A ‘surreal experience’: Father-son surgical team repair spines

By Brandon Richardson

In the operating room, trust is critical. Trust that the other surgeons and nurses will do their jobs and do them well. Trust that they have your back. For Amandeep Bhalla, there can be no greater sense of trust than when he looks across the operating table at his father, Sarbpaul.

For the past six years, the father-son surgical team has performed over 1,500 orthopedic surgeries at Long Beach Memorial Medical Center. Though Sarbpaul, 73, is slowing down on the number of surgeries he does per week, the pair still regularly perform five or six together, which makes up the majority of Amandeep’s cases.

“I think it’s pretty special—a kind of almost surreal experience,” Amandeep, 39, said about working in the OR with his dad. “[We] have complete trust in one another and a lot of that is kind of unspoken and grounding.”

The Bhallas specialize in spinal surgeries and in March performed their 100th procedure using the ExcelsiusGPS assisted spinal surgery robotic arm, which allows surgeons to virtually navigate the spine in 3D for increased precision. Long Beach Memorial was the first facility in Los Angeles County to purchase the machine almost two years ago, which makes the Bhallas the area’s leading experts in the tech.

When the duo performed its first surgery using the machine, it was cutting-edge, Amandeep said. Other facilities have begun purchasing the piece of equipment but their surgeons must be trained to use it. And that is where the Bhallas come in.

Continued on page 10

NEW EQUITY CENTER ESTABLISHING ROLE IN SUPPORTING NORTH LONG BEACH FAMILIES

By Christian May-Suzuki

Even in its infancy, the Robert R. Arias Health Equity Center is providing critical economic and social services to North Long Beach residents.

After over a year of renovations, the center opened last month at 6335 Myrtle Ave., next door to the Doris Topsy-Elvord Community Center at Houghton Park. The equity center was originally known as the Center For Family And Youth, a space mainly used for early childhood education.

Continued on page 5

CERRITOS COUPLE DONATES $5M TO LONG BEACH MEMORIAL

By Brandon Richardson

After being forced to work on a labor farm amid the Cultural Revolution, Hing Hung escaped Communist China in 1974. He made his way to the U.S. where he would graduate from college, meet his wife and co-found a successful business in Long Beach.

Hung’s road to the American dream gave him a “pay it forward” mentality—a mentality that led to a $5 million donation toward a hybrid operating room at Long Beach Memorial Medical Center.

“The Hungs are shining examples of what can happen when courage, hard work and love are met with freedom and opportunity,” Long Beach Medical Center Foundation Executive Director Shawnia Camp said.

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City OKs assisted living and dispensaries with equity focus
City to allow 8 more cannabis blazes into Long Beach for virtual upgrade in Long Beach beyond hospital beds
CEO to take over as head of Health Care

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Health Care
Former Community Hospital CEO to take over as head of Lakewood Regional

Virgin Narbutas was COO at Lakewood Regional from 1990-1994 and served as CEO of Community Hospital from spring 2020 to July 2021.

By Brandon Richardson

After 13 years with Tenet Health, Lakewood Regional Medical Center CEO John Grah is retiring later this month. The health care provider announced former Community Hospital CEO Virgin Narbutas as his successor, effective May 19.

A graduate of UCLA with a bachelor of arts, biology and a master’s degree in health service management, Narbutas was COO at Lakewood from 1992-1994. He has since served as regional CEO of three acute care hospitals and as CEO of long-term acute care hospital in Charlotte, North Carolina.

“I am very happy to be back at the hospital where I started my career,” Narbutas said in an email. “Serving the community where I have lived for the past 35 years continues to be my passion and I look forward to advancing the valuable health care services that Lakewood Regional Medical Center provides to our residents.”

Grah assumed the role of CEO at Lakewood Regional in 2016. During his tenure, he successfully led the charge for improved quality and safety of care as well as operational performance that enabled growth, hospital spokesman Jennifer Bayer said in an email.

Since Grah took over, the hospital achieved stroke service accreditation and recognition from Los Angeles County Emergency Medical Services. Grah also led the implementation of an ICU expansion program and to expand cardiovascular services.

For more than two years, Grah “navigated the hospital through COVID-19, maintaining a commitment to excellence throughout the challenging time,” Bayer says.

“As a transition to the next phase of my life, I am blessed in knowing that I have contributed to improving the lives of patients seeking care at my respective organizations,” Grah said in an email of his 35-year health care career. “I’ve had the opportunity to work with wonderful teams of dedicated people and have developed many long-standing relationships with people I consider family.”

Most recently, Narbutas, a Long Beach resident, served as CEO of the now-defunct Community Hospital. Under the acute-care facility’s final owner, Molina, Narbutas served from spring 2010 to July 2021. The reason for Narbutas’s departure from Community remains unclear.

The hospital was shuttered for over two years and reopened in January 2021 but permanently closed again 13 months later.

After his retirement, Grah is planning to pursue his education at the University of California, San Diego and continue to be involved with the hospital as a community member.

The recent donation is not the first time Bayer has supported healthcare. In 1998, Bayer and his wife, Dr. F. Brian Bayer, donated $1 million to establish the John G. Bayer, Sr., Professorship in Cardiac Surgery at Long Beach Medical Center. Bayer provided this donation in honor of his father, a cardiologist who supported community health care.

Bayer is also a member of the hospital’s Foundation Board of Directors and has committed more than $2 million in support of the hospital’s programs over the years.


g5m Donation
continuous

President Bob Gunsalus said in an email to the Business Journal: “Mr. Hung’s story in particular is better than anything Hollywood could produce.”

The hefty donation to the MemorialCare Los Heart & Vascular Institute helped fund a new hybrid catheterization lab and a cardiovascular operating suite that features advanced technology and combines the diagnostic capabilities of a catheterization lab with the surgical functionality of an operating room, according to the hospital.

Born in Communist China in the early 1950s, Hung was forced to work on farms and in factories. He eventually sponsored to receive his green card and moved to the United States in 1984. For over 40 years, Hung managed Mercury Security Corp., which created the technology behind home alarm systems.

For more than 2 years, Hung has donated to the hospital as a way to give back to the community.

The couple now lives in Cora, a small town in the mountains of Vermont. They have no children.

He and his wife, Doris, retired in 2014.

Bayer said the donation is a testament to the hospital’s continued success in providing high-quality care to the community.

The donation is not the first time Bayer has supported the hospital. In 1998, the couple donated $1 million to establish the John G. Bayer, Sr., Professorship in Cardiac Surgery at Long Beach Medical Center.

Bayer provided this donation in honor of his father, a cardiologist who supported community health care.

Hung and his wife, Doris, have made a number of donations to the hospital over the years. Together, they have donated more than $2 million to support the hospital’s programs.

Last year, the hospital received a $2 million donation from the couple to establish the John G. Bayer, Sr., Professorship in Cardiac Surgery at Long Beach Medical Center.

The donation was a way to give back to the community. "We are so grateful for the support of these incredible donors," Bayer said.

Hung and his wife, Doris, have been active in the community for many years. They have been involved in a number of local charities and organizations.

Hung is a graduate of Pomona College, where he studied electrical engineering.

Director Andrea Estrada

Expectant parents in Long Beach have birthing setting options beyond hospital beds

By Christian May-Suarez

From the moment Hannah Milot found out she was expecting her first child, she knew that giving birth in the traditional way was not something she wanted.

“I have heard from friends about their experiences at hospitals, and I knew I wanted something else,” Milot said over email.

She decided to use a birth center to help facilitate a more natural and holistic approach to pregnancy and labor. She did not want to go to the hospital when her due date came and went, but that was only reinforced her desire to give birth in a natural setting.

“The hospital was a very stressful environment for me,” Milot said. “At first, they wouldn’t let my husband in the room and then they tried to pressure us into inducing for no reason. Both my birthing experiences were perfectly healthy.”

So Milot went into labor naturally soon after the visit and was brought into the birth center. She was allowed to deliver the baby mostly on her own while her midwife—a professional who specifically trained and certified to guide and monitor a natural birthing process—checked on the heart rate of the baby periodically.

“The lights were off and they had candles lit,” Milot said. “It was a beautiful experience.”

Most people in the United States only consider giving birth at a hospital, but some expectant parents like Milot are looking for a different way to bring their children into the world.

Traditional hospital births are undoubtedly still the most popular, with about 98% of births in the country conducted at a hospital, according to recent data from the California Department of Public Health.

Births through more natural methods, however, have been gaining popularity in recent years.

Department of Public Health data shows the percentage of births happening outside of hospitals has doubled since 2007.

The main advantage of hospital-based birthing is safety—having a plethora of resources within close reach to minimize the consequences of any of the potentially serious complications that can arise during labor. Medications can be used to help speed up a birth and mitigate intense pain, and most women opt for this safety net.

But there are some who want to avoid giving birth at a hospital for a number of reasons, including past birth experiences with hospital births, a desire for more control or simply because they want to avoid being in the hospital under a calm environment. In Long Beach, expectant mothers have several options to explore a more natural birthing process.

One advantage of giving birth outside of a hospital, according to experts, is the presence of a birth center, a facility equipped with beds and other tools. There were just under 400 accredited birth centers that are not directly attached to the hospital as of 2020, where mothers can experience a more holistic birthing journey.

Long Beach Birth Center, where Milot gave birth, is one such facility, located 1224 E. Wardrobe Road. Meredith Bowling decided to open a birth center with her wife, Elizabeth Medrano-Bowling, after having her own experience at a hospital.

“Coming away from that, I realized why we need another place for women to give birth, especially if their pregnancy is low-risk, and they’re nothing wrong with them,” Bowling said.

Birth centers limit their use of medication in favor of a more natural process, Bowling said, and replace nurses with midwives, who are trained to oversee the natural birthing process and handle many of the common complications one sees, including an additional association training program done every two years. Midwives are accredited by the American Midwifery Certification Board.

Long Beach Birth Center has four midwives and five “birth assistants,” also known as doulas.

The facilities themselves are heavily monitored and accredited by the Commission for the Accreditation of Birth Centers to maximize patient safety.

The midwifery model of care is centered around the idea that labor is a natural human process that shouldn’t require significant intervention from medicine. Specific knowledge and procedures are laid out to ensure the birth is carried out as safely as possible, but facilities like the Long Beach Center have medicine on standby for emergencies.

During labor, induction and medication are replaced by more natural solutions like position changes and methods like acupressure to relieve pain. Midwives are extremely trained to respond to common complications but may transfer a patient to a hospital should they need additional resources and specialized care.

Patients are examined regularly during prenatal appointments over the course of nine months, similar to traditional hospital visits. Midwives will assess the baby’s health and look for any number of potential risk factors that may cause complications during a natural delivery.

Bowling said complications are rare and the evaluation required to be cleared for a natural birth outside of a hospital setting. Those appointments are far more personalized and detailed than education.

The center has now broadened its efforts to include more resources that families need.

“Featuring an open-space concept with a large community training room, the equity center has two conference rooms as well as two outdoor patios,” Rice Epstein said via email.

One of those services is the city’s Fundamentals of Fatherhood program, which launched in 2019 as part of a federal initiative. The program consists of 10-weekly sessions with a life coach mentor to help fathers with child bonding, co-parenting and economic stability and mobility.

Employment assistance services through the city’s Pacific Gateway Workforce Innovation Network are also being hosted at the center. Rice Epstein said this is particularly critical now given the economic impacts of the pandemic.

“This represents the city’s commitment to equity by bringing services directly into the communities most impacted by COVID-19,” Rice Epstein said.

For families in more dire circumstances, the center also hosts a Family Preservation Program for those whose children are at risk to be taken out of home care. Families that are part of the program are assigned a case manager who conducts weekly in-home visits. The case manager will also guide family members to services provided by the center who helped to deal with underlying issues, including parenting classes and support groups, youth groups, services for LGBTQ youth, counseling, job training and mental health services.

Medical services are also provided at the center, including family planning, and services related to HIV and TB. Having this wide range of services stays true to the city’s overall philosophy not only for the center, but its approach to bringing families in violence-stricken and impoverished areas as a whole.

“The intersection of youth development, violence prevention and strengthening families requires an intersectional approach,” Rice Epstein said. “It requires looking at prevention and early intervention in people’s lives by providing them with the necessary resources for them to achieve their potential.”

The city is planning to expand programming in the coming months, including increased access on younger people. The Futures Fund Programs target “prolific youth,” which are defined as being aged 16 to 24 who are entirely disconnected from school and work. The program will help those interested in continuing their education or re-entering the workforce.

They are also looking to expand the Long Beach Activating Safe Communities initiative into North Long Beach using the center as a base. The program arranges for prevention crews by using a community-based organization to send “neighborhood ambassadors,” who work with police to quell community violence prevention through outreach and the implementation of interventions.

For more information on the center and its programs, call the center directly at 562-570-3300.

By Brandon Richardson

High-needed patients—or those simply looking for convenience—on Los Angeles and Orange counties can now utilize an innovate piece of medical equipment during at-home virtual medical visits that give doctors real-time data for improved telehealth care.

In April, Long Beach Medical Center operator MemorialCare announced it was the first provider in the region to partner with TytoCare, the developer of a tech-driven, all-in-one, AI-powered medical device for remote patient monitoring.

About the size of a baseball, patients can use the device to measure heart rate and body temperature, which is key for treating many acute and chronic conditions, according to the provider. The device connects to the patient’s phone via Bluetooth and information is transmitted directly to the patient’s electronic medical chart.

The device is also equipped with a camera that allows doctors to examine patients’ skin, eyes, ears and throat. Several attachments are included or can be purchased as add-ons to assist in the examination, including a blood pressure cuff, a pulse oximeter and a component that allows doctors to listen to a patient’s heartbeat and breathing.

MemorialCare already has a significant number of patients free of charge, said Mark Scharfen, CEO of the MemorialCare Medical Foundation. Anyone, however, can purchase the device through the hospital or third-party vendors such as Best Buy for $30.

For free devices, the health provider is prioritizing certain patients based on condition and the need for increased convenience.

“We started with expecting parents and developed the initial cases based on that,” Scharfen said. “Our patient population is wherever they need to be. We want to maximize the financial impact in terms of reaching those most in need.”

Continued from cover page

Continued on page 8

By Brandon Richardson

A health department employee walks along the exterior of the Ronald R. Arias Health Equity Center at Houghton Park in North Long Beach.

The center currently serves as the case manager to refer patients to the TytoCare device.

Owner Meredith Bowling and her wife, Elizabeth Medrano, stand in one of the birthing rooms, equipped with a bed and bedding, at Long Beach Birth Center.

The center currently serves as a hub for the Community Impact Doseen of the city’s Department of Health and Human Services. Last week in a try, the division aims to improve racial equity in public health and quality of life by providing economic and social services to underserved communities.

“Equity programming at the [equity center] is family-centered and focused on a two-generational approach to uplift families and strengthen their social and economic mobility,” health department spokesman Jennifer Rice Epstein said via email.

One of those services is the city’s Fundamentals of Fatherhood program, launched in 2019 as part of a federal initiative. The program consists of 10-weekly sessions with a life coach mentor to help fathers with child bonding, co-parenting and economic stability and mobility.

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For more information on the center and its programs, call the center directly at 562-570-3300.
The Canadian Cancer Society and other NGOs have been calling for a drug war on cannabis. Activists from cannabis communities and the legal industry have pushed back against this on social media, with some arguing that the drug war is a failure and that legalizing cannabis is the way to go.

In response to the growing number of cannabis deaths, the Canadian Cancer Society has been working on a new policy framework to address this issue. They have been calling for a more comprehensive approach to cannabis use, which includes education and prevention programs, as well as a focus on reducing harms and promoting public health.

However, some critics argue that the Canadian Cancer Society’s approach is too conservative and does not go far enough in addressing the harms of cannabis use. They argue that a more radical approach is needed, including decriminalization and regulation of the cannabis industry.

The Canadian Cancer Society has been working with other NGOs and government officials to try to find a middle ground on this issue. They have been calling for a more evidence-based approach to cannabis use, which includes research into the harms and benefits of cannabis use, as well as a focus on prevention and treatment programs.

Overall, the debate over cannabis use continues to be a contentious one, with both sides arguing for their own approaches. The Canadian Cancer Society and other NGOs have been working to find a way forward that can address the harms of cannabis use while also promoting public health and safety.
Expectant Parents and patients that have difficulty planning for the weekends, Schaefer said. "We're especially at nighttime and on weekends," Schaefer said. "We're..."

MemorialCare is working on a free device, Schaefer said. "I don't promise a home birth. I am promising to keep everyone safe." After the legislation is passed, it will enable providers to put in reflect the overall message of the birth care model of care being supportive and building a personal connection with patients to provide a natural and intimate experience. "I really think that when you..."

"In the standard obstetrical model of care, they are talking about truly the most intimate moments of someone's life, but we need to make sure emotionally and mentally they're in a good place, because those things matter just as much as the physical stuff."

At-home care is crucial and expands the virtual health care system, which includes a feature that connects patients and medical staff via AI for quick diagnostics and treatment recommendations, Schaefer said. The chat feature is not appropriate for an emergency situation but rather if a patient has questions or concerns.

"It's an important part of the future where we have different electronic tools for patients so they can access care," Schaefer said. "Like when you're standing in line, you may do it from your phone, you may go to a drive-thru, maybe the ATM or you may actually walk into the bank. We want health care to be the same."

The Long Beach City Council will allow eight new licenses for cannabis dispensaries, and it will prioritize applicants who have already applied. City cannabis business regulators expect that the eight licenses will be selected by November. It would take one to three years for them to actually open up for business.

"We'll license to be served for equity" business owners that have lower net worths, whose family has been affected by the war on drugs or who meet other metrics outlined in the city's cannabis equity program. The city established this program because all 32 of the city's allowed retail storefronts have already been claimed.

The city already has 156 equity applications in the pipeline, and the council has not yet determined how eight of those applicants will end up on the waiting list on a lottery or moratorium on new people applying. "We're talking about 156 applications and only eight people are going to get licenses," Councilmember Al Austin said. "Once this is announced, you'll probably get another 50 applications..." The people that have been in this process should be rewarded.

Councilmember Cindy Allen's proposed change would require potential business operators to propose a 10-year business plan and require equity owners to maintain ownership for 10 years instead of the originally proposed five-year window. "We're talking about 156 applications and only eight people are going to get licenses," Councilmember Al Austin said. "Since this is announced, you'll probably get another 50 applications..." The people that have been in this process should be rewarded.

But as virtual health care continues to grow in popularity, technology must also expand with demand. "Technology is crucial for providing care virtually," Councilmember Al Austin said. "It's an important part of the future where we have different electronic tools for patients so they can access care," Schaefer said. "Like when you're standing in line, you may do it from your phone, you may go to a drive-thru, maybe the ATM or you may actually walk into the bank. We want health care to be the same."

The council could take the first of two procedural steps to approve the new ordinance as soon as next week. "Lower taxes, higher access" Councilmembers also voted to reexamine the tax structure in the city where cannabis is taxed at a higher rate than marijuana. These changes were contained in a bill that a combination of state, city and state lawmakers have been working to get passed to help more businesses seeking out the black market.

The council voted unanimously to ask for a feasibility study to be prepared in the coming months that would show what could happen if the city cut the current adult-use tax (8%) into the medicinal cannabis rate (6%). The report will also be intent of kind of bit the city general fund would take it was dropped to 5% or 4%.

The city's cannabis excise tax that voters adopted through Measure M has generated millions of dollars for the city's general fund and has helped pay for services like public health, police and fire.

El Licor is the city's only minority-owned and one of the more vocal critics of the high rate, said the charges amount to a "vice tax." He asked for a feasibility study to be prepared in the coming months that would show what could happen if the city cut the current adult-use tax (8%) into the medicinal cannabis rate (6%). The report will also be intent of kind of bit the city general fund would take it was dropped to 5% or 4%.

The council also approved throwing the city's support behind two state legislative bills that could eliminate or suspend the state's cannabis excise tax.

Assembly Bill 733 would suspend cultivation taxes until July 2023 and reduce the excise tax to 8% and Senate Bill 1281 would eliminate the cultivation tax and reduce the excise tax to 5% or 5.5% for taxed adult-use. Lawmakers either of the bills is signed into law and takes effect July 1.

"I understand that these folks may..." Councilmember Laurenigor said. "I really think that when you..." Councilmember Al Austin said. "Once this is announced, you'll probably get another 50 applications..." The people that have been in this process should be rewarded.
By Christian May-Suzuki

The Trisomy 21 (T21) Research Society—the first international nonprofit scientific organization dedicated to Down syndrome—is holding their biennial International Scientific Conference from June 9 to 12 at the Westin Hotel Long Beach. Held biennially, the conference will bring together over 200 professionals from around the world to Long Beach to discuss the latest developments in Down syndrome research.

Those experts will come from some of the most influential positions in the field, including decision makers from the National Institutes of Health and several biotechnology companies.

The conference is mainly focused on scientific meetings and symposiums, where experts will discuss topics such as the genetics of COVID-19 and the child's development, the interplay between inflammation, neurodegeneration, and aging in Down syndrome patients.

Meetings will also be held to connect experts to discuss research opportunities, and young researchers will also be given the opportunity to pitch their ideas.

Capping off the Whole conference will be a Gala Dinner and a pair of awards shows Saturday night and Sunday morning, where presenters will be recognized for the importance of their work.

After the first three conferences were held successfully in Paris in 2015, Chicago in 2017, and Barlona in 2019, a virtual spinoff of the conference was held in June 2021 as part of the regular biennial schedule due to COVID-19 restrictions. Now that restrictions have been lifted, organizers are excited to hold a proper, in-person conference.

“As we exit the pandemic, we can again embrace the ability to connect with one another and to stretch our boundaries,” he added. “I knew I loved surgery because you can get to work with your hands,”

Amandeep did his residency at Harbor-UCLA Medical Center before moving to Boston for a one-year fellowship at Brigham and Women's Hospital. Amandeep grew up in Southern California, the son of Sarbpaul Bhalla, a spine surgeon at Long Beach Medical Center.

Sarbpaul said his orthopedic residency in 1989 and moving to Boston for a one-year fellowship at Brigham and Women's Hospital were a platform for him to become the best surgeon he could be. However, the curb extensions are not expected to be completed by 2025 and could be delayed by two years as proposals to build there have been struck down in the past.

City officials are excited to help bring them into view of pedestrians, who have to cover to cross a street and have to make slower turns.

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City officials are excited to help bring them into view of pedestrians, who have to cover to cross a street and have to make slower turns.

Willow Station was also approved. This new project will also bring millions more in state funding to the city to improve its bicycle network.

One resident in the area, Reata Kuliocar, expressed concerns at the meeting about the use of the adjacent alleyway separating the property from a former Ralphs grocery store building. While talk at the meeting suggested that the alley would not be used for trash pickup and delivery of food and supplies, she quoted the staff report as saying it would be “needed to facilitate access for ambulatory and non-ambulatory residents, shrink excuses for local field trips, and local deliveries to avoid blocking the front entrance.”

Representatives from Sunrise said at the meeting that most of these activities could be done through the building’s porte-cochere, a covered entrance for vehicles and ambulances.

City staff noted building facilities like this was necessary to accommodate the city’s aging population.

With individuals living longer aging in place can be challenging especially when individuals have special needs that cannot be accommodated by relatives or other family figures,” the staff report on the project said.

The lot was created through a 2017 state law aimed at increasing other modes of transportation like walking and biking. The grant will bring in over $100 million in state funds to the city to improve its bicycle network.

An $8 million Pacific Avenue cycle track that would extend from Boulevard to Pacific Coast Highway would install a sidewalk, bike lane and bus islands that would provide more efficient service and make drivers and fare cards to make slower turns.

Conte said the streets that could see changes were identified in the city’s High Impact Bike Plan and include Magnolia, Pacific and Atlantic avenues, Sixth Street, Seventh Street and Long Beach Boulevard.

Other elements of the project include adding natural storm drains called bioswales and additional greenery. Conte said the extra space could also provide more opportunities for outdoor dining.

Two other active transportation projects in Long Beach were approved by CalTrans and could bring millions more in state money to the city to improve its bicycle network.

Downtown Long Beach could see a dramatic change to its pedestrian infrastructure in the coming years as the city works to make biking and walking around the area safer.

The city is starting the environmental planning process for a “Walkable Corridor” project that could install up to 150 curb extensions and fill in the crevice islands in the Downtown area.

The City Council approved the first wave of grant money earlier this month to pay for an initial environmental review and a public consultation with the city’s Health Department, which will teach the public how to use the new infrastructure.

Extending corners will both shorten the distance pedestrians have to cover to cross a street and better bring them into view of drivers who currently have to deal with parked cars when looking for people standing on corners.

The 87-mile project was approved through the CalTrans Active Transportation Program, which was created through a 2017 state law aimed at increasing other modes of transportation like walking and biking. The grant will bring in over $100 million in state funds to the city to improve its bicycle network.

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Downtown Long Beach could see a dramatic change to its pedestrian infrastructure in the coming years as the city works to make biking and walking around the area safer.

The city is starting the environmental planning process for a “Walkable Corridor” project that could install up to 150 curb extensions and fill in the crevice islands in the Downtown area.

The City Council approved the first wave of grant money earlier this month to pay for an initial environmental review and a public consultation with the city’s Health Department, which will teach the public how to use the new infrastructure.

Extending corners will both shorten the distance pedestrians have to cover to cross a street and better bring them into view of drivers who currently have to deal with parked cars when looking for people standing on corners.

The 87-mile project was approved through the CalTrans Active Transportation Program, which was created through a 2017 state law aimed at increasing other modes of transportation like walking and biking. The grant will bring in over $100 million in state funds to the city to improve its bicycle network.

An $8 million Pacific Avenue cycle track that would extend from Boulevard to Pacific Coast Highway would install a sidewalk, bike lane and bus islands that would provide more efficient service and make drivers and fare cards to make slower turns.

Conte said the streets that could see changes were identified in the city’s High Impact Bike Plan and include Magnolia, Pacific and Atlantic avenues, Sixth Street, Seventh Street and Long Beach Boulevard.

Other elements of the project include adding natural storm drains called bioswales and additional greenery. Conte said the extra space could also provide more opportunities for outdoor dining.

Two other active transportation projects in Long Beach were approved by CalTrans and could bring millions more in state money to the city to improve its bicycle network.
Romeo Chocolates closes its doors or Pine Avenue in anticipation of big changes coming

By Laura Ayaso Marga

Romeo Chocolates, which has occupied its location on Pine Avenue in Downtown Long Beach for almost five years, is closing its doors and making way for big changes and a new Downtown location coming soon, the shop announced on its Instagram page earlier this month.

“Bear with us as we relocate out of Pine Ave to prepare for a new iteration of our chocolate story,” wrote owner and chocolatier Romeo Garcia, announcing the closure.

The award-winning gourmet chocolate shop and wine bar opened its first brick-and-mortar location on 416 Pine Avenue in June 2017 after years of Garcia selling his chocolates, made from home, at pop-ups and art fairs all over Long Beach. Before he was a business owner and chocolatier, Garcia had established a 14-year career working in higher education that had divided his time between the art of chocolate-making along the way.

“I don’t think I would have ever fattened that I would transition into this career, but the thing is you don’t know where passion takes you,” Garcia said at the grand opening event for the Pine Avenue location in October 2017. For almost five years, the local favorite has offered special holiday collections, limited-edition creations and luxurious chocolate and wine tastings for the community. Eventually, it expanded its footprint to more locations in the city and opened its second store at The Hangar, at Long Beach Exchange in October 2021, which will also be closed during the shop’s transition.

While both of its locations are closed for an unknown amount of time, they will continue to host private tasting events and kids’ chocolate-making workshops at K祜o Long Beach, a diverse co-working and event pop-up space in Beverly Hills.

This year has not been easy for the shop’s Downtown location as earlier this year, the chocolate shop was burglarized weeks ahead of the busy Valentine’s Day season, leaving shattered front windows and an empty cash register. A GoFundMe page made to help the shop recover raised over $1,000 from community donations. Though the shop could not give specific details on the new location or when it would be opening, the owner encouraged his customers to keep an eye out on the shop’s social media pages and website to get updates.

“Our intention will continue to build community, to share our craft of which is fine chocolate, and to help build the next cadre of culinary/chocolate professionals,” Garcia wrote on Instagram.

Virgin Orbit announces next launch and fleet expansion

By Brandon Richardson

Cosmic Girl is slated to take to the skies once again next month for Virgin Orbit’s fourth launch, which aims to deliver numerous satellites into orbit for various government agencies, including the United States Space Force.

One of the firm’s LauncherOne rockets arrived at the Mojave Air and Space Port after departing the Long Beach production facility on April 28. The rocket will undergo flight prep before being attached under the wing of the modified Boeing 747 known as Cosmic Girl. The launch window for the mission is expected to open June 29 at 8 p.m. local time.

The mission, “Straight Up,” is slated to carry seven satellites to an orbit approximately 310 kilometers above the planet’s surface at 90-degree inclination, according to the company. This orbit has never been reached from the West Coast.

The U.S. Space Force procured the launch for the Rocket Systems Launch Program with payload provided by the Department of Defense Space Test Program. The seven satellites are from multiple government agencies and will serve as experiments to demonstrate various technologies, including adaptive radio frequency and space domain awareness.

“Virgin Orbit has been working ‘straight up’ since we began commercial launch operations 8 months ago,” CEO Dan Hart said in a statement. “More and more, we see the importance of space to the security of the U.S. and allied countries. We are honored and excited to be supporting the Space Force at this critical time.”

To date, Virgin Orbit has launched three missions, including two for the Department of Defense to support science and technology demonstrations across two flights. In all, Cosmic Girl has delivered 28 satellites into orbit.

The mission is named after American singer Paula Abdul’s 1990 hit song from her debut album “Forever Your Girl,” which was released through Virgin Records on June 21, 1988. The record was the most successful debut album ever at the time, the company stated, and the song remained Abdul’s biggest international hit.

One day after announcing the “Straight Up” launch, Virgin Orbit unveiled the expansion of its fleet, stating a second modified plane will join Cosmic Girl in carrying out launch missions around the world.

Florida-based aerospace and defense innovator L3Harris Technologies, which partnered with Virgin for the development of Cosmic Girl, will again modify a 747 to carry and deploy the LauncherOne system. The agreement is for L3Harris to acquire two 747 airframes, one of which is slated to be modified and delivered to Virgin in 2023, according to the announcement.

It was not immediately clear when the third aircraft would be modified and delivered.

The Florida firm will oversee the Cosmic Girl design with a new cargo configuration that is expected to allow Virgin to deliver its rockets—ground support equipment and the world in the same aircraft that will launch them.

“Virgin Orbit is at an exciting juncture in our growth as a company,” Hart said in the announcement. “As we expand our fleet to serve customers worldwide, we’re enthusiastic to once again partner with L3Harris.”

From apps to turbine blades entrepreneurs from CSULB pitch ideas at startup contest

By Christian Hay-Suzuki

When doctors told Arthur Varni that the treatments available to manage his generalized anxiety disorder were only for symptom management and not to actually cure him, it was not a reality he was going to simply accept.

As a software engineer, Varni believed he had a solution—“edit the software.” That would help teach his brain to turn back the anxiety off. Meditation, he decided, was the best way to do it, which is why the creation of Unwind-Meditation Trainer, an app that teaches people how to meditate using a personal progression system.

When he first looked into the apps available for self-guided meditation, Varni—who earned his MBA from Cal State Long Beach in May 2023—said the options available to him were “too cluttered,” and he was searching for something more simple and streamlined.

He was among dozens to pitch startup ideas at the Sunstone CSU Startup Launch contest at CSULB on May 6, which featured 21 teams led by students or recent graduates of six Cal State University campuses.

On Varni’s app, users work up from the lowest level, a three-minute guided meditation in which a trainer talks them through the principles and techniques of the art. Meditations slowly get longer and come with less assistance, eventually working up to a 20-minute session. The app also includes a journal to document one’s progress, and it offers guidance that helps keep users inspired and teach them aspects of meditation.

While Varni was participating in the Sunstone CSU Startup Launch and looking for additional funding from the cash prizes, the Unwind-Meditation Trainer app had already been materialized and is expected to be released to App Stores in July.

Three other teams at the challenge were led by students or recent graduates of CSULB hoping for a chance to win part of the event’s $8,000 prize pool. One of those was FAVANAS, a project that looks to tackle the shortcomings of the wind energy industry through the production of turbine blades that are more efficient and last longer than what is standard today.

Both FAVANAS and Undwind-Meditation Trainer received $2,000 as a reward for their third place finish in the internship track at the contest. Two other CSULB teams participated in the event and were formally recognized for being the only team at the event consisting entirely of undergraduates, led by CSULB student Emanuel Talley.

The app was designed to be more secure than commonly used alternatives like Slack and Discord by using Google Accounts to sign into the application. This feature not only makes the platform easier to secure by relying login information to Google, it also makes it easier and more convenient to use.

The award for the most innovative concept was given to the final CSULB team, which pitched a “bioapp” and website concept called Untuckable. This app was designed out of a need to nudge and remove language barriers for many financial institutions to serve to young adults a tool they can use to learn how to invest.

Untuckable gives users easily accessible and understandable financial information and resources in a centralized platform. The app will also look to direct users to tools from partnered financial institutions to ensure they are getting the proper tools and guidance.

Classchat and Untuckable each received $1,000 for their entries in the contest.
Rocket Lab successfully catches rocket booster out of mid-air

By Brandon Richardson

While successfully deploying 34 satellites into orbit, Rocket Lab pilots caught a first stage rocket booster in mid-air for the first time ever.

Rocket Lab’s New Zealand complex complex just before 4 p.m. PDT on May 2 after inclement weather delayed the launch for several days. The mid-air capture was unprecedented because it was not the first time Rocket Lab has attempted to recover the first stage of a rocket in that manner but this is the first time any company has used a helicopter to catch a returning rocket from space," a company spokesperson said. Rocket Lab founder and CEO Peter Beck. "A tremendous number of factors have to align and many systems have to work together flawlessly.”

Rocket Lab engineers now will assess the stage to determine if adjustments are needed to the system for the next helicopter catch and eventual reuse.

The next launch window for the firm, a lunar mission in partnership with NASA dubbed CAPSTONE, is set to open later this month, the company said. Beck said they are excited to disclose the exact date.

A cafe built out of a shipping container is coming Downtown to Civic Center plaza

By Brandon Richardson

The Container Café—a small cafe literally made out of a shipping container—is expected to open outside Port of Long Beach headquarters in late June.

The container Cafe will be built out of an actual shipping container, modified to fit the port’s design, according to Cordero.

The $3.3 million project was not an afterthought addition to the Civic Center development, which includes the port headquarters and City Hall, both opened in 2019. Cordero said.” During construction, port staff worked with the Civic Center Architect firms on the design for the café.

A cafe built out of a shipping container is expected to open in front of Port of Long Beach headquarters in 2023.

By Jason Ruiz

A plan to speed up the production of accessory dwelling units (ADUs) in the city could peak at around 500 per year in the next decade and remain high for about five years. The city currently gets around 300 ADU applications per year.

To speed up the permitting process and reduce the costs, the council could consider allowing local designers to submit plans to the city for pre-approval, which could then be sold to homeowners who hope to build a unit in their backyard.

The city could also allow homeowners to connect the unit to a sewer line. For the city to offer a potentially faster construction phase for homeowners, however, the projected cost to build an 800-square-foot ADU, the largest allowed in Long Beach, could cost about $220,000 based on 2022 construction prices.

The program would not preclude people from hiring their own designers but would provide an option for people wanting to streamline the construction of a unit without having to potentially correct potential permitting code issues that may exist in plans submitted by their architects.

Development Services Director Oscar Oriol said in the memo the city could offer incentives to developers to purchase plans from the city for their projects.

Some cities have opted to buy plans from designers and sell them directly to businesses. The purchase of a plan was identified in the memo as a potential incentive to designers. While there were design lines with the purchased plans, it would also allow the city to purchase the plans and likely pass those costs on to residents looking to build.

The City Council asked for a similar program to be developed earlier this year as it sought a more aggressive approach to producing more housing in the city by providing homeowners a less bureaucratic and cheaper path to adding ADUs.

The proposed program, which could be presented to the City Council in the coming months, would reduce some of the design and engineering fees typically paid by homeowners from 6% to 4%. Plan review fees, which the city said would typically be thousands of dollars for an 800-square-foot ADU, would be $450, according to the memo.

Once the City Council approves a program, it could take about six months for the city to sort through designs submitted for consideration by people looking to build an ADU with a design that’s pre-approved by the city.

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Once the City Council approves a program, it could take about six months for the city to sort through designs submitted for consideration by people looking to build an ADU with a design that’s pre-approved by the city.
$236 million in capital expenditures close to offsetting the $392 million over the next five years, but that wouldn’t come in at least $38 million in operating revenue over the next five years and could be forced to cut back on capital projects if it agrees to take over operations of the Queen Mary, the port’s vice president of the Pacific Merchant Shipping Association, said earlier this month.

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Panxa Cocina’s Chef Arthur Gonzalez dies at 47

By Tim Grobaty

Chef Arthur Gonzalez, who began his ascent in the culinary world as a dishwasher at Seal Beach’s Spaghettini before eventually establishing such local favorite restaurants as Roe Seafood in Belmont Shore and Panxa Cocina in Belmont Heights, died last week following a heart attack on May 7 and two subsequent surgeries in his new hometown of Castle Rock, Colorado. He was 47.

Locally, Gonzalez, who grew up in Cerritos, worked at McKenna’s on the Bay, the forerunner to Boathouse on the Bay in Alamitos Landing. His big breakthrough came when he and his longtime girlfriend Vanessa Auclair, operations manager for Roe and Panxa, debuted Roe Fish Market in 2012. In 2014, the couple opened his highly regarded Panxa Cocina on Broadway and Termino Avenue, showcasing his talents at New Mexican and modern Southwestern cuisine.

“He’d been in Colorado for a while ago, opening his new restaurant (called Tribe, in Castle Rock, outside Denver),” said his friend and colleague Chef Paul Buchanan, chef and owner of Promal Alchemy. “He worked hard, and I think he had one day off each week when he and Vanessa and their dog would go up into the mountains and camp.”

Restaurant柔和Navarro, who owns two Loya’s Mexican Cuisine restaurants as well as Portuguese Bend and the Social List in Long Beach, said he always enjoyed competing with Gonzalez.

“We were close,” said Navarro. “We were both kind of at the forefront of the food movement in Long Beach. We’d talk a lot and bounce ideas off one another. Sometimes we got into some heated arguments, but it was always positive. He was solid; always willing to help when you needed new ideas. Our competition was intense, but like an NBA game, we’d compete hard, but then sit back and enjoy a cigar and a glass of whiskey.”

Navarro recalled having a meeting a year and a half ago with a half-dozen chefs, a group that included Gonzalez and Filipino it takes on physical and mental health dangers that come with the job. And now, a year and a half later, two of the six who were at that table are dead.”

Chef Janice Dig Cabaysa who ran the Corner Stoop pop-up before she died last year at 39. “We got together to talk about the health hazards of being a chef, the toll

Pier 76 Fish Grill closes after 9 years in Downtown

By Tim Grobaty

Pier 76 Fish Grill, a nearly decade-long popular Pine Avenue restaurant for the street’s once-busy lunch scene, has closed its doors. “It was fun while it lasted,” said owner Chris Krajacic, who brought the seafood restaurant to town in 2012 following six years as executive chef at Walt’s Wharf in Seal Beach.

What ultimately brought about the downfall of Pier 76 is the same that’s plaguing many restaurants these days, including trouble finding workers, and the higher costs of paying them, as well as ever-rising food prices, along with the continuing effects of COVID-19, which continues to keep Downtown offices vacant while employees work remotely. “No restaurants are immune to the problems,” Krajacic said. “And it’s a combination of those things and more. It’s not the fault of one person, or any one thing. It’s a culmination.”

Krajacic also owns the Harbor bar and restaurant on Pine, and he says, while that establishment has similar problems, they’ve eased a bit by the fact it caters more to a night crowd and drinking, while Pier 76 depended largely on lunch clientele, which Krajacic says has gone way down. “Just look at Downtown during the afternoon,” he said. “It’s dead. A few years ago our place was packed all the time. I’d come to work and see the parking lot packed with cars and think we’re going to be jammed today. That doesn’t happen anymore.”

“Realistically, I should have closed a year ago. I just tried to make it work, and it wasn’t working.” Krajacic said that he is appreciative of Long Beach and for the customers who continued to dine at Pier 76, “but at the end of the day it comes down to red or black, and we were red.”

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