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IN THIS ISSUE: **CENTRAL
LONG BEACH AND
MAYOR Q&A**

The mayor answers questions about the budget, infrastructure, housing and more.

Article on page 3

Long Beach Mayor Robert Garcia in Downtown, backdropped by the historic Villa Riviera, Wednesday, Sept. 29, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

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Mayor Q&A and Central Long Beach

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In This Issue:

Mayor Q&A..... 3

Central Long Beach 6

Leader of Midtown BID is hopeful support will return in 2022 6

Meet the man behind El Paisa Colombian in Central Long Beach..... 8

It's been a challenging first year for new councilwoman Suely Saro 10

Newswatch 12

What the end of the eviction moratorium will mean for landlords 12

Businesses still struggle to find workers 13

Amid congestion, port officials say people should shop early 16

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MAYOR Q&A

By HAYLEY MUNGUIA / Business Editor

Mayor Robert Garcia sat down with Business Journal editor Hayley Munguia for his eighth annual interview on Wednesday, Sept. 22, at The Westin in Downtown Long Beach. The conversation focused on Long Beach's ongoing recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic and how the crisis has impacted all aspects of the city, including operations at the Port of Long Beach, housing construction, employment, the budget and more. The interview has been edited for space considerations.

HAYLEY MUNGUIA: We're in Downtown Long Beach, obviously, and you see evidence of the Grand Prix everywhere. How are you feeling about tourism coming to life and the Grand Prix coming back?

ROBERT GARCIA: I think that obviously the last, now, almost two years have been very hard. But you're starting to see the shift back to the Downtown economy picking up again, which is mostly a tourism economy. You're seeing hotel rooms back. You're

seeing the Long Beach Airport now, obviously now close to where it used to be. You're also beginning to see a lot more interest in tourism and conventions over the next few years. So I think that the economy's absolutely coming back. But we still have to be mindful that we are still in the pandemic. So how we recover safely and how we make sure that when we're bringing folks back, it's done in a way that's safe—I think that's really important.

HM: Obviously it's hard to predict, but is it your sense that measures like vaccine requirements in bars and mask mandates are the new normal for the foreseeable future?

RG: I think we have a lot to learn over the next few months. So I think that once we hit the 80% vaccination rate, that is going to be significant. And once we know it's completely safe to vaccinate kids in our schools, that is a huge milestone and a game-changer for us, because we know that so many kids are able to transfer it on with no symptoms. So that is going to be a very big shift for us going into this fall—is getting families vaccinated, making sure kids are taken care of, and then being cautious about not removing too many precautions until we know we have this in place.



Long Beach Mayor Robert Garcia speaks during an interview with Business Journal Editor Hayley Munguia Wednesday, Sept. 22, 2021. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

We're not going to make that decision. That decision is going to be made by the best scientists and doctors in the country, and so we should follow their advice and their direction on when it's safe to do so.

HM: What have you heard from

business owners about these mask and vaccine requirements that they need to enforce?

RG: Honestly, I have heard about as many business owners saying they

Continued on page 4

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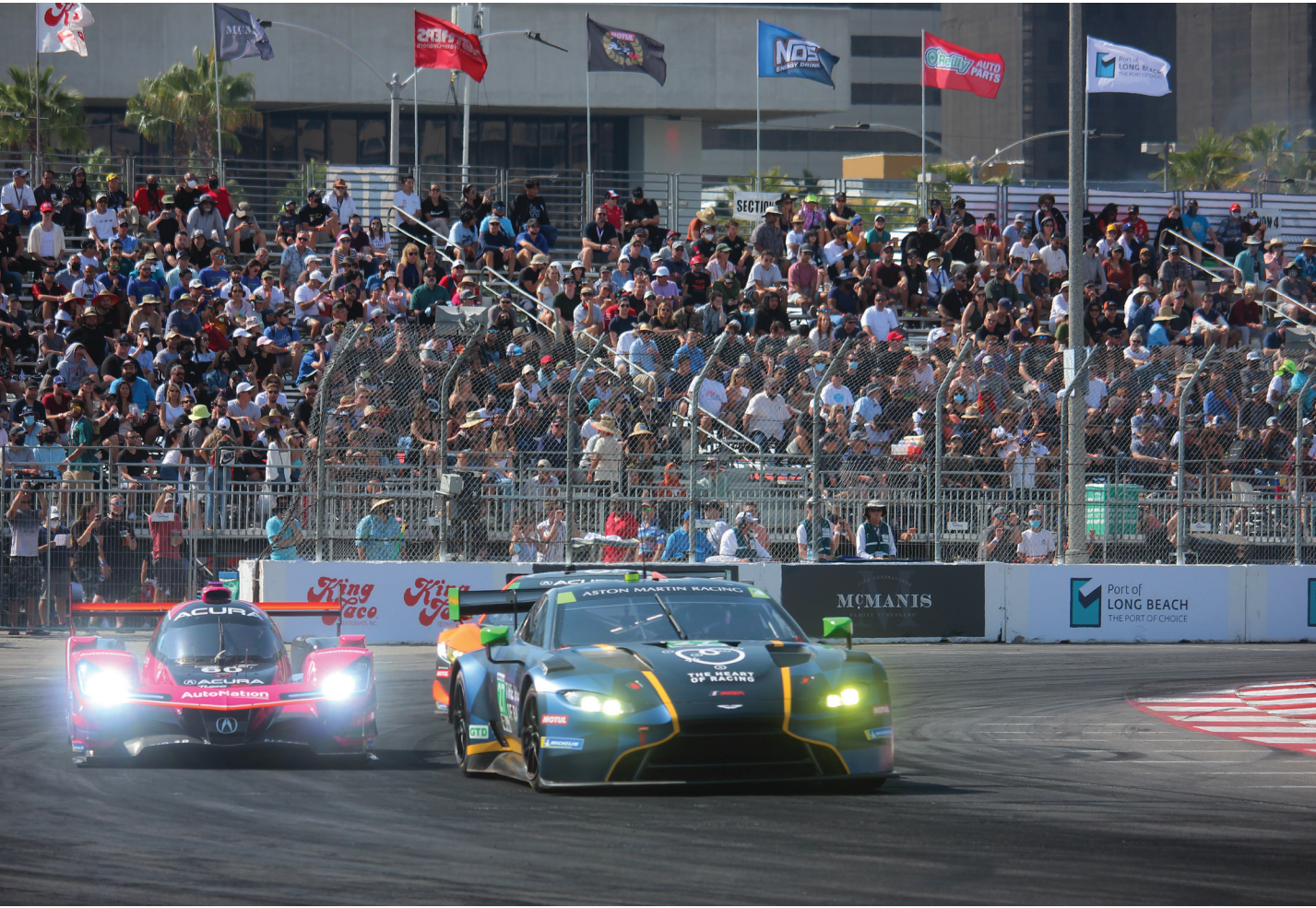
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The grandstands were packed with spectators—some wearing masks and others not—during the IMSA WeatherTech SportsCar Championship race in Downtown Long Beach Saturday, Sept. 25, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

Q&A

Continued from page 3

support them and saying, you know, ‘I’m glad the city’s imposing this because we felt we were going to be at a competitive disadvantage.’ I’ve had bar owners who, months ago, were asking, ‘Can you please impose this type of mandate?’ but they also didn’t want to destroy their business. So I understand the hard place they’re in.

I’ve also heard from some that don’t like the mandates. Many of them are the same folks who also don’t believe in vaccines, in some cases. So it is what it is. People have different opinions. But it’s a decision guided by science, and a decision guided by good medical advice. So I support it, and I think it’s something that not just should be done here in Long Beach and in the county, but it should be statewide or across the country.

HM: Now, moving onto some questions about development. Supply chain issues are still having an impact on construction material pricing and availability, so what’s your sense of how that is impacting development in Long Beach?

RG: The supply chain question is one that we’re actually very involved with right now. The truth is that we still have a backup of cargo because the economy’s roaring back so fast and the demand is so high. So we are working with the Biden-Harris administration, as well as the Department of Transportation, right now. We’ve had numerous meetings around: How do we get goods moving faster? Because the issue is not supply. We’re having record-breaking years.

The issue is gate times, weekend gate times, and longer hours. And the issue that’s constrained the ports in the past has not been that we can’t open terminals longer. The issue is: There has to be warehousing on the other end to actually accept the cargo 24 hours a day, and that’s currently not the case. And so there has to be a complete logistics plan to ensure that we can get cargo from Point A to Point B in a way that works. So the cargo piece is really important. It’s great for the local Long Beach economy, and it’s great for jobs. It’s great for the American economy. But we are going to have to get more creative and really push hard on making sure the port can actually get more cargo through our terminals.

HM: Right, so the port has announced its pilot program to extend hours. On the warehousing end, though, is there anything the port can do or Long Beach can do to help? Or is it just a situation where all these different pieces need to work together?

RG: Well, the federal government’s involved. This has risen—the Department of Transportation is deeply involved in this issue. So we know what our piece is, which is increasing gate times, weekends, evenings. They are also working right now with the warehousing groups. And we’re working with them as well.

HM: So while that’s getting sorted out, have you noticed a significant impact on construction in Long Beach because of these issues?

RG: We’ve been actually pretty fortunate that construction has been pretty consistent in the city. Now, there has been a challenge—certainly there were impacts on the price of steel. We’ve

seen those slow down projects, but they haven’t stopped completely—the majority of the projects in the city. We’re about to open what will be the tallest building in the city. We’re building a 22-story tower in the East Village. There’s dozens of projects across the city that are being actively built.

So, has it slowed down some projects? I think the answer to that is yes. But it hasn’t had a dramatic impact on construction or development across the city. We are open for business. People are investing in Long Beach. We’re talking to investors and developers all the time, and we want to encourage more housing construction, especially, and quality office construction. So we do know the impacts have slowed some progress down, but we were already on a fast-moving train before the pandemic hit, and that continues.

HM: So how are you feeling about construction of housing, especially with RHNA (Regional Housing Needs Allocation) numbers being so much higher this cycle?

RG: We’ve done a few things, particularly leading up to the pandemic, that I think are going to help us in the next few years. One of the big initiatives I proposed to the council was inclusionary housing. Now, over the course of the next few years, new projects are going to have a minimum of 11% affordable units. Every project that gets built will have an affordable component.

We’ve tried to make and create incentives for developers to build housing. You’re seeing a lot of housing construction. I think we have, either built or in the pipeline, 8,000 housing

units across the city in just these last couple years. So we are building more quality housing. It’s just not enough.

And it just can’t be a Long Beach solution. It has to be statewide. So when you look at—I recently went to the Sacramento Valley. They are just building all across, every which way, because they have a lot of available land. So we support that. And here in our own community, we’ve got to build in a way that’s smart and understand where density makes sense: Downtown and along the Blue Line.

But also, and I believe this strongly, you also have to preserve historic districts and residential communities. As someone that’s lived in the Downtown for a long time, I think that downtowns are built for density and public transit. And then we have amazing neighborhoods across the city that are traditional, middle-class neighborhoods, and those should also be protected. So I think there is a balance that we can find, but we have to create more housing in areas where density is appropriate.

HM: In terms of the economic recovery, business owners are still reporting difficulty hiring workers. Is that a concern for you in the bigger picture of Long Beach coming back from COVID?

RG: There is a transition happening in the workplace, and I think it’s two things. One, you have a lot of uncertainty with workers. It’s not a black-and-white issue. Workers have a lot of choices in front of them, and many of them revolve around health. When you’re a two-parent household, and one parent’s got to go to work, and the other parent is taking care of a sick grandparent or has to worry about their child going to school or doing virtual learning, different choices get made in households.

We also know that there is a shift happening around wages, and there’s a lot of workers who, because California is an expensive place to live, are making different choices about where they’re going to work and how they’re going to work. So I think the economy is shifting. I think it’s going to take us still, the better part of this year to kind of even things out. But we are making progress every month.

As an example, prior to the pandemic, we had about a 4.5% unemployment rate. At the height of the pandemic, we shot up to 15% unemployment. And now, I didn’t look at the last number, but I think we’re probably now around 7.5, 7% unemployment. So we have cut the unemployment rate in half. And so yes, there is still a challenge hiring workers, and it’s hard, and I see it when I talk to friends that own restaurants or are in retail—it’s hard to hire folks right now. But that will get better over the next few months as more people go back to the workplace.

HM: Infrastructure is, obviously, also a really big priority for business owners and residents. The City Council held a study session earlier this month about street and alley repair, which

would cost about \$1.8 billion to fix. What are your thoughts on how that should be funded?

RG: We have to think about what is actually happening first. So I think it’s important to note that Measure A, which voters obviously approved, is the single largest infusion of infrastructure dollars that’s happened in the city in over 50 years. So is there a lot of street work that needs to get finished? Absolutely. Are we also fixing more streets and sidewalks than we have in a generation? Absolutely.

Now, the voters have also made Measure A permanent. And so we’re going to continue to, every year, do more and more streets than we would have ever been able to do prior to the passage of that measure. So it is going to take time—cities are never completely built or completely fixed. Just like your house—you’re always fixing something. There’s always something else to do, and the same is true for the city.

What we’re focused on right now is the infrastructure bill in the Congress. Like the American Rescue Plan, Long

Beach is set to benefit greatly from the infrastructure bipartisan deal that’s currently sitting in the Congress. If that passes, and I think it will, you’re again going to see significant infusion of infrastructure money to help us with roads and bridges and repairs.

HM: If that happens and a backlog still exists, would you support putting a bond on the ballot to address it?

RG: I certainly wouldn’t rule out the idea of a bond, but that still has to be well studied and developed. I think before we jump to a bond, I think we need to see what we’re going to benefit from out of the infrastructure bill. And I think that’s where the City Council is at, as well. So let’s get past this infrastructure deal, and then I think we can have an honest discussion about what a bond could look like. And if a bond is able to deliver a lot more street repair without burdening additional taxpayers, I think that’s something that we should absolutely look at.

HM: Moving onto the budget, there is a projected \$27 million deficit for the next fiscal year. In this year’s budget presentation, [City Manager] Tom



Gantry cranes move cargo at the Long Beach Container Terminal Friday, Aug. 20, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

Modica said the city would need to think about strategies to address that pretty early this fiscal year, so can you speak to where those discussions stand and what options are on the table to address that deficit?

RG: First, since I’ve been mayor, the city has maintained an AA credit rating—AA, AA- credit rating—and has ensured that our reserves have been strong. So we have been in a strong fiscal and financial position every year. Once the pandemic hit, we spent down the entirety of our reserves, and in what I think was a responsible fiscal move, my first request to the council when we received federal funds was to not spend that money, but to replenish our reserves first. And that’s what we’re doing. So we are in a structurally sound financial position.

Now, I think almost every year that I’ve been mayor or on the council, the city starts off with a deficit. We budget, always, very conservatively. I think that’s the right approach. And by the time we pass the budget, we have solved, oftentimes half that deficit or most of it. So I do think that throughout the year, we are going to work on bringing that number down.

But we’re going to have to deal with whatever deficit we may have. I also know, though, that some other things are happening in our favor. Sales tax projections are a lot higher than we expected. Tourism and the economic strength is actually growing stronger than we anticipated. So all of those kinds of economic forces that are happening right now are actually going to have a positive impact on whatever deficit we may have.

And we have to be honest: We have a deficit, in large part, because we just went through a massive pandemic. So what the federal support allowed us to do was to bridge the impacts of COVID a year so we’re not having to deal with lowering services during a health crisis. So are we still going to have to deal with this pandemic deficit? Absolutely, but I think the economic factors are in our favor, and we’ll do what we need to.

If that includes continuing to lean down in certain departments or having to make sure that we’re finding other ways of supporting services, I think we’ll do that.

HM: The pandemic is still ongoing. So are there still significant costs associated with that that the city is facing that were offset by federal money last year, that might not be around this year?

RG: The answer to that is yes, and we hope that the federal government reimburses or helps, or FEMA helps out as much as possible. You just never know, at the end of the day. And you have unexpected costs that happen all the time. So during the pandemic, we spent down so much of our revenue and our reserves, hoping that the American Rescue Plan would pass, and it did, which is going to help us for what we spent down. We’re continuing to spend, so that is going to continue, oftentimes, to cause deficits.

What we’re not going to do right now is impact paramedic times. What we’re not going to do right now is cut garbage pickup when it’s already been impacted throughout the year. So we will deal with those challenges, but we’re also hopeful that FEMA and Congress and others continue to help cities and support cities during the pandemic.

HM: OK. So I have one last question for you: Your term ends next year. What are your thoughts on running for reelection?

RG: That’s definitely a decision I’m going to make in the next several weeks. I think that my focus needs to be on getting us through this pandemic, and there’s plenty of time for the 2022 election. And so I want to make sure that we are in a better place right at this moment before any sort of campaign season starts. And I know others are involved in campaigns, and that’s just not, I think, where I’m at or where the city needs to be or where the public is at. So we’re going to beat the pandemic, and over the course of the next several weeks, I will certainly have a decision on 2022. ■



Construction continues on the Broadway Block, a two-building development in Downtown Long Beach Wednesday, Sept. 29, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.



Midtown Business Improvement District Executive Director Monorom Neth stands in front of his favorite mural along Anaheim Street in Cambodia Town Thursday, Sept. 30, 2021. The colorful mural by Rick Vilchis represents the diversity and heart of the Midtown community, Neth said. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

Property owners didn't approve 2021 Midtown BID renewal; executive director hopeful for 2022 return

By **BRANDON RICHARDSON** / Reporter

Long Beach's Midtown Business Improvement District has supported Anaheim Street's eclectic mix of businesses—various markets, popular restaurants, jewelry stores and more—for the last four years. But that support came to an end this year because of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The BID, which spans Anaheim Street from Raymond to Alamitos avenues, normally has a contract with the city and is funded by property owners, who agree to have their buildings assessed by the county to determine how much they pay annually. Each year the organization would receive about \$160,000, the organization's executive director Monorom Neth said.

But that funding depends on a majority of Midtown property owners signing that they agree to pay. Neth said he initially hesitated to ask folks for money during the worst of the

pandemic, and later struggled to get sufficient support. So he ultimately missed the deadline.

The BID's closure was just another blow to many businesses in the area that were already hurting.

"The [organization's] presence has been a great asset to me and my businesses," Adam Van, owner of Monorom Cambodian and Udom Khmer restaurants, said. "It's a big loss."

Van, whose family immigrated to Long Beach as refugees in the 1980s, said he was fortunate to come out of the shutdowns with both restaurants intact. He and his wife had only opened Udom a couple of months before the onset of the pandemic after about a year of renovations.

Other than takeout, there was no respite for most restaurants along the corridor, Van said, noting that Anaheim is not safe for the parklets that popped up in other areas due to the amount and speed of traffic.

Van said that Neth—who has no ties

to Van's restaurant, despite sharing a name—has been an important support for the Midtown business community. Since the BID began its services in early 2017, the organization's main focus has been safety and cleanliness, including security patrols five days a week, street cleanups, power washing sidewalks and addressing homelessness. After a night of rioting in Long Beach last year in response to the murder of George Floyd, Neth organized a cleanup of smashed windows in the area and helped businesses that were looted, including a jewelry store and a supply store.

Like other business associations in the city, Midtown received some funding through the CARES Act for fiscal year 2021. But since it was unable to renew its contract with the city, the organization will not receive funds through the American Rescue Plan Act.

With its contract not renewed and no incoming revenue, the Midtown

BID stopped providing services in May when funds ran out, Neth said, adding that he still communicates with the business owners and assists when possible.

"I still do what I can to keep the place safe, clean and beautiful," Neth said.

Arteaga's Market Manager Mayra Arteaga said she has seen a noticeable change in the cleanliness of the neighborhood.

"You can tell the difference—there's trash, the sidewalks are really dirty," she said, and Neth "used to drive around and help with the homeless."

Arteaga's Market has been located in the same storefront at 1436 E. Anaheim St. since 1984, more than two decades before the neighborhood was officially designated Cambodia Town. The area did not receive its designation until 2007 despite being home to the largest Cambodian population outside the country itself since the mid-1970s.

Continued on page 8

'Disappearing one by one': Longtime Cambodia Town businesses shutter or remain in limbo due to pandemic, new development plans



A man walks past a boarded up space of La Lune Thmey, a now-closed restaurant in Cambodia Town in Long Beach on Wednesday, Sept. 20, 2021. La Lune Thmey ended its lease in December 2019. Photo by Crystal Niebla.

By **CRYSTAL NIEBLA** / Reporter

More than just a restaurant in the heart of Long Beach's Cambodia Town, La Lune Thmey is a cultural hub that for decades has hosted weddings, parties, and in 2019, a dinner for a City Council race that would later culminate in the election of the city's first Cambodian council member.

Leaders in the Cambodian community, though, worry that the restaurant's quiet closure in December 2019 may have been the beginning of the loss of one of the city's most well-known and identifiable corridors, particularly as developers see potential in the area.

"It appears that businesses are disappearing one by one," said Charles Song, who was born in Cambodia and survived the genocide under the Khmer Rouge regime in the 1970s, and like thousands of others, found a new home in Long Beach.

The loss of La Lune Thmey is "heartbreaking," said Councilwoman Suely Saro, who celebrated her wedding there. In late 2019, a party for her City Council campaign turned out to be the last event the restaurant held.

Since then, another staple in Cambodia Town has likewise closed. In May, KH Market, located at a nearby plaza, shuttered despite community attempts to save it. The family could not afford the higher rent, Pichiv Pang, a member of a Cambodian family that owns the business, said in an interview at the time.

KH Market, whose owners are of Chinese-Cambodian and Thai-Cambodian descent, sold hard-to-find Southeast Asian items and groceries for the surrounding community for 15 years. Cambodia Town native Lan Nguyen lamented the closure.

"They were a holder of culture for the community," she said.


Over the decades, Nguyen said she has seen several other Asian businesses close down, such as a Mien market on the corner of Atlantic Avenue and Anaheim Street. (Mien people are an ethnic group from Southeast Asia.)

"That was a market that I grew up going to, but now it's a 7-Eleven," she said.


Susana Sngiem, executive director of the local nonprofit United Cambodian Community, said her organization has internally tracked the status of small, Cambodian-owned businesses in Cambodia Town over the course of the pandemic and found that 5% of them have closed. Half of all the small businesses in the area, not just Cambodian-owned, are on the brink of closing down, she said.

"What we see is a mixture of small businesses closing due to the pandemic, but also due to future development that's going to happen in Cambodia Town," Sngiem said. Many landlords are seeing the era of the pandemic as an

Continued on page 9



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Luis Melvin Henriquez, owner of Colombian restaurant El Paisa in Central Long Beach, moved from Colombia to the U.S. in 2001. He worked at a restaurant in New York before starting his own in California. Video still courtesy Thomas Cordova.

A ‘parade of flavors’: Long Beach’s El Paisa restaurant explores Colombian cuisine

By **SEBASTIAN ECHEVERRY** / Reporter

To step through the glass door of El Paisa Colombian restaurant that’s wedged between Alamitos Avenue and 17th Street in Central Long Beach is to experience a little slice of the South American nation. Cumbia music plays

as the aroma of toasty empanadas, rounded buñuelos and cheesy pan de bonos resting on the counter’s heated display embrace guests who walk in. Near the cash register sits a mini-mart of Colombian sodas, baking ingredients to make arepas and assorted candies. Decorations of sombreros volteados

and Willys Jeeps packed high with coffee pouches adorn the eating hall. Karaoke turns the restaurant into a dance hall on Friday nights. It’s the second restaurant Luis Melvin Henriquez, 35, has co-launched in Long Beach. Known as “Melvin el paisa,” Henriquez and his sister

also operate a Salvadoran bakery and pupuseria called La Guanaquita in North Long Beach.

The two restaurants pay homage to their Salvadoran mother and Colombian father.

Henriquez moved from Armenia, Colombia, to New York in 2001. He worked at multiple restaurants, starting out as a dishwasher and eventually becoming a shift manager.

He moved to California and opened el El Paisa in October of 2015 to fill a void of Latin American eats that he believes was missing on the West Coast.

“California is missing that special Colombian sason,” Henriquez said in Spanish. “We have Mexican, Honduran, Guatemalan—but we are missing Colombian. Many cultures have built up Long Beach.”

Henriquez says Colombian food is a “parade of flavors” and credits the nation’s fertile farming grounds for the production of those dishes.

Exotic fruits and vegetables combined with different methods of meat preparation create distinct plates such as la bandeja paisa, also called la bandeja campesina, which is a symbolic dish in the region where Henriquez grew up: the mountains of Colombia’s Quindio department.

The “country” plate features grilled steak, fried egg, corn cake, pork, sausage, sweet plantains, avocado, rice and beans. It’s a hefty plate, and for good reason. Henriquez said the dish was originally created to feed the farmers who worked long hours among the valleys and mountain ranges.

“‘Paisa’ represents the humble people, people who work the fields,” Henriquez said. “The Quindio state offers lots of nature and exotic fruits that carry the culture forward.”

Continued on page 10



Idalia Marquez, who has been a cook at Arteaga’s Market for 20 years, watches customer David Galan, 74, walk out of the Mexican restaurant that is tucked away in the back of a mini-market in Midtown Thursday, Sept. 30, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

Midtown BID

Continued from page 6

Arteaga and her parents, who still own the business but leave its operation to their daughter, were in a unique situation throughout the pandemic: They own the building in which the restaurant is located. While landlords and tenants navigated the struggle of rent and mortgage obligations amid the pandemic, the Arteagas only had to worry about themselves—which saved their business.

“We’re surviving only because we own the building,” Arteaga said. “If we had a lease like these other businesses do, we would have been gone.”

Despite the hardships they were facing, the Arteagas signed the BID assessment renewal petition. Arteaga said she sees the value in the services offered by Neth and the BID and would like for them to continue.

The BID’s value didn’t just come in the form of security and cleanup

services. It also helped the market’s bottom line, Arteaga said. Federal and state grants helped the business during the pandemic, and Arteaga said she only knew about that money because Neth kept businesses well informed.

But even Neth’s best efforts could not save every business.

When it was operating, the business district had about 160 members, Neth said, but there were some casualties throughout the pandemic. About eight businesses were forced to shutter since the emergence of COVID-19, according to Neth, including Legend Seafood Restaurant.

As the economy continues to recover, though, Neth said he is optimistic that he will garner enough support from property owners to allow the organization to restart its work in 2022. He is only a few signatures short of the target number, he said.

Van, meanwhile, is also hopeful. “They are instrumental, they’re always present,” Van said. “They’re so helpful. I would love to have them back.” ■

Cambodia Town

Continued from page 7

opportunity to sell or develop their land, she said.

As a result, many small businesses are being “pushed out,” Sngiem said, when a property owner sells, wants to redevelop or increases rent. Other businesses closed temporarily and have not been able to reopen.

It’s a loss that goes beyond economic impact, according to Sngiem. In Cambodia Town, the small businesses don’t just contribute to the area financially. “They keep our Cambodian culture alive within our neighborhood,” she said.

A cultural center

Long Beach is regarded as home to the nation’s largest concentration of Khmer people outside of Cambodia. Thousands of Cambodians immigrated to Long Beach over the years, establishing a 1.2-mile cultural and business corridor along Anaheim Street, between Atlantic and Junipero avenues. Cambodia Town is now adorned with visible cultural markers like Khmer scriptures spelling the signs of the storefronts in the native language spoken by workers and patrons.

Today, nearly 20,000 people of Cambodian descent live in the city.

Aside from serving Phnom Penh noodles, the restaurant La Lune Thmey provided an atmosphere that made people feel at home. From the decorations to Khmer music to Cambodian cuisines, Song said it carried significant cultural value.

“I fell in love with the place,” said Song, who had frequented the restaurant for as long as he can remember. He remembers seeing his elders walk to the plaza two or three times a day. It was a very open space that would hold about 350 guests.

Song said the restaurant also served as a place for political mobilization. He hosted fundraisers, local candidate races, redistricting efforts, and a celebration of the emerging Cambodian power in the city.

He remembers the night as something beautiful: it was an event where politicians from different backgrounds came together under one group.

“I’ll probably remember it for the rest of my life,” Song said.

Saro, who said she’s been going there since she was a kid, saw the ownership be passed along between members of the same family that owned it. She said it’s difficult to prevent closures when the property is privately owned, and her office’s involvement in such matters is limited.

“But to the extent that I can, it is definitely in that realm of support, programs, grants, services that we can offer to support and navigate through things like this,” Saro said.

The United Cambodian Community has also given out more than \$300,000 in grants and loans to help businesses pay down debt they



A local customer selects a drink to purchase during the last days of operation of KH Market, a business in Cambodia Town in Long Beach on Thursday, May 27, 2021. Photo by Crystal Niebla.

accrued during the pandemic, in hopes of helping them survive.

Fear of gentrification

Song, a leader in the city’s Cambodian community, blames gentrification for displacing businesses or pricing them out.

Three years ago, two commercial properties, Poly Plaza (which housed La Lune Thmey) and East Anaheim Plaza, were at the center of controversy in Cambodia Town when plans to demolish small businesses and redevelop the space surprised residents and local politicians.

Concerns over the demolition of La Lune Thmey, KH Market and Poly Burgers, even drew criticism from Mayor Robert Garcia, resulting in developers halting the plans.

Development updates were, for the most part, left in limbo due in part to the pandemic. But the businesses have still

suffered. With its closure in December 2019, La Lune Thmey was the first to go.

Jakobo Onofre, senior property manager for Charles Dunn Real Estate Services, Inc., which serves as the managing agent for the owners of Poly Plaza, said that “the parties mutually agreed to terminate the lease” but did not provide a reason why. The restaurant had operated at the site since 2007, he said.

As retail habits change, redevelopment plans remain unclear

At Poly Plaza, Poly Burger, a fast food restaurant bustling with high school students on a daily basis, is the last of the three staples standing. For months this year, business owner John Oh did not know what the fate of his business would be.

Onofre, meanwhile, said via email that plans for the redevelopment of the plaza are still unclear but that for now,

they’ll keep Poly Burger as “a valued tenant of the center.”

Onofre said Oh agreed to a new five-year lease with Poly Burger in October of 2019 to relocate to a new space within the future project before the pandemic triggered shutdowns that impacted businesses financially.

“As a result of COVID-19, we were forced to put the revitalization project on hold as we dealt with tenant emergencies and reevaluated whether the project was still viable due to the dramatic change in consumer behaviors that impacted retail centers nationally,” Onofre said.

He said they worked individually with every tenant and did not evict anyone during the pandemic. Instead, he said they worked out deals such as rent reductions with tenants occupying smaller spaces.

Onofre said they are still “not ready to proceed with the entitled plans as the market dynamics continue to change.”

“With retail habits continuing to change, we need to be sure that the approved plan will continue to be feasible,” he said.

The owners of La Lune Thmey, husband and wife Pros and Lee Chea, have now transitioned to solely running their other business, a takeout spot in Signal Hill.

Today, you can find Lee Chea in a cap and polo shirt serving food behind a counter at Chinese Combo, on Willow Street and Cherry Avenue.

While it’s unclear if La Lune Thmey would ever return, Lee Chea said she has a sister who owns Little La Lune, a spinoff restaurant on Pacific Coast Highway near Sherman Place in Central Long Beach. Many patrons dine and order takeout from the restaurant, maintaining a buzzing Cambodian identity in the city. ■



A picture of a photo shows Sovjaya Saro, right, kissing Suely Saro, left, surrounded by people during a wedding reception inside La Lune Thmey in 2008. Photo courtesy of Suely Saro.



Long Beach 6th District Councilwoman Suely Saro in Long Beach Monday September 27, 2021. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

Saro’s challenge and goal: to bring a new sense of pride to the 6th District

By **HAYLEY MUNGUIA** / Business Editor

Central Long Beach was already an area in transition when Suely Saro began campaigning for the City Council’s 6th District seat in early 2019.

Metro’s \$300 million renovation of what was then called the Blue Line, which pulses along Long Beach Boulevard in the middle of the 6th District, was underway. A slate of new affordable housing projects were breaking ground. And on the political front, Cambodians in the area were celebrating the first election victories of members of their own community.

Saro, who would later add to those achievements by becoming Long Beach’s first Cambodian American City Council member, saw an opportunity to use her background in community organizing to unite the area and build a new sense of pride for 6th District residents.

Then came COVID-19. Saro had to pivot to virtual

campaigning last March, and after she won the November 2020 election, she had to learn how to be a City Council member—and how to address the fallout of the worst pandemic in a century—without meeting anyone face to face.

“It’s already a unique experience, I think, to have won an election and become a council member,” Saro said in a recent interview. “It’s been another layer in the midst of the pandemic, because I don’t really know what’s normal.”

Saro faced a steep learning curve on the machinations of what quickly became a completely digital City Hall. But virtual representation aside, the issues that led her to seek office—homelessness, unemployment, education—were magnified by the public health crisis, especially in the largely low-income 6th District.

“What’s amazing about my district is we are made up of a lot of essential workers,” Saro said, so the pandemic “really lifted up the value

and need of essential workers. But it also demonstrated, too, the economic disparity that they face.”

Saro said the challenges in her district have mirrored the challenges in the city as a whole. But her constituents have felt the impacts more deeply than folks who live in wealthier parts of Long Beach.

When it comes to homelessness, for example, “it’s not a challenge that is unusual,” she said. “It’s a challenge facing the whole city that’s just more exacerbated in my area because it’s already had these challenges.”

Saro said she’s hopeful, though, about more services opening up in conjunction with affordable housing projects that are wrapping up construction. More support and housing for people who are homeless will also help businesses, she said, that have struggled due to a lack of customers.

“A lot of times, when I talk to small businesses, their concerns are not only about their actual business activities, but the impact that homelessness has on their business,” Saro said. “One of the issues that comes up a lot is: What can you do to keep their trash out, or why isn’t someone picking up their trash fast enough, or why are they allowed to do this? Because it makes it harder for customers who want to go in their business.”

Saro said she’s working to address the issue on multiple fronts. One of the methods she’s trying is working with the city’s Economic Development Department to offer more direct support to business owners.

“Part of that, too, is me thinking about the Pacific Avenue corridor and Wrigley Village—they have always had challenges with vacant properties,” she said. “So I’m working out, how do we get more business navigator support so that they have a consistent person to communicate with? But meanwhile, it’s also important to be hosting regular cleanups and engaging neighboring residents.”

Forging those types of connections between residents and the city was one of the themes of Saro’s campaign, and it’s an approach to civic engagement that has become even more crucial during the pandemic.

As she looks ahead to the rest of her

four-year term, Saro said she hopes that fostering better relationships between neighbors will build a foundation to better address whatever problems the 6th District may face.

“While we have a very diverse district, we’re also kind of unorganized,” she said. “We don’t have evenly distributed neighborhood associations. There’s a lot in the Midtown area, and then there will be some in Wrigley, but there’s not a lot in between. So I’ve been working very hard to figure out: How do we have groups that can come together and address some of these quality-of-life issues?”

Saro said bringing in new activities, like a festival celebrating the arts and culture the Wrigley neighborhood has to offer, could be one way to start that process.

“A lot of negative things have been lifted up in our district in the past, and I just think there needs to be a balance,” she said. “That’s what I’m intending to do, is just change the perception of the 6th District—and by doing that, people will feel more pride in living here.”

“And hopefully then, they’ll want to keep it more clean, and you know, improve, maybe, their doorstep area. I mean, every little bit helps,” Saro added. “You notice when you’re like, ‘Oh, they did something new there, there’s a gate there today,’ when you’re passing by your area. Or, ‘Oh they painted their mailbox,’ or something. All of that adds up to making people feel comfortable, and also proud of living where they do.”

For Saro, that sense of pride in the 6th District is the ultimate goal. And as Central Long Beach—along with the rest of the city—begins to slowly emerge from the pandemic, she’s optimistic about achieving it.

“I think that people in the district are not feeling like they have to wait anymore, and they can actually plan for the future now and live their lives,” Saro said. “I feel positive vibrations gradually pulsing through the district as I’m able to connect more with people and support them.”

“I’m feeling good because there’s just the energy and the vibrations of how people are feeling and reacting to each other,” she added. “There’s a sense of hope and relief.” ■

El Paisa

Continued from page 8

The restaurant has developed an eager base of regulars. That support became a lifeline for Henriquez as the pandemic forced his restaurant to offer takeout only last year.

Live music and festive weekend nights came to an abrupt end, but fans of his dishes still placed orders and continued to support the restaurant.

“It hasn’t been easy,” Henriquez said. “But many people have supported us to get to this point.”

Currently, there is only one El Paisa

restaurant, but Henriquez is envisioning a push to franchise the business.

Henriquez has already seen success in spreading the word of his restaurant.

The official El Paisa restaurant Instagram page has collected over 40,000 followers. Henriquez has also been hosted on Spanish-news station Univision to show off Colombian food typically eaten during Christmas.

“We are a family business with many dreams,” Henriquez said. “We want to create job opportunities for late Latinos to triumph in the restaurant business.” ■



La bandeja paisa, the country platter, features different meats, rice, beans, a fried egg, avocado and a fried plantain. It is a cultural dish traditionally found in the farming regions of Colombia. Video still courtesy Thomas Cordova.

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A man walks his dog past a building with units available for rent along Cherry Avenue in Central Long Beach Thursday, Sept. 30, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

LA County landlords can resume some evictions—but there are still strings attached

By HAYLEY MUNGUIA / Business Editor

Landlords across California can, with certain exceptions, once more evict tenants who are behind on rent. The state’s eviction moratorium, which was put in place last March to protect renters and stabilize housing amid the COVID-19 pandemic, expired Thursday, Sept. 30. And because that ban also preempted local governments from instituting the same protections, cities and counties are barred from passing laws that would effectively extend the moratorium in their own jurisdictions. That’s created a complicated legal

landscape in Los Angeles County, whose Board of Supervisors voted Sept. 28 to extend other renter protections through the end of January. So what does this all mean for local landlords? While landlords in LA County can now evict tenants who are behind on rent, that ability still has strings attached. Residential tenants who have applied for rental relief are still protected from eviction through the end of March. And if a tenant has not applied for rental relief, the landlord must submit their own application for rental assistance on the tenant’s behalf before filing for eviction.

Long Beach has managed its own rental relief program during the pandemic, and as of Sept. 28, the city had received 9,706 applications, and 7,034 of those applications were submitted by landlords. Of the applications landlords submitted, 2,031 still required cooperation from tenants in order to determine their eligibility for rental relief funds. The city has paid out about \$19 million in rental relief, and 90% of that has gone directly to landlords, according to Long Beach’s Development Services Department. Other types of evictions that have been banned in LA County during the pandemic—including nuisance evictions, evictions due to unauthorized people or pets and evictions of commercial tenants that are behind on rent—are still prohibited through the end of January. While LA County supervisors said the regulations are still necessary to prevent a wave of mass evictions all at once, the continued restrictions have been a source of frustration for property owners who feel like they’ve been forced to bear an unfair financial burden. Anthony Peters, a property owner who spoke during last week’s Board of Supervisors meeting, said his tenant has a full-time job but has refused to pay rent throughout the pandemic. “For over a year and half, they have not been paying rent,” he said, “and yet I’m having to fund their ability to live in my property. I’m at a point where I’m risking losing my home.”

Fred Sutton, a representative of the California Apartment Association, said he’s heard of multiple instances of landlords being forced to sell their properties because they’ve gone so long without receiving rent. “Given the economy’s reopening and vaccine availability,” he said, “it is unconscionable that the county is continuing its broad moratorium.” Keith Kennedy, a landlord in Long Beach, said in a recent phone interview that he’s been fortunate that most of his tenants have been communicative and willing to work with him through the pandemic. “I understand how you have to be a little flexible,” he said. “With people that are honest, that’s never been a problem. They are always very diligent about making sure they’re current, and even if they do it on the last day of the month—that’s not a preference, but it’s not an issue either.” But Kennedy has had a few tenants, he said, who have not paid rent or communicated with him at all throughout the pandemic. The eviction moratorium “just was kind of set up in such a way that the landlord was completely taken out of the picture in the process,” Kennedy said, “which is unfortunate because you don’t know whether they’re sick—or dead. We don’t know what the situation is. We just know they’re not paying.” And many landlords, Kennedy included, are not keen to evict tenants if they can reasonably avoid it. “I can tell you from experience, I would prefer never ever seeing an eviction in my entire life, ever again,” he said. “It is not a fun process. It is not an easy process. It does not make you feel good, and it is just not an experience anybody ever wants to actually have to go through—either party, either the individual being evicted or the party evicting them. It’s never positive.” That’s why fostering a cooperative relationship between landlords and tenants is in both sides’ interest, he said. But the regulations that have been put in place during the pandemic, Kennedy said, have created a barrier to that cooperation. “I believe that everything should be done in such a way that it’s taking both parties into account, because you have to,” he said. “It doesn’t work the other way. If you just have one side, whether it be landlords or tenants, and you only focus on that one group, then you’ve kind of skewed the whole process, and it creates more problems than you expected.” The LA County Board of Supervisors, for its part, acknowledged the difficulties that landlords have faced because of the ban on evictions. “There are two sides to every equation, and it does feel sometimes like our landlords have borne the brunt of the burden for our continued extension of this eviction moratorium,”

Continued on page 15



A “now hiring” sign hangs in the front window of Dog Haus in Downtown Long Beach Wednesday, Sept. 29, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

Hard-hit industries still struggle to find workers, weeks after extra unemployment benefits expired

By BRANDON RICHARDSON / Reporter

Understaffed businesses are still struggling to hire, even as the temporary increase in unemployment benefits has expired. And the likely reasons, experts say, point to longer term challenges for the hardest hit industries. Even before the extra unemployment benefits expired in early September, there were signs of deeper problems in areas like the food and hospitality sectors. In June and July, for example, 26 states ended the federal enhancement to unemployment benefits—but only

eight have seen food and hospitality jobs return to pre-pandemic levels, according to Nick Schultz, executive director of the Pacific Gateway Workforce Investment Network. “I think it still boils down to health and safety,” Schultz said. “The indications were there before that the benefit wasn’t what was keeping people away from jobs in certain sectors,” he added. “People are unsure, they aren’t comfortable. For what they can earn in certain jobs, it’s just not worth it.” E.J.’s Pub General Manager Corrie Matthews said safety is the main

factor keeping staff out of restaurants, since food service requires so much face time with customers, especially at a sports bar that often has customers sitting for hours at a time “yelling at TVs.” Before COVID-19, the Bixby Knolls establishment had about 40 people on staff during peak sports seasons, according to Matthews. At the height of the pandemic, she had only eight employees. Now, with baseball playoffs fast approaching and football in full swing, only 22 people are working at the sports bar, despite Matthews spending hundreds of dollars advertising available positions. “It’s been a challenge,” she said. “In late August, we had a few candidates trickle in, but I’m still not getting [applications for] dishwasher, minimum wage or even higher positions at all.” If she were able to fill all vacant positions, Matthews said sales would likely increase by around 25%. But at current levels, the restaurant simply cannot serve more customers, she said. At hotels, though, safety concerns are not what is keeping staffing below pre-pandemic levels, according to Pete Hillian, a spokesman for the Long Beach Hospitality Alliance, which represents nine of the city’s hotels. “We estimate that, as an industry in California, we lost about 90,000 hotel workers permanently,” Hillian said. “A majority of this is not as tied to unemployment benefits as others may have been saying. Our hard-working folks had to find work elsewhere, so they moved or moved on to different industries.” Most hotels are operating at lower occupancy rates than normal, particularly during events such as the recent Acura Grand Prix of Long Beach, Hillian said. Operators do not want to put themselves in a position to overwork employees or underperform for guests, he added. “It’s going to be a while before we

can get back to pre-pandemic levels because of our lack of employees,” Hillian said. In August, Long Beach’s unemployment rate decreased to 10.2% from 10.7% in July, according to the California Employment Development Department. While the rate is far better than the historic 19% in May of last year, Long Beach continues to trail behind Los Angeles County, which saw a decrease from 10.2% to 9.7%. The city’s unemployment rate could have been even lower, however, August also saw a decrease in the labor force from 328,900 in July to 235,600. “It’s a product of a couple things,” Schultz said. “People are exhausting benefits and not indicating they’re looking for work, but also gig workers aren’t counted in those statistics.” Prior to the pandemic, Schultz said gig workers accounted for about 25% of all employment. Over the last 18 months, though, gig employment has exploded, he said, increasing by at least 10%, if not more. And while employment is expected to increase over the next couple months due to seasonal hiring, unemployment will likely go back up after the holiday shopping rush, Schultz said. “I anticipate our number will get worse before it gets better,” he added. “I don’t think we’ll get under 5% again until the beginning of 2023.” In Bixby Knolls, meanwhile—a business community known for working together—the staff shortages have brought increased competition. Matthews said prospective employees will go to multiple nearby restaurants to see what each pays, essentially creating a bidding war for staff. “They’re playing that game and they can right now,” Matthews said. “It’s a waiting game at this point. We don’t know what the end of the benefits means. I feel like it’s going to take a few months for it to really hit home.” ■

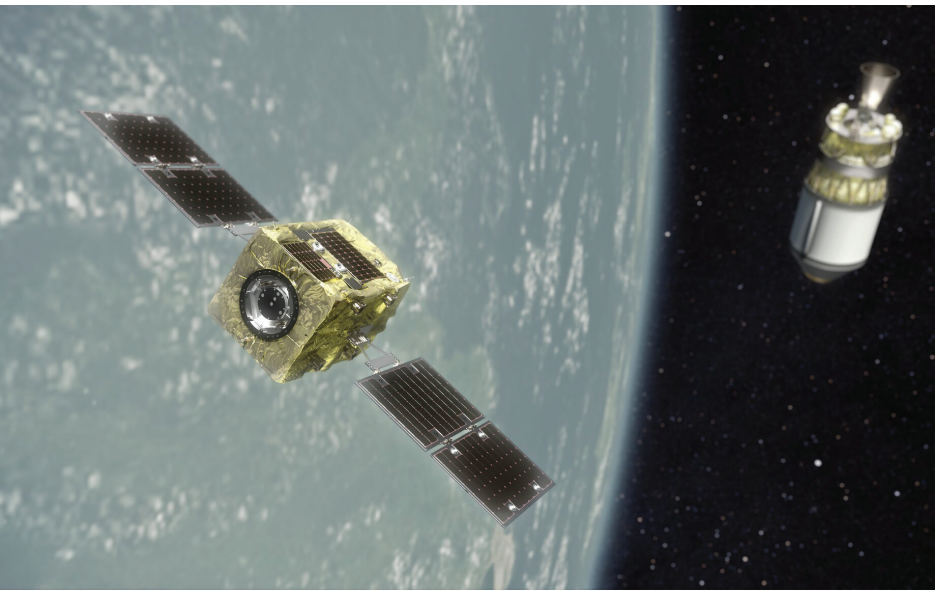
Rocket Lab to launch ‘sustainable space’ demonstration satellite

By BRANDON RICHARDSON / Reporter

The U.S. Department of Defense is tracking more than 27,000 pieces of “space junk” as they orbit the Earth, according to NASA. And in 2023, Rocket Lab will launch a demonstration satellite meant to remove that orbital debris, the Long Beach-based company announced Sept. 21. Space debris could be natural meteoroids as well as human-made objects such as nonfunctional spacecraft, abandoned launch vehicle stages and other mission-related debris. Much more debris that is too small to be tracked also is circling the planet—and even tiny pieces could be catastrophic for space missions, as objects are traveling approximately 15,700 mph in low Earth orbit, according to NASA. The fastest

bullets, by comparison, travel about 1,800 mph. The amount of space debris grows with every mission, so Rocket Lab has penned a deal with Astroscale Japan Inc. to launch the satellite, dubbed the Active Debris Removal by Astroscale-Japan (ADRAS-J). “Reliable and commercially viable launch vehicles like Rocket Lab’s Electron rocket enable frequent and flexible access to space, allowing us to advance our on-orbit services which are fundamental to the growth of the space infrastructure and economy,” Nobu Okada, founder and CEO of Astroscale said in the announcement. Once deployed to a precise orbit by Rocket Lab’s Electron rocket, the demonstration ADRAS-J satellite will

Continued on page 15



A rendering of the Active Debris Removal by Astroscale-Japan satellite. Image courtesy of Rocket Lab.

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Impressive and historic Craftsman in Sunrise District enclave listed at under \$1 million



A home built in 1915 on the 700 block of Sunrise Boulevard goes up for sale in Long Beach Tuesday, September 21, 2021. Photo by Thomas R. Cordova.

BY TIM GROBATY / COLUMNIST

First, let’s agree that Sunrise Boulevard in Long Beach isn’t a boulevard as we’ve come to understand the word. It can puff out its chest and call itself one, but it doesn’t rise to the level of a wide, busy thoroughfare. Rather, Sunrise trickles quietly off busy Atlantic Avenue a couple of blocks south of Willow Street, and meanders slowly past a handful of houses before it merges briefly with Burnett Street and ignobly dead-ends at a wire fence with a yellow sign that tersely and definitively declares “END.”

Every day, thousands of cars on northbound Atlantic pass without noticing the turn for Sunrise Boulevard, never realizing the road leads to the Sunrise Boulevard Historic District, notable for its egalitarian mix of architecture that was instituted there in the early 1900s, with small bungalows built for the working class, midsize Craftsman and Spanish Colonial Revival homes for middle class and large, sprawling Craftsman mansions for the wealthy and prominent residents of the 70-home tract.

It’s the latter that most distinguishes the community, save for the tract’s little El Cortez Motor Court, which is now a set of small but cool apartments with interesting interior touches such as built-ins and miscellaneous niches.

The area was originally a ranch and miles of flowers were grown around the area, which became known as Burnett in honor of railroad man Thomas Burnett who established a station there for the Terminal Railroad. The station was a boon for the local farmers who could ship their flowers and crops. It put the Burnett tract on the map and led to the area’s later development.

In 1907, a physician, Charles Sanford Porter, built the Porter Milk Diet

Sanitarium on Sunrise Boulevard. The diet and its therapy sounds like quackery, but who wouldn’t try something that entailed spending an entire month in bed in an open-air pavilion drinking quart after quart of room-temperature non-pasteurized Holstein milk (and no other food or beverage) and taking two hot baths a day?

The sanitarium lasted until 1924, by which time many of the notable houses in the district had sprung up, including the historic Harnett House at 730 Sunrise Blvd. The Tudor Craftsmen was built by Ernest and Harriet Harnett, who emigrated from England in 1889 and raised 13 children—all but three born in England—in the house, many of whom went on to become leaders in Long Beach’s development. These included Jane Harnett, one of the first teachers at Long Beach High School, later head of the history department at Poly, and an early historian of the young city.

Jane died of pneumonia during the Spanish Influenza outbreak in 1918; her father, Ernest, died the day after her funeral when he was struck by a car on Atlantic Avenue near 23rd Street.

Houses of the Harnett’s sort rarely hit the market in the historic district, but one across the street, at 735 Sunrise Blvd., is listed now by Realtor Mark Vinton at \$785,000.

It’s a beautiful old two-story Craftsman set on more than a quarter-acre lot that’s dotted with century-old trees. If \$785,000 seems like a steal, it is, and whoever ends up buying it will likely have to pay more than the asking price.

The home’s most recent owners were George and Polly Johnson. George died in 2015, and Polly, who was the granddaughter of patriarch Ernest Harnett, and last remaining member of the family who was still living in Long

Beach, died last year.

“They were well thought of by the neighbors,” said Vinton. “Their passing was a loss for the neighborhood.”

So now the family’s home is on the market for the first time in 65 years, and it’s been drawing interest from both serious home-shoppers and a curious public. Vinton held open houses at the place on Sept. 18 and 19 and, he says, about 550 people showed up to stroll through the residence, with some making serious offers which Vinton said would be reviewed by the sellers. It wouldn’t be a shock if the house were to fetch close to a million dollars.

The 1,900-square-foot house looks inviting from the street, with its long, wide front porch protected by shade trees. It practically begs you to pull a chair and enjoy a tall glass of sarsaparilla and a game of checkers.

Inside, there’s lots of spectacular woodwork, including solid mahogany doors, rolling pocket doors, and wood entryway and window trim. Plus high, coffered ceilings, wall sconces, a wood-burning fireplace and a rare basement that’s unfinished but wouldn’t take much to convert to a wine cellar.

Three of the home’s four bedrooms are on the ground level, with the master bedroom upstairs. The dining room has more beautiful woodwork, including a built-in buffet and cabinets and French doors that open to the outdoors.

The garage in the back has a bonus room on top and the long driveway from the street can easily accommodate six cars.

Additionally, the home’s history can likely qualify for Mills Act tax benefits. Because the house is in a historic district, there are restrictions regarding what you can do with the exterior, but you likely wouldn’t monkey around with this excellent example of early-20th-century Craftsman architecture in this hidden Central Long Beach neighborhood. ■



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Satellite

Continued from page 13

intercept a long-abandoned upper-stage rocket body. The satellite will not remove the debris from orbit, but rather test its systems in close proximity to the rocket body and obtain images of the debris to gather observational data about the debris environment.

A planned second mission of the ADRAS-J will demonstrate the removal of debris. The contract for that mission has not been awarded.

The mission is part of the first phase of the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency’s Commercial Removal of Debris Demonstration. The program is one of the world’s first technology demonstrations for the large-scale removal of orbital debris, according to the announcement.

“The ability to actively remove satellites and debris from orbit at the end of their operational life will likely play a key role in ensuring a sustainable space environment for the future,” Rocket Lab founder and CEO Peter Beck said in the announcement.

“Rendezvousing with a piece of debris on orbit, traveling at around [15,700 mph] per hour, is a highly complex task that requires absolute precision when it comes to orbital deployment,” Beck added. ■

Landlords

Continued from page 12

Supervisor Janice Hahn said, “and I’m concerned that continuing to do this will continue to hurt them.”

But Hahn also noted that some protections are still necessary, because “I think we all fear a mass eviction that we would not be able to accommodate help for.”

While the board extended most of the current regulations, the supervisors also said it was important to begin easing restrictions—but that process should be informed by the broader economic and public health picture in LA County.

To that end, the board voted to ask county staff to report back in 30 days with current data on unemployment, rent relief requests and funding and other indicators of the region’s economy. The item also asked county staff to report back in 90 days with a plan to phase out the eviction moratorium based on that data.

Supervisor Kathryn Barger was the only member of the board to abstain from voting on the extension of the moratorium; all of her colleagues voted in favor of it.

With the state moratorium expiring, “we should ask if the county should lift ours, as well,” Barger said. “I believe we should have a plan in place that will allow us to move away from the moratorium and get back into allowing landlords to collect from people renting their spaces.” ■



A pedestrian walks their scooter across Ocean Boulevard on Pine Avenue in Downtown Long Beach Thursday, Sept. 23, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

Traffic signal pilot program uses artificial intelligence to ease pollution, congestion throughout Long Beach

By ALENA MASCHKE / Reporter

Long Beach’s street congestion and air quality could soon see improvements, thanks to a new pilot program that will test the ability of traffic lights to respond to traffic patterns in real time.

Coined Project X, the collaboration between Mercedes-Benz, the city of Long Beach and the Los Angeles-based technology company Xtelligent will deploy a fleet of up to 50 smart vehicles and artificial intelligence-driven software in the city. The vehicles and software will communicate with each other to provide real-time data to traffic signals.

The project, which will last 10 months, is expected to launch by the end of the year. If successful, the program could move into a second phase once the pilot concludes.

“We’re expecting intelligent vehicles and connected traffic signals to become industry standard in the next few years,” said Ryan Kurtzman, Long Beach’s Smart Cities Program manager. “We’re getting a sneak peek.”

The three partners announced that a contract had been signed on Sept. 23, kicking off the process of selecting a project area and implementing Xtelligent’s software to test on traffic signals in the selected region.

The cars will mainly be sharing location data, something many cars already do to enable onboard navigation systems. But in this project, they will be sharing this data with city infrastructure, allowing Xtelligent’s software—and by extension, city engineers—to measure congestion, even calculating emissions based on the type of vehicle and its movements.

The data will be anonymized, preventing anyone in possession of the data to follow any individual car’s movements, according to a Mercedes-Benz representative.

The potential benefits are manifold, Kurtzman noted.

The implications for traffic flow, for example, are clear. When high congestion is an issue, like around a car crash or during school drop-off and pickup times, customized red and green periods at specific intersections could make traffic flow more smoothly, said Michael Lim, co-founder of Xtelligent.

In the long run, the technology could even allow the city to prioritize carpools or buses, similar to a high occupancy vehicle or bus lane, creating incentives for environmentally friendly travel, according to Kurtzman.

The system could also improve air quality. In areas that suffer from high pollution, such as major transit and transportation corridors, adaptive traffic signaling could reduce the amount of time cars spend idling at red lights.

“If a passenger vehicle is spending less time idling at a red light, that’s less time the vehicle is polluting the environment,” Kurtzman said. A study of Xtelligent’s algorithm by the Argonne National Laboratory projected roughly 15% emissions savings as a result of traffic optimization using the company’s technology.

Drivers of electric vehicles also stand to benefit from the new technology. Lim, of Xtelligent, drives a Nissan Leaf and said he often struggles with the car’s limited range, having to make inconvenient stops just to charge. More efficient traffic signaling can help electric cars like his

go farther, he said.

“When you have a more predictive, flowing type of movement, they’re able to maintain energy more effectively,” Lim said. Having a city infrastructure model that could improve the range of electric vehicles like his, he said, might also encourage more people to make the switch from fossil fuels to electric.

But the first step is launching the pilot program to analyze how well the technology works and what could be improved.

Details of the program, like which streets this particular fleet of intelligent cars will be roaming, are still to be decided. The Atlantic Avenue corridor, parts of Downtown and an area near the Mercedes-Benz facility near the intersection of the 710 and 405 freeways are among the potential locations.

The city is carefully considering the potential impact of the operation on local traffic and the community overall, Kurtzman said.

“We need to make sure that the area makes sense from an engineering standpoint,” he said, “and from a community standpoint.”

The group also plans to start a STEM education program for local students at the Mercedes-Benz facility as part of the project, but the details of that program have not yet been released.

If successful, the new technology could have significant benefits for the city, he added.

“Systems like that have the potential to improve the efficiency of our transportation network,” Kurtzman said. “This project helps us inform how we could deploy this type of technology on a larger scale across the city.” ■



Gantry cranes load shipping containers onto trucks at the Long Beach Container Terminal at Middle Harbor Thursday, Aug. 19, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

Cargo delays likely to persist amid holiday season

By **ALENA MASCHKE** / Reporter

Congestion at the San Pedro Bay port complex has left a record number of ships idling in the San Pedro Bay in recent weeks—with no definite end in sight. That means that as cargo shipments ramp up ahead of the holiday shopping season, this year’s holiday gifts might get stuck at sea with them.

Over the past year, increased online

shopping has led to an unprecedented number of containers passing through the twin ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles, with Long Beach hitting new records every month. This has caused congestion at the port and delays along the supply chain, leading experts to predict a shortage of popular gifting items—from electronics to clothing—just ahead of the holiday season.

The twin ports, though, are working

to reduce delays in cargo processing by working to expand gate hours during nighttime and weekends, including a new pilot project extending gate hours at Pier T that was announced on Sept. 21. But it’s unclear how much of an impact those measures will have.

“There’s definitely going to be shortages,” said Patrick Penfield, professor of supply chain management at Syracuse University. Many retailers,

Penfield projects, will struggle to fill their shelves in time for the holidays.

Port of Long Beach Executive Director Mario Cordero agrees.

“You need to do your Christmas shopping early,” Cordero said. While the twin ports have been working to reduce bottlenecks in the processing of goods coming into the country via the Pacific, it’s unlikely they will be eliminated within the next few months, he noted.

Challenges exist all along the supply chain, from a lack of warehouse space to missed appointments by trucking companies, limitations on rail capacity and equipment shortages.

The unprecedented cargo volumes arriving at the ports during the pandemic have stretched resources, creating a backlog of ships to be processed and extending the time a container spends at a marine terminal after it is unloaded from an ocean carrier.

On Sept. 20, 70 ships were sitting at anchor or in drift areas in the San Pedro Bay, awaiting processing. Depending on the size of the vessel, the port of Long Beach’s six terminals can have between 15 and 16 ships at berth at the same time, according to port authorities. Each ship takes an average of three-to-five days to unload, leading port officials to project that the backlog will last well into next year.

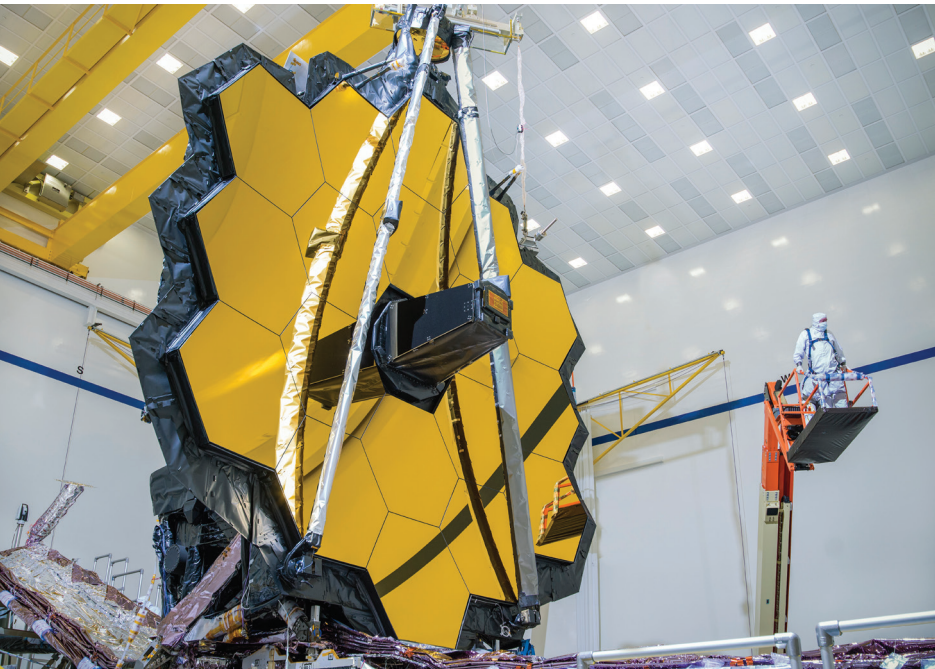
For terminal operators, a lack of space because of the influx of containers is the main challenge at the moment, said Jessica Alvarenga, manager of government affairs at the Pacific Merchants Shipping Association.

“We need the containers out of our terminals,” Alvarenga said.

Once unloaded, cargo needs to be moved onto trucks or freight trains

Continued on page 20

NASA’s new James Webb telescope to depart from Port of Long Beach this month



The James Webb telescope sits in a Northrop Grumman facility in Redondo Beach. Photo courtesy NASA/Chris Gunn.

By **SEBASTIAN ECHEVERRY** / Reporter

NASA’s James Webb telescope is said to be the space exploration agency’s most technologically advanced, deep-space telescope to date.

Once in orbit, the telescope will help NASA take sharp images of far away galaxies, see first-hand how new planets are formed and answer questions about the possibility of extraterrestrial life.

However, before NASA’s telescope takes to the stars it must first make a lengthy trip across the Pacific Ocean and through the Panama Canal to reach French Guiana in South America where a rocket will transport it to space.

That journey begins at the Port of Long Beach.

A report from Inverse this month featured the satellite’s terrestrial journey. According to the report, a ship will transport the telescope from Long Beach, through the Panama Canal to arrive at Kourou, French Guiana.

Alise Fisher, a spokeswoman for NASA, said shipping preparations for the \$10 billion telescope will be completed in September. The space agency hopes to launch the telescope by Dec. 18.

“Webb is shipping to the launch site in French Guiana this month; launch processing will take two months,” Fisher said. “As a precautionary security measure, NASA is not disclosing further details at this time, but we will announce when Webb has arrived in Kourou.”

NASA officials have kept details concerning shipping logistics of the

telescope secret, including when exactly the space instrument would depart the Port of Long Beach, for security reasons—one of them being the potential of a pirate attack while the ship is out at sea.

Earlier this month, NASA reported the telescope was sitting at a Northrop Grumman facility in Redondo Beach where crews were preparing it for shipping.

The telescope will be carried by U.S. Transportation Command, which is part of the military, according to NASA statements.

Upon arriving at French Guiana, the telescope will be loaded onto an Ariane 5 rocket, which has already arrived at the South American nation, according to NASA.

Researchers will use the telescope to keep an eye on 17 known actively-forming planetary systems. They will be able to measure what rocky, Earth-like molecules are forming at the center of those systems to see if elements needed to sustain life—oxygen, carbon and nitrogen—are present, which could be used to answer questions about Earth’s interstellar origins. ■

‘From recovery to expansion’: Long Beach economy continues to grow, experts say

By **ALENA MASCHKE** / Reporter

Economic indicators from the labor market to spending are pointing in the right direction for Long Beach.

That was one of the main messages experts shared during the Accelerate Long Beach quarterly economic forum on Sept. 22.

“We’re really shifting gears at this point, from recovery to expansion,” said Robert Kleinhenz, principal economist at Kleinhenz Economics.

Nationally, the number of unemployed Americans has gone down significantly since the height of the pandemic, according to a data analysis by the Cal State Long Beach Office of Economic Research. With available jobs currently outnumbering the number of unemployed workers, Kleinhenz said employment is likely to recover fully by mid-summer next year.

“Businesses are poised to hire,” Kleinhenz said. “They want to expand.”

California has also been gaining ground, accounting for 43% of jobs added nationwide. Employment in

leisure and hospitality, one of the sectors hit the hardest by the pandemic, has recovered significantly across the state, according to the Cal State data analysis.

Despite significant gains, employment in this and other hard-hit, face-to-face sectors—such as personal care services—is still below pre-pandemic levels. “They’re leading the charge in employment recovery, but they’re still struggling a little bit more,” said Seiji Steimetz, chair of the Cal State Long Beach Economics Department.

With the recent expiration of additional unemployment benefits, some of the workers in these industries might be forced to return despite concerns over infection risk and low wages, Steimetz said. Labor force data supports that trend, with Long Beach participation in the labor force only 3% lower than pre-pandemic levels.

But affordability could be an ongoing challenge, Steimetz cautioned, as home prices and rents continue to rise sharply, with Long Beach rent growth outpacing that of the surrounding LA and Orange County regions, presenting

a rare dark spot in an otherwise optimistic forecast.

“I have concerns,” the economist said.

But for now, despite slightly above-average inflation and rising housing costs, consumer spending both nationally and on a local level has made strong gains. That much is clear with the influx of cargo into the San Pedro Bay port complex, which has caused congestion at the port and in the overall supply chain that is expected to last well through the holiday season.

Consumer spending in LA County has surpassed pre-pandemic levels by 13.4%, with retail leading the charge, according to a CSULB analysis.

“There’s a lot of purchasing power right now,” Steimetz said, “and our local consumers are definitely using it.”

One sector of the local economy that has remained extremely strong both in terms of employment and spending has been health care, which accounts for 16.4% of all employment in the city.

Since January 2020, before the effects of the pandemic were first felt in the U.S., health care spending in Long

Beach increased by 33%. The reasons for this significant increase are yet to be fully explored, Steimetz noted, but are likely to be attributed, at least in part, to the additional stress patients experienced as a result of the long-lasting public health crisis.

Nurses have been in especially high demand, with 89% of job postings falling into the nursing field. This, Steimetz pointed out, is a reflection of a current and ongoing nurse shortage in the city and across the nation.

But despite continued growing pains like labor shortages and above average inflation, economists project a bright year for the local, state and national economy.

“We’re really making progress by leaps and bounds,” Kleinhenz said.

“I think it still boils down to health and safety,” Schultz said.

“The indications were there before that the benefit wasn’t what was keeping people away from jobs in certain sectors,” he added. “People are unsure, they aren’t comfortable. For what they can earn in certain jobs, it’s just not worth it.” ■



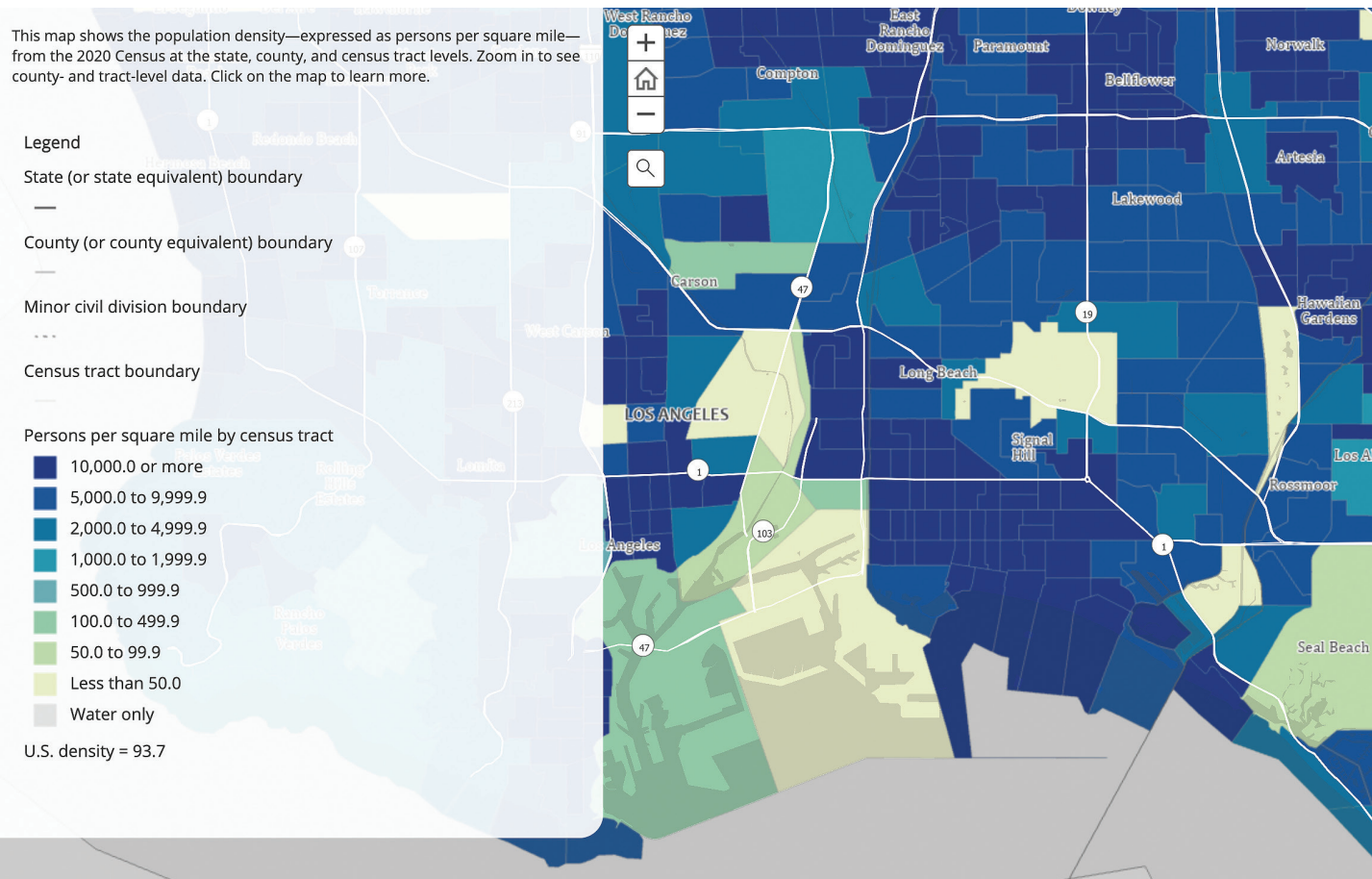
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 **LONG BEACH**
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A map showing population density in Long Beach and surrounding areas. Map courtesy of the U.S. Census Bureau.

Census data is out; here’s what it means and what happens next

By JASON RUIZ / Reporter

The citizen panel charged with using new census numbers to redraw the boundaries of City Council districts is finally about to begin its work.

Local census data was released Sept. 23, which will give the 13-member Independent Redistricting Commission the information it needs to assign residents to one of nine districts that each elect a representative on the City Council.

The new numbers show that while the city only grew about 1%, the nine districts did not grow evenly.

The 7th District, which includes West Long Beach, California Heights and parts of Bixby Knolls, saw the largest population gain in the city, while the city’s 1st District in Downtown and the 6th District in Central Long Beach saw the largest losses.

The city’s charter requires that district populations be more or less even, but allows for a total deviation of 10% from the “ideal” population, which would be one-ninth of the city’s entire population. Based on new census data, the current district lines have a deviation of over 14% and that will require some shifting of district lines over the next few months.

That process will begin Oct. 6, the first of five meetings, through Nov. 17 that could result in a new map being selected by the commission that would lock in political lines for the next 10 years. Some commissioners have said the tight schedule does not leave enough time for public input to be heard by the commission, but the maps must be approved by Dec. 7.

“The schedule is pretty inflexible,” Deputy City Manager Kevin Jackson said during a Sept. 22 commission

meeting. “That’s how it’s built.”

There is a chance that additional meetings could be added by the commission, but the tight timeline dictated by the late release of census data to cities across the county means that the next 10-plus weeks will likely be the last window of opportunity for the public to have its voice included in the process.

The California Supreme Court has denied an appeal by the statewide redistricting commission to extend the deadline to mid-January.

Here’s what you need to know:

Why is redistricting important?

It’s a legal obligation that every city, county and state is required to undergo after each census to ensure that the voting districts in its jurisdiction have roughly the same amount of people in them.

In Long Beach it will determine who can run for office; you have to live in the district to represent it as a City Council member or school board member. It will also determine when you will vote.

If lines shift, some residents would be moved out of their district that was due to vote in the upcoming June election, which means some people could end up voting in back-to-back elections while others will have to wait a total of six years to vote for their council representative. The new map adopted by the commission will be in place for the next decade.

How will the maps be drawn?

The maps won’t necessarily be drawn by the commissioners, but the final one will eventually need to be approved by a supermajority of the commission, meaning at least nine of the 13 members must vote for the final map.

A consultant hired by the city, Redistricting Partners, will draw maps according to commission recommendations, which could be based on maps submitted by the public over the past few months outlining their specific communities of interest. The consultant advised commissioners not to submit maps they’ve personally drawn and instead make their suggestions during an open meeting.

When will the maps be approved?

The commission has a tentative schedule outlined that could see it adopt a final map as soon as Nov. 17, however, the deadline is Dec. 7. The new maps will be used in the June 2022 primary election.

A handful of draft maps are expected to be selected at the commission’s Oct. 20 meeting and an Oct. 27 meeting is scheduled to hear public feedback on the maps. To become a draft version, a map needs to be supported by three members of the commission with at least two of those members living in separate existing council districts.

The final map hearing date is scheduled for Nov. 10.

Any map the commission votes on must be publicly posted for seven days before it can adopt it so the current schedule allows for the commission to propose new maps and push back the adoption dates a few weeks. But it must adopt a map by Dec. 7 for it to be turned into Los Angeles County election officials in time to be used for the next election cycle.

What happens if the commission can’t get nine votes in favor of a map?

That’s where things can get

Continued on page 22

Second phase of North Long Beach rezoning plan shifts focus to industrial core

By SEBASTIAN ECHEVERRY / Reporter

For decades, oil producers and other heavy industrial companies have operated along Paramont Boulevard and Cherry Avenue in North Long Beach next to residential neighborhoods.

The current zoning has allowed for a “hodge podge” mix of land uses, said Councilman Rex Richardson, who oversees the city’s northern council district.

The second phase of a rezoning plan specific to North Long Beach will attempt to address that.

It focuses on the region’s industrial core in an effort to attract companies that produce less pollution and create a cohesive development plan moving forward, according to city planners.

Richardson explained that a residential neighborhood in North Long Beach might include houses, tire and auto-repair shops, liquor stores and motels lined up next to each other. He said this has led to long-term problems such as crime, storefront vacancies and graffiti.

“Chronic issues in North Long Beach are directly tied to land-use policy,” Richardson said. “You can have five motels clustered together, but no tourism—that’s bad land use.”

Richardson proposed the Uptown Planning Land Use and Neighborhood Strategy—UPLAN for short—to restructure the region’s jumbled development. The strategy included in-person community events where residents told city planners the types of developments they wanted to see.

The second phase would implement neo-industrial zoning to allow businesses with a light industrial focus. Currently, the region is marked as “general industrial,” which allows for a wide range of industries that “may not be desirable in other districts,” according to the city’s municipal code. Businesses there have an emphasis on heavy industrial and manufacturing uses.

The City Council adopted the first phase of the UPLAN last year that focused primarily on changing zoning codes along major retail corridors in the area to allow for mixed residential use on Atlantic Avenue and Artesia Boulevard.

This has allowed developers, such as LAB Holding, to propose mixed-use projects to allow for residential homes and small businesses. Developers Brandywine Homes won approval from the city’s Planning Commission for 84 townhomes last month, yet another example of the types of developments city planners are trying to attract in North Long Beach.

Light-industrial zones would

Continued on page 20

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Cargo Delays

Continued from page 16

to be transported to warehouses and distribution centers, a process that is taking an increasingly long time, according to the most recent data published by the association.

In August, 28.4% of containers set to be moved onto trucks sat at the port for more than five days before pickup. Of containers waiting to be loaded onto freight trains, 42.7% waited more than five days for their departure. For comparison, prior to the pandemic, containers rarely spent more than three days before they left the port by truck or train.

As trucking companies and rail operators struggle to keep up with demand for the transportation of containers from the port to warehouses and distribution centers, containers pile up at the port, where they compete for space with empties waiting to return.

Those empty containers, which are piling up as the U.S. imports more goods than it exports, are further adding to congestion, said Harbor Trucking Association CEO Matt Schrap. There were simply “too many empties still sitting on dock,” he added. Last month, 70% of all

outbound containers were empty, although it’s unclear how long those empty containers spent at the port before they were loaded onto ships for export.

As for full containers, trucking companies and railroad operators run up against limitations in warehouse capacity. Warehouses in the Los Angeles region, which includes the South Bay and the Inland Empire, are nearly full, a July study commissioned by the Pacific Maritime Association noted.

Industrial warehouse vacancy rates have dropped to less than 4% in the Inland Empire and less than 2% in the Los Angeles South Bay area near the ports, according to the study’s findings.

The surge in online shopping during the pandemic has highlighted many challenges that actors along the supply chain—from terminal operators to trucking companies—have bemoaned for years.

Some have suggested increased automation as a preventative measure for future surges, arguing that automated terminals would be less susceptible to fluctuations in the availability of labor, be it for nighttime operations or in the current public health crisis, which has seen port workers falling ill and unable to work.

Automation is a controversial topic and one port executives and local operators have been careful to take a stance on. “It’s a prickly topic,” said Alvaranga, of the Pacific Merchants Shipping Association.

Terminal operators, who are in competition with each other, don’t individually share data on the amount of cargo they process. This makes it difficult to compare the efficiency of those with higher levels of automation to those processing cargo manually, Alvaranga said.

Port Executive Director Cordero was careful to take a stance, citing the same reason.

For Cordero, the current situation has instead offered an opportunity to once again push for solutions he has been advocating for in previous years: the “24/7 supply chain.” This includes expanded hours of operation at the port terminals.

“We need a new model of operation,” the port director said, acknowledging that this supply chain-wide change likely won’t happen overnight. But, he added, “the cost of doing nothing is not acceptable.”

Now, the pilot project at Pier T—the main terminal for shipping giant Mediterranean Shipping Company—

will test-run open gates 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It’s unclear at this point how the pilot program will affect cargo backlogs.

Both marine terminal operators and the trucking association have been skeptical of expanding gate hours as a solution to the backlog, arguing that it doesn’t address capacity challenges along the supply chain. Instead, they have advocated for improvements to the system for container storage and pickup order, and pickup appointment systems, respectively.

Expanding gate hours is no overnight fix, Cordero acknowledged, but he argues it’s a step in the right direction.

“We need to start where the container arrives,” he said. “We just have to get out of our comfort zone.”

Because of the complexity of the supply chain and the unprecedented pressure the pandemic has placed on its participants, port officials and experts think it’s unlikely that backlogs and delays will be completely eliminated before their impacts can be seen on the shelves of retail stores come holiday season.

“The backlog’s too big,” said Penfield, of Syracuse University. Shoppers will still get their products, he said. “It just may be after the holidays.” ■



A ball strikes the screen as Birdies N Brews owner/operator Andrew Esparza tees off on one of the bar's golf simulators Tuesday, Sept. 28, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

Play virtual golf while drinking a pint at this new bar in Downtown

By BRANDON RICHARDSON / Reporter

“Drinking and golfing go hand-in-hand,” Andrew Esparza said, sitting in his new bar surrounded by golf-related decor. Birdies N Brews, Long Beach’s first indoor golf bar, opened its doors on Sept. 20, offering guests the chance to drink some booze while they whack some balls in a “cozy” country-club-meets-cabin-meets-man-cave atmosphere.

The idea came to Esparza a few years ago, after his wedding in Lake Tahoe. While in the mountain city, he noticed several indoor golf joints, which are in high demand in the area due to the weather. Shortly after returning home to Southern California,

Continued on page 22

Rezoning

Continued from page 18

allow office spaces for research and development in technology, engineering, design and creative sectors among others, according to city planners.

“Limited retail and services are also permitted to support the day-to-day needs of workers employed in these areas,” Patricia Diefenderfer, Planning Bureau manager, wrote in an email.

During a Planning Commission meeting this month, city planners said that just 20% of residents who make more than \$3,333 a month both live and work in North Long Beach. About 47% of workers commute into North Long Beach and 41% work outside of the city’s northern neighborhoods.

Joni Ricks-Oddie, a North Long Beach resident and vice chair of the city’s Planning Commission, said the second phase of the UPLAN could bring small-business incubators and more job opportunities closer to the neighborhood.

“It was very clear that people who live in North Long Beach don’t work here, residents commute out,” Ricks-Oddie said. “We have an imbalance in the type of business sectors here and because the intent is small incubators and co-working spaces, those are all types of commercial spaces from the community who want to start small businesses, and it supports that idea to live where they work.”



A woman walks by the Holliday Rock ready-mix concrete supplier facility on Artesia Boulevard in North Long Beach Thursday, Sept. 30, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

If the council adopts the second phase as they did the first, the zone changes wouldn’t immediately impact businesses that are already operating under heavy industry zone codes.

Diefenderfer said businesses are allowed to remain as “grandfathered”

use. That means that as long as the business remains in place, they can continue operating as they have before.

Ideally, as land turns over and heavy industrial tenants leave, new businesses that come to North Long Beach will have to comply with the

new zoning.

City officials are tentatively aiming to bring the zone changes to the Planning Commission for review before the end of the year. From there, the City Council will decide sometime in early 2022 if it wants to adopt the changes. ■



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Case Equipment Parts, Service, Repairs & Maintenance	ITB FS21-080	10/07/2021
9-1-1 Emergency Communications Study	RFP DC21-085	10/12/2021
340B Contract Pharmacies	RFQ HE21-102	10/12/2021
SCADA Improvements Phase 2B	WD-15-21	10/13/2021
Sanitary Sewer Rehabilitation & Replacement Program Project 7 (SSRRP-7)	WD-16-20	10/14/2021
Fair Housing Services	RFP DV21-097	10/19/2021
Sanitary Sewer Rehabilitation & Replacement Program Project 8 (SSRRP-8)	WD-04-21	10/19/2021
On-Call Hydrogeological Services	RFP	10/19/2021
Citywide Disposable Waste Bags	ITB LB21-101	10/21/2021

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Census

Continued from page 18

murky. The City Charter says that the commission has six months from when it received final census data to adopt a map. However, the 2020 census was unique for a number of reasons including the pandemic, which delayed the release of data to the commission. The commission received final data from the census this week.

Under the charter that means it would have until March to approve a map, but because county election officials need maps six months in advance of the election to adjust precincts to ensure that the right residents get the right ballots for the elections, the commission likely needs to vote on one by Dec. 7.

If the commission can't approve a map before the charter's designated timeframe, or it approves maps that violate provisions of the charter meant to protect voting rights, a court could step

in to draw the lines for the city.

How can I get involved?

There are a number of public meetings leading up to a planned adoption date in November. There are also two mapping tools that the commission has been soliciting input from the community and the city is hosting a series of workshops to help residents better understand how to use them over the next few weeks. Map submissions need to be submitted before Oct. 12 at midnight to be part of the

packet that the commission will consider.

It's expected that every meeting will now be in-person only because statewide emergency orders that required public meetings to be held virtually or in a hybrid setting have expired. For upcoming commission meetings, visit <https://longbeach.gov/redistricting/agendas-meetings/>.

The final map-drawing workshop will be held 5:30 p.m. Oct. 7 at Burnett Neighborhood Library. ■

Birdies N Brews

Continued from page 21

a rainy day spoiled the Downey native's tee time, and he told his wife, Jasmine, he wished there was a local indoor golf bar.

"And here we are, three years later," Esparza said. "It took a while but it's done."

The owner/operators enlisted Jasmine's two sisters, Tiffany Hernandez and Samantha Ortiz, to help run the business. Hernandez, who has worked as a bartender at three of the "World's 50 Best R Birdies N Brews restaurants"—Employees Only and Cosme in New York and Callooh Callay in London—is the beverage director, while Ortiz is the bartender.

Birdies N Brews features two golf simulators that cost \$25,000 each. The rigs include a projector, a system that tracks every aspect of the golfer's swing—club speed, angles, etc.—along with contact with the ball and the ball's subsequent speed and trajectory.

The balls are struck into the large screen that shows the virtual golf course. The virtual ball travels according to the tracking system's real-time readings, with nearly 100% accuracy, while providing data on the swing, Esparza said.

Aside from the basic driving range setting, the system features games such as target practice and more than 40 golf courses, including popular locations like the famous Monterey County course Pebble Beach. Patrons can play the entire course or single holes, such as Pebble Beach's beautiful 7th, which SB Nation calls an architectural miracle.

"There are courses that are on the PGA Tour that you probably would never get to play on in real life," Esparza said, "but you can play them here."

Tee time is paid for by the hour: \$35 per hour for the first person, plus \$10 for each additional person.

The bar features basic munchy items such as chips and candy, but also higher-end snacks, including hummus with pita bread and charcuterie boards with up to three different meats and cheeses, crackers, nuts, grapes and jam. Hernandez said she also would like to add a vegan "hot dog" to the menu in the future.

And the bar wouldn't be a bar without a wide array of alcoholic beverages. For the beer selection, Hernandez said she put a heavy emphasis on local and state breweries.

"I made it a point to ... find brands that are either [people of color]-, female- or LGBTQ-brewed and -owned," Hernandez said, noting that their bar is family- and Latinx-owned.



A two-cheese, two-meat charcuterie board and three spicy miche drinks at Birdies N Brews in Downtown Long Beach Tuesday, Sept. 28, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

"It's really important to me to be able to highlight people in our community."

With a background in high-end cocktails, Hernandez takes particular pride in her low-ABV craft drinks. The menu includes a flight of three hand-crafted, spicy miches that are mixed with SouthNorte's Sea Señor Mexican Lager. The Rojo is a blend of Roma tomato, orange bell pepper, and Valentina Hot, soy and Worcestershire sauces. The Verde miche is a mix of cilantro, tomatillo, green bell pepper, jalapeño and poblano chile sauce. And the Habanero miche includes Jamaican tuna roja, guava puree, habanero and lemon.

Hernandez also created the Caddy Coffee, which includes an Irish stout beer reduction, cold brew Amaro, Ibarra Mexican Chocolate and coconut foam. The coffee drink comes in a standard and mini size.

In the future, once the bar gets its liquor license, Hernandez said she will introduce a curated cocktail program and wine list.

Of course, there are concerns when it comes to drinking alcohol and then swinging metal golf clubs in a confined space, Esparza said. While drinking has become synonymous with the sport among amateurs, there is a lot more space on an actual course,

he said, noting that the bar will keep an even closer watch on the level of alcohol consumption with its golfers than a normal bar does.

While Esparza is concerned about safety surrounding swinging clubs, he said he is not worried about rogue balls causing injury or damage—except for the holes in the ceiling, which has been the only casualty when golfers mis-hit. There is a net on the other side of the tiles, he said, to keep balls from traveling any farther, adding that ceiling tiles are "pretty cheap."

Extra ceiling tiles will come in handy as the space already has proven popular among novices. "I've already gotten a ton of new golfers in here just trying to get a feel for the game," Esparza said. "Maybe they've been too embarrassed to go to an actual golf course but this is a really friendly environment."

"Golf can be elitist and not inclusive," Hernandez added. "It can be daunting, so to learn in this sort of casual way, I think, will allow for a more diverse crowd to enjoy the sport. And that's how it should be."

Birdies N Brews is located at 90 E. Fourth St. and is open from 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sundays. ■

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Birdies N Brews beverage director Tiffany Hernandez, left, owner/operator Andrew Esparaza and bartender Samantha Ortiz sip their drinks inside the new indoor golf bar in Downtown Long Beach Tuesday, Sept. 28, 2021. Photo by Brandon Richardson.

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