaces—there is potential for public use of the space as well—and residents and business tenants would use the remainder of the de-

velopment.

However, the plans are very preliminary, explained John Keisler, the city’s director of economic development.

Tuesday’s vote allowed city staff to enter into a 90-day window where the proposal can be discussed at length and changes to the terms or proposed design could be explored.

“That’s what we think we’re going to need to hammer out an agreement,” Keisler said.

One of the issues that would need to be resolved is whether the site is purchased by the group or set into a long-term lease, as was the pitch included in the city’s request for proposals, or RFP. Gundry Partners was the lone respondent to the RFP.

While selling the site is not a deal breaker, Keisler said that would likely require some closed session discussions with the full City Council and other city leaders before that could be approved. The project itself would then also have to be processed through the city’s development services team and pass through the city’s Planning Commission before ending up at the City Council for a formal approval.

Because of the building’s historic importance, any approved project would have to comply with the city’s regulations protecting historic buildings that could expand the overall timeline of any project at the armory site.

“There will be plenty of time for public scrutiny,” Keisler said.

The Seventh Street Armory Building was completed in 1930 and was one of 10 built by the California Army National Guard. The guard relocated to the Joint Forces Training Base in Los Alamitos in 2018.

The building initially served as home to the 2nd Battalion, 251st Coast Artillery unit, an anti-aircraft regiment in the lead-up to World War II. The unit was called into service in September 1940, over a year before the attack on Pearl Harbor thrust the United States into the war. ■



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Community Hospital receives first behavioral health patients in over 2 years



Community Hospital in East Long Beach received its first behavioral health patient in late January. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

■ By **BRANDON RICHARDSON**
Senior Reporter

Community Hospital received state approval on Jan. 26 to activate 28 behavioral health beds, and the operator saw its first transfer patient from College Medical Center the following day.

The news came three weeks after the hospital received its first patient—also a transfer from College—since closing two and a half years ago.

The opening of the behavioral health department marks another milestone in the resurrection of the facility, said Brandon Dowling, spokesman for

the operator, Molina, Wu, Network.

“It’s a hospital that people want to see restored,” he said, “and we’ll be opening piece by piece to ensure we keep our patients ... safe during our future growth.”

At the beginning of January, the state granted the facility approval to

reopen with 51 beds, including 11 in the intensive care unit and 40 medical/surgical. At the time, the operator said it would continue to work with the California Department of Public Health to reopen additional departments in the coming months.

Community is only accepting transfer patients from other hospitals, as its emergency department has not yet reopened. While the operator initially said the goal was to reopen the ER in March, Dowling said it may be postponed until April due to delays caused by the pandemic, especially the increased workload for the state health department.

While the facility will not be releasing patient counts regularly, Dowling said numerous patients have been transferred to Community since the reopening on Jan. 4, many of whom have been treated and discharged.

The East Long Beach hospital has a license that expires on April 28. However, the state health department confirmed this is the date of the hospital’s mandatory annual license renewal, a process all medical facilities undergo each year.

Editor’s note: John Molina—of Molina, Wu, Network—is the primary investor in the parent company that owns the Long Beach Business Journal. ■

LBUSD says attendance is steady during distance learning

■ By **MIKE GUARDABASCIO**
Staff Reporter

Even though there’s been a spike in failing grades during distance learning in the Long Beach Unified School District, school officials say there’s some good news based on a recent study about online attendance.

Attendance in other major urban districts has suffered—with the LAUSD’s attendance dipping below 89% this fall and the New York public school system saying it’s still missing 2,600 students who’ve never made contact at all this school year—but LBUSD officials say their attendance is relatively steady despite the challenges of online learning.

LBUSD data shows that attendance has been hovering near 95%, right around where it was through the fall of 2019. In October, districtwide attendance dipped 1.6% to 94.6% when compared to 2019, but that number improved in November (95.6%) and December (95.0%).

“Attendance rates in December 2020 were actually better than for 2019, but of course virtual attendance criteria are different than for in-person,” said LBUSD spokesperson Chris Eftychiou.

When school is in session on campus, physical presence for the day is required to mark a student present. The standards are much easier to meet for distance learning, according to the LBUSD’s Attendance During Distance Learning Guidelines,

which state, “If the student attended the session (for any amount of time), or if the student turned in the work by the end of the day, the student will be marked present.”

Those guidelines were put in place to allow students who are completing work asynchronously to still be marked present on days where they participated in class activities.

However even with the lower standard to meet for being marked present, the district’s continued high marks stand out. Other urban districts across the country are struggling with the distance learning phenomenon of “missing children,” formerly enrolled students who’ve completely dropped off their districts’ radars.

A study by education research firm Bellwether Education Partners found that 3 million students across the country fell off the grid this fall. Bellwether found that as many as 20% of students in Boston are not participating in distance learning, and that as many as 500,000 students statewide in California are unaccounted for by their school districts.

At LBUSD Board of Education meetings this year, the school district outlined its plans for making sure it knows where students are, including email and phone call campaigns from teachers and administrators, and even in-person door knocking by school officials to make sure students have laptops and mobile hotspots to allow them to participate in distance learning. ■



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Photographs by
Jose Cordon



THE BLACK OWNED BUSINESSES OF LONG BEACH



Aquarium of the Pacific has reopened its outdoor exhibits

■ By **BRANDON RICHARDSON**
Senior Reporter

The Aquarium of the Pacific reopened its outdoor exhibits on Jan. 30 with special safety measures. The facility also will continue its various virtual programs, including cultural festivals.

The nonprofit has been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic, reporting a multi-million dollar shortfall last year despite receiving some federal funding.

Outdoor exhibits include the Shark Lagoon, where guests may touch sharks and rays, the Lorikeet Forest aviary, where guests may feed the colorful birds, the moon jelly touch tank, the seals and sea lions habitat, the penguin habitat and more.

Due to the limitations on which exhibits are accessible, the aquarium is of-

fering a discounted rate of \$19 per person with advance reservations.

For the safety of guests, the aquarium has a number of protocols in place, including limiting the number of visitors, requiring advance reservations, temperature checks for all visitors, a mask requirement for everyone ages 2 and up, hand sanitizer stations and increased cleaning procedures.

Aquarium members and those with tickets must still make a free reservation online.

Operating hours are 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday and 9 a.m. to 8 p.m. on weekends.

For more information on the facility's COVID-19 safety protocols, visit the aquarium's safety webpage at https://www.aquariumofpacific.org/visit/aquarium_safety/. ■



The Aquarium of the Pacific's outdoor exhibits are open with limited capacity but guests are required to submit to temperature checks upon entry and to wear facial coverings. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

The culinary masterpiece that is Belmont Shore's Ubuntu Café returns for outdoor dining



A selection of Ubuntu Cafe's brunch: the Smashed Avocado Toast (front), Bagel & Lox (left) and Strawberry Fields Ricotta Toast (right). Photo by Cheantay Jensen.

■ By **CHEANTAY JENSEN**
Staff Reporter

When Fellippe Esteves and Danielle Soldati opened up their café, Ubuntu, in Belmont Shore in February 2020, prospects seemed high for the first-time business owners.

Their grand opening saw an impressive turnout, some 350 guests, Esteves said, and momentum was growing. But after only a month into operations, the coronavirus pandemic stalled the burgeoning business.

"It was definitely one of the hardest things I've ever done in the restaurant business," Esteves said, whose career in the high-end restaurant industry, including opening a restaurant with Bravo Top Chef celeb Stefan Richter, spans over 20 years. "You have re-opening expenses landing on you and then 30 days later, you don't know how you're going to pay the bills. But from day one I told my wife, we're not closing."

The restaurant was able to stay open for much of the pandemic, even after the governor shut down indoor dining in early July. By then the café was thriving.

Situated across the street from the

Colorado Lagoon, Ubuntu's sleek, modern-styled building features a spacious patio, a fortuitous design through the pandemic when dining was consigned to open air. Though the ambiance of the space, from the trickle of the cascading water feature, to the small bouquets of flowers gifted on each table, to the gardens of succulents tracing the grounds, made for its own dining attraction.

"We really wanted to make it welcoming and warm," Esteves said.

But the complete closure of outdoor dining on Nov. 25 meant the restaurant, along with others throughout the city, had to pivot to takeout and delivery only.

Forced to temporarily let go of all their staff, Soldati, Esteves and one chef manned the restaurant, prepared to weather the uncertain months. But the Belmont Shore community had other plans.

"Especially in the first month [March], people would come to get a coffee, pick up a pastry, every day," Soldati said. "We decided to do family dinners and people would come over to get just one meal to make sure we'll stick around. The amount of support we got in the midst of the pandemic was unheard of."

Ubuntu reopened to outdoor dining on Jan. 29, and the couple is eager to pick up where they left off before the second wave of stay-at-home orders. Rather than scurry to reopen, Esteves and Soldati chose to take the extra days to hire and re-train their staff and prep their restaurant to live up to its shining statement: as the greatest neighborhood café.

"It's a ballsy statement," Esteves said.

It's not without merit.

The minutiae of detail evident in the café's ambiance translates tenfold to the menu, from preparation to presentation. The lavender latte, a creamy sip subtly infused with the aromatic flower, can be steamed with a choice of oat, almond, walnut or cashew milk, made in-house. If enjoyed on-site, the latte is served in a ceramic coffee mug, with tiny lavender buds tracing the saucer. Frozen black coffee cubes clink and swish in every iced coffee, ensuring the jittery concoctions' espresso bite never diminishes.

In a pastry display next to the register, hand-written name cards label the day's selection of soft, flaky French pastries, muffins, croissants and baguettes, imported daily from a bakery in Los Angeles.

Their menu, envisioned by both Esteves and head chef Carlos Jurado, who opened the lauded Vespertine in Culver City, is prepared with locally sourced ingredients, from farm-to-table. As such, much of their menu changes with the seasons.

"We work with a beautiful vendor who has about 10 farmers markets under their belt," Soldati said. "They send us an email with every single vegetable, with all the pictures, so we can pick and choose whatever is in season."

That said, there are a handful of staples that will always be available—their brunch menu a particular attraction for guests.

An innovative take on the open-faced breakfast trend, the Smashed Avocado Toast is loaded with fresh Hass avocados, sliced pieces of hard-boiled egg, adorned with watermelon radish and sprinkled with pomegranate seeds.

The Strawberry Fields Ricotta Toast is a beautiful tribute to the sweet, acidic divinity of the strawberry. Generous helpings of the red fruit, paired with basil leaves, sit atop a layer of house-made ricotta and a lightly toasted brioche slice. The soft, subdued flavor and creaminess of the ricotta allow the strawberry to shine—a must-try.

It would also be an oversight not to mention Ubuntu's omelet, a tribute to the French preparation. It is delicately rolled, buttery and pillowy to the touch. At its base level, the omelet is rolled with a smattering of chives, but the chanterelle mushrooms are a tempting add-on.

"We usually say that once you try our French omelet, we mess you up for life," Soldati said.

On your first visit, expect to spend a few minutes studying the menu, laboring over the decision of what to try first, from crisp, light salads to hearty soups to decadent burgers and sandwiches. At some point, it's imperative to try the cod croquettes and Brazilian cheesy bread (the latter, the recipe of Esteves' late mother), as both dishes are a delightful nod to Soldati and Esteves' Brazilian heritage.

Their café is named after the South African philosophy of compassion and camaraderie, about working together toward a common goal. The phrase often translates to "I am because you are."

As the couple move forward with their endeavor, though the ups and down, they remain grateful.

"Now we understand why this happened. It definitely made us stronger as restaurant owners, but it gave us the opportunity to grow with the community. We made connections that will last forever," Soldati said.

Ubuntu Cafe is open seven days a week from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m. Beginning late February to early March operation hours will be extended as the cafe reintroduces the "sunset hour" happy hour and dinner menu. Ubuntu Cafe is located at 335 Nieto Ave. For more information including full menu descriptions, visit Ubuntu's website and Instagram. ■

The Boujie Crab seafood restaurant brings the French Quarter to North Long Beach in bowls



Nickey McKnight, owner of The Boujie Crab, sits in the dining room surrounded by boujie-ness. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

■ By **SEBASTIAN ECHEVERRY**
Staff Reporter

Nickey McKnight's self-made-boss mentality and Southern upbringing inspired her to open The Boujie Crab restaurant in North Long Beach—and despite opening during the COVID-19 pandemic, the upscale seafood restaurant is already making waves.

McKnight, a New Orleans native known online as Nickey the Advisor, always had a knack for making skillful financial moves. In the early 2000s, she flipped properties in Atlanta, and when the housing market collapsed in 2008, she pivoted toward financial advising to help others increase their profits. She moved to Long Beach in 1999 and began investing in local property.

In late 2019, she came across a scrappy pizza joint at the intersection of South Street and California Avenue, which became McKnight's latest investment target. She thought about it for three days—visiting the store multiple times to see how many customers frequented the place and speaking with the owner. Finally, in September 2019, they agreed on a cash buy out.

“It was very old and run down, and it was almost like it took me back to real estate, because I always purchased ugly, undesirable homes in low-income neighborhoods,” McK-

night said.

But instead of reselling it, McKnight kept the property for herself. She figured that enough people visited the location that the business could still make a profit.

“Even if I was to keep it as a pizza place, I could probably still make money because [the store] still had customers, but I didn't know anything about pizza,” she said.

She spent October 2019 refurbishing the place—purchasing new refrigerators and appliances. The shop was coming together, but the concept was still missing.

McKnight fell back on her New Orleans roots and decided that a seafood restaurant with a Louisiana twist was something she could pull off. But her restaurant wasn't going to be like other seafood eateries where the food is served in a bag.

McKnight wanted her customers to experience her Southern meals while eating jumbo shrimp, pinkies up. Her appeal to high-end interior design finally led to the restaurant's name: The Boujie Crab—a play on words for the French term bourgeoisie used to describe an upscale lifestyle.

The restaurant's marble-top tables, fine wine glasses, pink padded walls and eccentric chandeliers looks like a scene straight out of the iconic French Quarter.

The food at The Boujie Crab usually comes in the form of a bowl. Customers can order a variety of seafood pairings like the Cajun jumbo shrimp platter, served with shrimp and fries, or the snow crab and shrimp bowl, featuring spiced shrimp with crab meat. All of the restaurant's bowls come with beef sausages, chopped corn on the cob and potatoes. The Boujie Crab has over 20,000 followers on Insta-

gram, the social media platform that McKnight credits for the swift increase in sales.

She initially wanted to hold off opening in March 2020 during the early days of the pandemic, but changed her mind after her daughter asked for a Boujie signature bowl. McKnight fired up the stove and created a Cajun-spiced meal, and posted a picture of the food on social media, which prompted a flood of comments asking McKnight if she was finally open.

“They were always following me and, I guess, they got tired. They were like, ‘When are you going to open?’” McKnight said. “They started pressuring me.”

The Boujie Crab officially opened on March 24, days after the pandemic prompted indoor dining to close down. Take-out orders at The Boujie Crab have kept the business afloat amid the devastating pandemic, but customers haven't had the chance to fully experience the upscale ambiance sitting idly inside, which is something McKnight hopes will change this year.

Looking ahead, McKnight is working to secure a liquor license with the city. She wants to expand her business to the space next door and offer daiquiris and other alcoholic beverages to complete that Mardi Gras experience.

“The attitude of Southern-style hospitality—they love to feed you and they welcome you in their home like everything is yours,” McKnight said. “I just wanted to extend that same thing to people who probably haven't been to New Orleans, you know, you will get it right here.”

The Boujie Crab is open daily from noon to 8 p.m. on the weekdays and 2 to 7 p.m. on the weekends. There is currently a space for outdoor dining. ■



The Boujie Crab Bowl at The Boujie Crab in North Long Beach. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.



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A new Long Beach-based digital marketing company promises more buzz around businesswomen of color

■ By **ALENA MASCHKE**
Senior Reporter

When Giulia Triassi and Kiara Kensie first met in a web design class at Cal State Long Beach in 2017, one thing immediately stood out to them:

They were two of very few women in the class, and—as they recall—the only women of color.

After three years of plotting and coffee shop meetings, the two recently launched Hunnibuzz, a digital media agency with the mission to make

branding and web design services more accessible, especially to women of color.

“Those kinds of services often felt like there was a robot on the other side—we want people to relate to us more,” Triassi said of her experiences

working with firms providing technical services like web design.

The company also offers services such as logo design, photography and printing.

Currently, all of their clients are Black female entrepreneurs from the Long Beach area, many of whom were referred to the newly founded firm by contacts Triassi had from previous positions at the Long Beach branch of the NAACP, the Uptown Business Improvement District and the African American Cultural Center in Long Beach.

“We’re kind of that safe space in tech. And one of our values is to be inclusive and make our clients feel comfortable and confident,” Triassi said.

That special relationship goes both ways, Kensie said. “Working with other Black women, at least for me, it feels easier. It feels like there’s more of a connection,” she said.

Their mission to both represent and create a welcoming space for Black women and other women of color in the business world is also expressed in how the company presents itself online and in marketing materials, by using bright colors, for example.

“Our colors make a statement as much as we make a statement as women of color in this space,” Triassi said. “Loud and proud.”

As their client list grows, however, the two are hoping to branch out and build a more diverse clientele, serving five to eight clients at a time, depending on the amount of services each business needs. “Ultimately, we want to work with everyone,” Kensie said.

Eventually, they want to help other women and girls enter the tech space by offering coding camps and other workforce development opportunities. “We want it to be our legacy, we want to make a difference,” Triassi said.

Triassi and Kensie have a strong connection to Long Beach—both spent most of their formative years here and attended Cal State Long Beach for undergrad—and a desire to represent the city through their work is high up on their list of priorities.

“When I think about Long Beach, I think about how community-based and diverse it is,” Kensie said. “That’s really what I want Hunnibuzz to be.”

Their philosophy, as Triassi describes it, is one of synergy and creative expression—for themselves and their clients.

“With our branding, we express our personalities, how creative we can be,” she said. “Not only are we fulfilling our passions, but we’re fulfilling other people’s passions as well. Together, that’s the golden ticket.” ■



Giulia Triassi, left, and Kiara Kensie founded digital media agency Hunnibuzz with the needs of entrepreneurs of color in mind. Photo courtesy of Hunnibuzz.

Relics owner brings passion for old-school photography to Retro Row



Drake Woodson, 32, peers through a vintage 50mm Canon chrome nose lens at his new vintage camera store, Relics, the first black-owned vintage camera brick-and-mortar in Long Beach. Photo by Cheantay Jensen.

■ By **CHEANTAY JENSEN**
Staff Reporter

In a modest storefront on Retro Row, shelves of vintage cameras sit encased behind towering glass displays: Polaroids, point-and-shoots, standard SLRs, even a ‘76 Super 8 motion camera.

It’s an impressive collection. Then again, after 10 years collecting the analog equipment, it tends to add up.

“Some people might call it hoarding,” said Drake Woodson, owner of the Fourth Street shop, Relics.

When Woodson first began selling his vintage cameras online a few years ago, he admits it was a little hard at first to part with his treasure trove. But his mission to diversify the film community by making photography more accessible to a more diverse audience made letting go easy.

Part of that is achieved by just his presence; Relics is the first Black-owned vintage camera shop in the city. That representation, Woodson said, is important.

“The [camera] shop owners never



Relics has an entire display case dedicated to vintage Polaroid instant cameras. Center is the Polaroid SX-70 Land camera. Left, a red Polaroid 600 Cool Cam and right, the 1999 Polaroid 600 Barbie instant camera. Photo by Cheantay Jensen.

looked like me,” the 32-year-old said. “They were never inviting, not a very welcoming place to be—a lot of bad experiences.”

Each customer who walks into Relics is given the same attention and patience as if they were his first customer on opening day, he said. Sure,

health and safety precautions, in keeping with the times, account for the minimal indoor occupancy, but it’s also about the experience.



Drake Woodson, owner of Relics camera shop, holds an Asami Pentax k1000 camera in his shop. Photo by Cheantay Jensen.

It's about finding the right camera for the person, said Woodson, who takes into account skill level, price range, genre, style and even weather conditions. Relics' 1987 underwater Minolta Weathermatic 35, for example, is a notable find since the manufacturer ceased production in 2006.

Price is another important aspect in accessibility. While the bulk of Relics' merchandise range in the low-to-mid hundreds—these are vintage cameras after all—Woodson said he makes sure to stock cameras with price tags as low as \$25. Patrons can also expect to walk out with an assortment of accessories if so inclined, from straps to vintage bags and lenses—film photography books, too.

Since opening just a few days before Christmas, Woodson said business has been spectacular.

"I'm talkin' lines down the street," he said. "I just try to make sure everyone feels welcome and relaxed."

Opening up a camera shop in the middle of the pandemic didn't seem to faze the new business owner. He'd done his research, he said, noting that the trend of film photography, which has made a resurgence in recent years akin to the popularity of vinyl records, would make for good business.

He also recognized that within the vintage camera niche, customers sought trust.

"I knew it was hard to get reliable vintage cameras," Woodson said. "Most of the time people get cameras from other sites like eBay, OfferUp and Craigslist. It's a gamble. I think when people can actually get cameras from someone like me, they feel more confident."

Each camera is rigorously tested, run through the gamut by the vintage camera connoisseur and passionate film photographer—landscapes being a particular focus. His prints of desert and coastal landscapes are the only art hanging on the business's white-walled interior.

Woodson's foray into photography began when he was 8. His first camera was a gift from his father, whom Woodson described as a film hobbyist. Growing up in Virginia, Woodson said he always had a camera strapped around his neck, documenting the myriad school field trips he'd go on in his youth.

"I've just been obsessed with them ever since," he said.

When Woodson made his way to the West Coast, he laid roots in San Francisco, working 80 hours a week in the tech industry as a marketing consultant. The grueling, competitive and fast-paced career taught him the real meaning of burnout but supplied him with the means to invest in his camera collection.

"Golden handcuffs," Woodson said of the tech job.

Eventually, he grew tired of the consultant gig and pivoted his focus to his online vintage camera store and moved to Bixby Knolls in 2018. He had flirted with the idea of opening his brick-and-mortar store on Atlantic Avenue, but fell in love with the modest space on Retro Row, that was formerly Goldies Boutique.

"[Retro Row] was way better," Woodson said. "There's a lot of creatives running around here; good vibes and good energy down here."

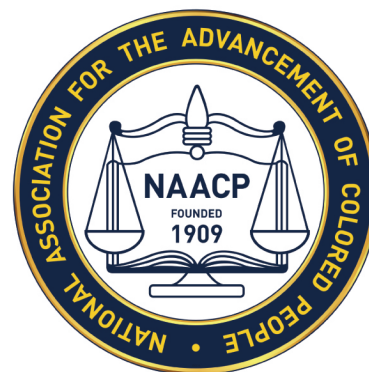
Woodson said he's only in the beginning phases of his business and plans to offer regular film processing and scanning soon, perhaps within the month, he said, since he's received many requests in and out of state for the service.

For now, you can find Woodson living his dream in the city that welcomed him with open arms.

"I feel like Long Beach and the film community really wrapped their arms around me," he said.

Relics is open 1 to 5 p.m. Wednesday to Sunday. The store is located at 2106 E. Fourth St., Long Beach. ■

Long Beach Branch NAACP Naomi Rainey-Pierson Erdmann, President



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(Continued from Page 1)

ness and not give up on their dreams,” said the emerging entrepreneur, who now books several virtual speaking engagements a week at different schools.

Her wish to inspire others is also part of what prompted her mom to replace Khiley’s planned birthday trip to Nickelodeon Resort in Punta Cana with funds and support to start her own nail business.

“I hope that through our story, we might start a new tradition,” Krystle said. There are Sweet 16s and quinceaneras, she figured, so why not make a child’s 10th birthday an occasion for a business investment?

“I wanted to start something that could create something that could provide for our kids and that could start the conversation about financial freedom and generational wealth,” said Krystle, a sixth-grade teacher at Green Dot Public Schools, a charter school in the South Park neighborhood of Downtown LA.

Krystle said she was fortunate that her husband worked full time while she attended college, enabling her to stay focused on her studies. She said she doesn’t want her children distracted by money problems, either, when it comes time for them to pursue a higher education.

“I don’t want my kids to have



Khiley Braxton, 10, with her mother Krystle in front of the Sissy B. Nails line. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

three jobs just to pay for college,” she said. Instead, she wants them to start building their legacy now.

Most 10-year-olds would likely be a bit upset to see their ticket for a cartoon-themed trip to the Caribbean turned into a business registration

form, and Khiley was no exception. “I was so mad,” she said.

But Khiley always had a passion for nail polish—an early riser, she would do her nails every day before school—so the product idea was a perfect fit. When Khiley presented it to her extended family on a video call, her passion was contagious.

“Everyone was blown away,” Krystle recalled. “Once I saw that, I said: ‘We’re onto something.’”

Since then, Khiley has been juggling virtual schooling at KIPP Scholar Academy and running the business out of the family home on the Westside of Long Beach. “It’s kind of hard to balance those two without going full mind on school or full mind on my business,” she said.

Still, Krystle has found ways to combine her daughter’s educational goals with those of her business. Khiley had been struggling in math class and the business’ finances became the perfect way to practice.

“Having a shop or a line, it basically means: math, math, math,” Khiley explained. So together with her math tutor, she worked on determin-

ing the price point of each bottle, for example, based on the profit she was hoping to make.

“She’s learning so much, more than I originally thought,” Krystle said. “She’s matured a lot. She’s my little adult.”

Starting a business with her daughter under the restrictions of the pandemic was an experiment, but one that has paid off, Krystle said.

“We might be in this pandemic and there’s a lot of things we can’t control, but we can control our happiness and we can control what we do with our time,” she said. “Through this business, we can still achieve greatness. We can still be great, thrive and be successful.”

As for starting a new tradition, at least in the Braxton household, that seed has been firmly planted. Khiley’s 6-year-old brother, Kayden, has already been asking his mom when she’s going to help him start his business.

Kayden’s business idea is already a tradition of sorts: He wants to start a lemonade stand. ■

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Sissy B. Nails, a polish line started by 10-year-old Khiley Braxton. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

(Continued from Page 1)

tion center in Industry, 110 workers were infected.

Vernon's director of health, Frederick Agyin, said he's bothered "a lot" that his city sits atop the county's list. But he concluded after talking to county health officials that it wasn't worth the trouble of trying to get them to separate the test results of residents from businesses.

"If it was an easy fix, we'd fix it. I want it fixed yesterday," he said, but added, "we have other things we have to deal with right now."

Whether in its packed workplaces or crowded residential neighborhoods, the 27 cities and nine unincorporated areas

of the Gateway region of southeastern LA are being hit hard by coronavirus cases.

Pollution from heavy industries and the network of criss-crossing freeways has left many residents with underlying health conditions, such as asthma, that make them particularly susceptible to the effects of COVID-19.

Add to that the high number of essential workers and the density of housing in most of southeast LA and the Gateway cities, and the result is what local officials and advocates consider a perfect storm that has swept up many of the region's communities in its path.

"All these factors have put fami-

lies living in this region at greater risk of exposure and infection," LA County 1st District Supervisor Hilda Solis, who represents many of the most heavily affected cities in southeast LA, said in a statement.

One of those areas is Florence-Firestone, an unincorporated, largely residential community east of the 110 Freeway. It has a rate of 18,924 cases per 100,000 residents, placing it in the top 20 of the 341 cities and communities listed on the county's COVID-19 data dashboard. Cudahy, Bell Gardens, Huntington Park, South Gate—all are among the top 30 cities with the county's highest infection rates.

"If a community has a lot of people who don't have the ability or, in fact, the luxury to be able to work from home, we know that every time people leave their home and share air with individuals with whom they don't live, it does increase the risk of infection," said Shira Shafir, assistant professor of epidemiology at UCLA's Fielding School of Public Health.

With housing conditions or employment patterns unlikely to change in the near future, vaccination efforts have become a beacon of hope for the region's most heavily affected cities.

Getting residents signed up for vaccinations, keeping them up-to-date with the rollout process and combating myths about the vaccine will be crucial, experts say.

"There's misinformation that needs to be cleared up and we have to do it in a way that is accessible," said Wilma Franco, executive director of the Southeast Los Angeles Collaborative, a network of nonprofit organizations serving the area.

The inclusion of residents 65 and older in the current priority group for vaccinations may also work against communities in southeast LA, which skew younger than the rest of the county but have high numbers of essential workers and case rates.

"One of the consequences of an age-based strategy is we may end up seeing that those who are essential workers may be less likely to be vaccinated in a timely manner," said UCLA's Shafir. "The communities most significantly affected by COVID infection right now will not necessarily be communities that are being reached with greater efficacy with respect to vaccinations."

Supervisor Solis, whose office declined to comment directly on the switch to an age-based strategy, instead focused on the need for more vaccination sites.

"It is critical that Southeast Los Angeles, a community that has been systematically denied access to services and programs that have been readily available to other populations, be prioritized," she said in her statement. "I expect a new vaccine site—one that is accessible—to be stood up in Southeast Los Angeles quickly." ■



A line of cars on Soto Street in the city of Vernon. Vernon is home to many essential businesses, some of which—like the Farmer John meatpacking plant—have suffered coronavirus outbreaks. Photo by Alena Maschke.

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Q&A with Nancy Pfeffer, executive director of Gateway Cities Council of Governments

■ By **ALENA MASCHKE**
Senior Reporter

As the executive director of the Gateway Cities Council of Governments, Nancy Pfeffer is tasked with developing policy priorities and leading regional efforts on some of the most complex issues affecting the 27 “gateway” cities and communities in southeast LA County.

The joint powers authority, which includes cities as far North as Vernon and as far southeast as Catalina Island’s Avalon, represents its member cities in collaborations with other regional agencies such as the LA County Metropolitan Transportation Authority and the air quality control board.

Pfeffer became the council’s executive director in January 2018, after serving as its director of regional planning for over a decade.

(The following Q&A has been edited for space and clarity.)

Long Beach Business Journal: What are some of the biggest issues that the Gateway Cities Council of Governments is tackling at the moment?

Nancy Pfeffer: Our key priorities are getting major regional projects funded and delivered in accordance with regional and county plans. Some of those projects include the I-5 project through several of our cities, the I-710 Freeway South Corridor Project, which is the whole 18-mile corridor, the I-605, which also includes State Route 91, and I-405. I would say homelessness is another big issue that we’re dealing with right now. The COG actually has some additional innovation funding from the county that came out of Measure H [a sales tax measure that funded a number of homelessness and housing initiatives] and we’re partnering with several of our cities and some of the nonprofits to really focus on and address homelessness. Another really big issue right now is housing. We’ve recently brought on a new director of regional development and she’s really focused on working closely with our cities, with the county, with the state’s Department of Housing and Community Development, to make sure cities have the funds and resources they need to update the housing elements and to deal with the regional housing needs allocations.

LBBJ: Looking at the case rates, the gateway cities have been hit especially hard by the pandemic. How is the COG approaching the recovery process?

NP: We applied for an economic development grant, which is a federal grant to help support our local businesses, particularly along some of the corridors where we’re developing Complete Streets plans [a program to repair streets and install safety measures across Los Angeles]. Unfortunately, that grant did not get funded. But in the course of doing that, we collaborated with USC on a grant application that will serve several of our cities in a similar way. We’re hopeful



Nancy Pfeffer. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

that at the federal level, the member project requests—also known as earmarks—might come back in this new Congress, in the new administration. If that’s the case, we would potentially seek some earmark funding to carry that economic development process forward, focused on economic recovery post-COVID.

LBBJ: Housing affordability is one of your priority issues. What is the COG’s strategy on affordable housing during the pandemic and beyond?

NP: One thing we’ve been doing is a series of affordable housing workshops. The idea behind these gatherings is marketing the gateway cities, creating the opportunity for developers, affordable housing developers—whether for profit or not for profit—to mix and mingle with our cities. Another thing we’re building toward is trying to develop an affordable housing resource hub on the COG’s website; to demystify some of the processes, some of the financial programs and incentives, tax credits, how you put financing together. That’s all in the formative stages. I hope that within another several months to a year, we might have a resource hub on our website that would help cities and developers find each other and make projects come to fruition. Overall, one of the key barriers that we’ve identified to developing housing and affordable housing is that the city budgets are so strapped, they don’t have enough resources to provide services to new residents. There’s always political concerns and community concerns about the construction of new housing in any neighborhood, in any location. We have cities that could redevelop, perhaps on commercial corridors where there’s potentially less community pushback. But they just don’t have the revenues to provide services to new residents. We’re attacking that problem by working with the state Legislature. We had a bill introduced last year by Sen. Bob Archuleta, who represents a large por-

tion of the eastside of our region. Everything got kind of wiped away by COVID last year, legislatively, but we’re going to work with him to reintroduce the bill. The idea would be to provide for a larger share of property taxes to stay with the city, just based on the new units that are coming in.

LBBJ: You mentioned potential for community pushback when it comes to the construction of affordable housing. Another area where there is a big potential for community pushback is any sort of freeway widening, and freeway extension project—the 605 and 5 freeways project in Downey comes to mind. How does the COG approach these kinds of challenges in regional transportation planning?

NP: In the last few weeks, our staff has been working with the most affected cities, including Downey and Santa Fe Springs, and working with Caltrans and Metro to come up with an alternative that would reduce the initial amount of property taxes that were projected for that project. It looks like between Metro, Caltrans and the cities, it’s taking shape. The process that we’re going through—whether it’s the 710 or the 605, they’re really going through the same environmental impact process—it’s not really designed to get a lot of good community input. Unfortunately, it’s the process we’re stuck with.

LBBJ: With local transit agencies suffering significant losses as a result of the pandemic, what is the COG’s plan for keeping member cities connected through public transportation?

NP: We’ve worked very closely with Metro on all of that. Metro really is the primary conduit for funding, including relief funding out to municipal operators. The COG has a transportation committee where we do talk about our transportation issues, highway issues and transit issues, and Long

Beach Transit is a voting member on that, representing our municipal operators. That’s basically how we do it, through our ongoing relationships and close work with Metro on their transportation plans.

LBBJ: COVID-19 has brought particular attention to preexisting health issues, especially when it comes to the respiratory system, which have long been a concern for gateway city residents because of the poor air quality in the region. What’s the status of efforts to improve air quality?

NP: We’re trying to work with Metro and other partners to get a clean truck program launched for the 710 Freeway. Metro, in the last year to two, has been developing a countywide goods movement strategic plan, and one element of that is a clean truck initiative. Metro committed \$50 million out of the I-710 project funding toward a clean truck program, and that was intended as a down payment. So I’m constantly partnering with Metro staff and the Metro board offices to see how we can partner with the state and even with federal sources to fill in the rest of that funding, and make sure that we can turn over that truck fleet as soon as possible. The state Air Resources Board and the California Energy Commission jointly have a solicitation out right now, for funding for clean truck demonstrations. And the South Coast Air Quality Management District—along with Metro and a number of other funding partners, including the ports of LA and Long Beach—are applying for funding to get ahold of 100 zero-emission trucks and deploy them into different private fleets. One is based in El Monte and the other is based in Ontario. And while the fleets themselves are not physically within the gateway cities, they are going to be serving the port complex.

LBBJ: Where do you see the biggest potential for the COG to make an impact on the future of business in the region moving forward?

NP: I think of mobility as being really key. The main reason that the COG was formed in the first place was so the cities had a voice in transportation planning decisions, and what we now really refer to as mobility and multimodal. It’s really about the COG’s engagement in both the individual project decisions, but also the long range, kind of broader policy development, and getting people more choices in how they move around. Really supporting and making sure that businesses can take advantage of our infrastructure, that it works for them in delivering goods and services. We are on the threshold of this new age of e-commerce, we’re seeing a lot of changes in how people buy things. I bet a lot of that will stick around even post-COVID. And yet, all of that can still very much support local businesses and local entrepreneurs, and local business growth. So I think it’s really our focus on mobility and our partnerships in those areas that are going to help us support business. ■

Former Cudahy mayor who led her city through a turbulent 2020 discusses her life and future plans as a politician

■ By **BRANDON RICHARDSON**
Senior Reporter

A year ago, at age 26, Elizabeth Alcantar was sworn in as the youngest mayor in the city of Cudahy.

Exactly one week later, on Jan. 14, Delta Air Lines Flight 89 declared an emergency and dumped 15,000 gallons of jet fuel on multiple East Los Angeles and South Bay communities, including Cudahy, kicking off a tumultuous one-year term for the young politician.

“The first word that comes to mind is ‘turbulent,’” Alcantar said of her year as the city’s mayor. “It was a tough time.”

Born in Huntington Park, the now 27-year-old Alcantar moved to Cudahy when she was 5. She has lived with her family in the city since then. After high school, she attended Cal State Long Beach, where she received a degree in political science.

The small Cudahy community of about 30,000 is 95% Latino, and 85% of residents are renters. Alcantar herself, along with her family, are renters.

“A majority of our people don’t have any sort of advanced degree or college diploma,” Alcantar said, noting that it is important for younger members of the community to get

degrees and remain in the city. “Supporting our community in the best way that we can with all that new knowledge we’ve earned.”

And that is exactly what she did.

Alcantar was 25 when she was elected to the Cudahy City Council in 2018, missing the title of “youngest ever city councilmember” by only three months. But when her peers on council elected her to serve as mayor for 2020, she became the city’s youngest mayor on record.

Cudahy mayor is not elected by residents. Instead, residents elect city councilmembers for four-year terms and then the positions of mayor and vice mayor are selected each year by the council.

But the elation of being elected the youngest mayor wore off quickly when the Delta airliner coated the community in chemicals.

“The biggest impacted location was Park Avenue Elementary School. They were doused in jet fuel,” Alcantar said. “I’m used to environmental injustice and we know that too often those contributing these harms to our communities are not held accountable.”

Residents exposed to the fuel experienced rashes, infections and diarrhea, in some cases for weeks. And nearly half the city’s residents are without health care, Al-



Elizabeth Alcantar, vice mayor of Cudahy, stands in front of Chris's Hamburgers, a long-time Cudahy staple. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

cantar said. Delta representatives were invited to a town hall meeting to hear from the community regarding the incident. Ultimately, the company, in partnership with a local community health clinic, provided free healthcare for all impacted residents.

Litigation between the city and Delta is ongoing, so Alcantar could not elaborate on any future agreements for compensation, monetary or otherwise.

Two months later, almost to the day, the devastating impacts of the new COVID-19 pandemic began being felt throughout the county when officials ordered businesses to close on March 16. Alcantar, fresh off one disaster with the Delta dump, had a new, long-term crisis on her hands.

“Immediately we saw our people losing their jobs, losing access to healthy food, not knowing what to do in terms of rent—we still see that today,” Alcantar said. “We are seeing our residents asking for support,” she added. “Unfortunately, it is difficult for a small city budget to manage.”

Under Alcantar’s leadership, the city was able to implement some support in the form of rental subsidies, a food distribution program and senior meal delivery, among other things.

“Mentally and physically [crisis] does take a toll,” she said. “But as an elected official, you’re not only thinking about the toll you feel but also the community at large.”

One driving force behind Alcantar’s political career is affordable housing. She said despite the overwhelming majority of city residents being renters, Cudahy has no renter protections. Recently, Alcantar introduced multiple housing-related items to the council, including an eviction data collection ordinance.

“One of the reasons I focus so much on housing issues is a big part of my life was translating rent increase notices from our landlord to my parents,” she said. “There was a lot of housing insecurity growing up.”

Environmental injustice is another issue that led Alcantar into politics. She explained that being cradled between four major free-

ways—and near several others—Cudahy and surrounding cities are used to air quality issues but have never had representation on the South Coast Air Quality Management District, a body responsible for improving air quality for more than 17 million residents in LA, Orange, Riverside and San Bernardino counties. For that reason, Alcantar ran for a seat on the air quality board against Long Beach Councilman Rex Richardson.

Though she lost her bid for the AQMD board to Richardson, Alcantar still ended up as part of the organization. Exiting board member and former Rolling Hills Estates Mayor Judith Mitchell appointed Alcantar to the board’s environmental justice advisory group.

“I decided to run after speaking with environmental justice organizations about the needs of the region,” Alcantar said. “I’m proud of the race I ran. I stuck to the issues that matter to our communities.”

Alcantar serves on the board of the Hub Cities Consortium, part of the LA County America’s Job Center of California workforce development agency, and sits on the California League of Cities Women’s Caucus.

In December, when Long Beach Mayor Robert Garcia announced he would not seek reelection to the Metro board, he mentioned Alcantar by name, which led to speculation that she may run for the vacant seat. However, Alcantar said she has no current plans to run for Metro. In fact, Alcantar is supporting Bell Mayor Ali Saleh.

“I was a Metro rider for 24 years. My family also uses Metro—bus and rail—to get to work,” she said. “I would love to be on Metro but I am focused on Cudahy.”

Alcantar said she has no real political ambitions planned beyond serving her community through a second term on city council when she comes up for reelection next year.

“I appreciate all the questions about running for higher office but I am focused on Cudahy,” Alcantar said. “This is only my first term. I have so much work to do.” ■



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