



NEWS
City replaces fire vehicles

SEE PAGE 2



PAGING DR. FRISCHER
Why are you still drinking soda?

SEE PAGE 3



NEWS
Downey park getting upgraded

SEE PAGE 3



NEWS
Arc Walk returns on Zoom

SEE PAGE 7

Fire rips through Rancho

■ A two-alarm fire broke out at the abandoned south hospital campus Wednesday; there were no injuries.

By City News Service

DOWNEY – Fire authorities said Thursday an abandoned building at the historic Rancho Los Amigos National Rehabilitation Center in Downey was heavily damaged by a massive fire that burned for several hours.

Doug Ulibarri, a spokesperson for Downey Fire Department, told various news outlets that his department had received several calls regarding a large-scale fire at the abandoned Poor Farm building in the southern portion of the rehabilitation center and firefighters were unable to enter the structure during the first hours of the blaze.

“At this time no injuries have been reported to any civilian or firefighters,” tweeted Ulibarri, who confirmed that the blaze was a two-alarm fire.

Downey Fire Department firefighters were called about 6:17 p.m. Wednesday to the 12000 block of Erickson Avenue after the fire broke out in an abandoned building, the Los Angeles Times reported.

Firefighters from at least five fire departments battled heavy flames coming from the building’s roof and were forced to employ defensive measures as they fought to control the fire.

Fire crews from Downey, Los Angeles County, Montebello, La Habra Heights and Compton fire departments were able to get control of the raging blaze just after 9 p.m. Wednesday, according to Fourth District County Supervisor Janice Hahn.

“The fire in an abandoned building at Rancho Los Amigos South Campus is under control thanks to the swift action of both the Downey Fire Department and @LACOFD,” the supervisor tweeted.

The cause of the fire was not immediately known.

Fire crews were on scene into Thursday morning.

Jeremy Stafford, a dispatch supervisor with the Los Angeles County Fire Department, said his agency got the call for assistance at 6:31 p.m. Wednesday and confirmed the incident was a second-alarm fire, the Times reported.

The Rancho Los Amigos campus opened in 1887 when indigent patients from Los Angeles County Hospital were relocated and was known then as the Los Angeles County Poor Farm. It is the second largest municipal health system in the nation, according to its website.

Last month, the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors greenlit the demolition of over 100 buildings at the location.

The county-owned 74-acre property is located at 7601 E. Imperial Hwy. Its buildings have remained abandoned and in a continued state of decay since medical-related services were consolidated to Rancho’s north campus in the 1980’s.

As they stand currently, the south campus and its current buildings are incompatible with county use, and restoration would amount to \$300 million, county officials said.

Despite its dormant state, the site continues to demand approximately \$1.5 million in resources annually, mostly in security and brush clearance.

ASHTON RESIGNING FROM CITY COUNCIL

■ Instability at City Hall continued this week as Councilman Sean Ashton announced his resignation.

By Alex Dominguez
Staff Writer

DOWNEY – Councilman Sean Ashton announced on Tuesday that he will be stepping down as a councilmember effective March 18.

During his comments at the regular council meeting, Ashton attributed his resignation to a new management position which was offered to him at Fed Ex, where he has been working since the beginning of the pandemic.

“I’ve been really happy at that job, and it’s something I enjoy. When given the opportunity to apply for a management position, I took that opportunity just thinking that I would apply and just get my name out there,” said Ashton. “I didn’t think I would be taken seriously considering my short amount of time with the company, but I was informed on Friday that they have offered me the position, and I have decided to accept that position, which means I will not be able to continue as a city councilmember for the City of Downey.”

Ashton expressed appreciation to his constituents.

“To all the people that have voted for me, contacted me for any reason, compliment, complaint, whatever, I truly appreciate your emails, your phone calls, your conversations; it’s been a pleasure,” said Ashton.

He said that it “was not how I envisioned finishing my time as council, but this is an opportunity I can’t pass,” adding that it “was the right thing for myself to do.”

Ashton concluded by



Councilman Sean Ashton speaks at Downey’s State of the City event in 2018. Ashton is resigning from the City Council effective March 18. (Photo by Claudia Gomez)

complimenting city workers, describing them as “the best staff in the nation.”

He stepped down as Mayor Pro Tem at the end of the evening. His final meeting as a councilmember will be on March 8.

The council will now need to fill the vacancies that Ashton will leave upon his departure, namely the Mayor Pro Tem position and his District 2 seat.

Council will have 60 days

to replace Ashton once the vacancy is official. Because of the timeliness in comparison to the election later this year, the council will be able to appoint an interim councilmember.

According to City Attorney Yvette Abich Garcia, staff will bring council a “step by step” process that will include solicitation, interviews, and appointment, all done in open session.

The appointee could run for the seat in November’s election.

Appointment of a new Mayor Pro Tem can occur as early as the next council meeting.

Ashton was elected in 2014 and ran for reelection unopposed in 2018, serving as the city’s mayor that same year. He would have finished his final term on council in November.

Sports bar gets city approval to open at former Denny’s

■ Ojos Locos is drawing scrutiny for how they dress their waitresses, which can include lingerie.

By Alex Dominguez
Staff Writer

DOWNEY – A controversial restaurant project gained approval from the Planning Commission, despite concerns over its scantily-clad waitresses and safety.

Ojos Locos Sports Cantina is a chain restaurant with 21 locations across Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. Located at 8350 Firestone Blvd., this will be the first California location.

It is the previous site of Denny’s, which operated there from 1987 to 2020.

Plans call for the demolition of the former Denny’s building, and the construction of a new 8,947 square foot building.

The establishment is already raising some eyebrows.

Commissioner Horacio Ortiz argued that the image of the potential was more “adult oriented,” specifically pointing out that the waitresses seem to wear only lingerie.

However, for the business to be categorized as such clientele would need to enter for a specific activity related to an adult-oriented business, according to staff. Because the business is classified as a restaurant, city planning has no control over the “uniform” of its employees.

A representative of Ojos Locos clarified that the specific attire in question was limited to “special events,” and that the restaurant would be open to working with the city if the attire was deemed to be an issue.

Ultimately though, the Planning Commission held no ultimate sway over the matter, and could only vote on the conditions of staff report and findings in front of them.

There were also concerns over safety.

According to Downey Police Department Lt. Vince Rosario, other locations have contended with criminal activity including shootings, stabbings, and problems with outlaw motorcycle gangs.

Commissioner Art Montoya said it was a “difficult decision.”

“It’s a restaurant that has a business model that seems to be successful in other locations in multiple states...but I do see the concerns that there is potential for loud music, that there’s concerns of the attires of the employees as well as the safety concerns that could be drawn to the establishment,” said Montoya.

“I am very concerned that Ojos Locos would be detrimental to the health and welfare and safety of our youth, specifically because it’s so near Downey High School, senior citizens, and areas where families do gather,” said Ortiz. “As [Lt. Rosario] mentioned, there have been shootings, and there have been stabbings and issues at other locations.”



Waitresses at Ojos Locos sports bar, as seen on the restaurant’s Instagram page. The restaurant gained approval from the planning commission to open at the former Denny’s on Firestone Boulevard.

“It’s a hard vote for me. I just don’t know where we can draw the line.”

Despite these concerns, the project was approved 3-1, with Ortiz in opposition and Commissioner Carrie Uva abstaining.

Ojos Locos is anticipated to operate seven days a week, from 11 a.m. to 12 a.m. Sundays through Wednesdays and 11 am to 2 am Thursdays through Saturdays. The restaurant will also feature a DJ from 6 p.m. to 1:30 am on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays, and from 6 pm to

11:30 am on Sundays.

At least four security guards will be present during peak hours, from 6 pm through 30 minutes past closing time on Thursdays through Sundays, when live entertainment is provided. The number of guards can be increased if needed.

An approximate 120 full-time and part-time jobs will be created.

Weekend at a Glance

Friday	68°	
Saturday	76°	
Sunday	75°	

THINGS TO DO



“Y Para Siempre: Marco Antonio Solis” Exhibit Grammy Museum

“Y Para Siempre” explores the life of Marco Antonio Solis, a multi-Latin Grammy Award winning singer and one of Mexico’s most successful artists of all time.

ON THIS DAY FEBRUARY 24

1821

Mexico declared its independence from Spain.

1868

The House of Representatives impeached President Andrew Johnson following his attempt to dismiss Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton; the Senate later acquitted Johnson.

1903

The United States signed an agreement acquiring a naval station at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba.

1920

The German Workers Party, which later became the Nazi Party, met in Munich to adopt its platform.

1955

Apple computer co-founder Steve Jobs was born in San Francisco.

1981

Buckingham Palace announced the engagement of Britain’s Prince Charles to Lady Diana Spencer.

1999

Lauryn Hill won five Grammys for her debut solo album, “The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill.”



2006

South Dakota lawmakers approved a ban on nearly all abortions.

2007

Japan launched its fourth spy satellite, stepping up its ability to monitor potential threats such as North Korea.

2008

Cuba’s parliament named Raul Castro president, ending nearly 50 years of rule by his brother Fidel.

2015

A Metrolink train derailed in Oxnard, killing the train engineer and injuring 32 passengers and crew members.

Birthdays

“American Me” actor **Edward James Olmos** (75), baseball hall of famer **Eddy Murray** (66), “Titanic” actor **Billy Zane** (56), boxer **Floyd Mayweather Jr.** (45), and actor **O’Shea Jackson Jr.** (31).

Artesia city clerk, former HR manager sue city manager, 3 council members

■ The workers accuse city leaders of ignoring complaints of discrimination, harassment and fiscal misconduct.

By City News Service

ARTESIA - The city of Artesia's city clerk as well as its former human resources manager are suing the city, the former city manager and three City Council members, alleging a failure to properly address city employee complaints about gender discrimination and harassment, election and fiscal misconduct and other issues involving the then-city manager.

City Clerk Ernesto Sanchez

and former human resources manager Boyd Horan brought separate lawsuits against the city, former City Manager William Rawlings and Council Members Tony Lima, Monica Manalo and Ali Taj. Horan and Sanchez both allege intentional infliction of emotional distress and a violation of the state Labor Code, while Horan additionally alleges retaliation.

Both seek unspecified compensatory and punitive damages. A representative for the city did not reply to a request for comment on the Los Angeles Superior Court lawsuits brought Friday.

Rawlings and the city parted ways in October after complaints by staff members about his

fitness to lead.

Horan was hired in January 2018 and reported to Rawlings, who prohibited him from speaking to council members about any issues or complaints raised either by Horan or any other city employee, Horan's suit states.

However, in November 2020, the City Council approved a policy allowing city employees to take their complaints to the city attorney and not Rawlings, so last May Horan spoke to City Attorney Hong Doa Nguyen about "the litany of concerns many employees had raised with him about City Manager Rawlings," the Horan suit states.

The workers' complaints included gender discrimination

and harassment, pregnancy discrimination, unlawful retaliation, election misconduct, fiscal misconduct and instructing employees to engage in unlawful conduct on behalf of the city, the Horan suit states.

However, Lima, Monica Manalo and Taj voted against an investigation into what Horan had reported and the council subsequently reinstated the previous city policy that required workers to take complaints to Rawlings, even when the issues involved him, the Horan suit states.

Rawlings then stopped nearly all communication with Horan and stripped him of some of his responsibilities, the suit alleges.

In September, Horan found out that Rawlings wanted to fire an employee who had complained he had not received adequate notice that another employee in his same department had tested positive for the coronavirus, according to the Horan suit.

Horan reported what he knew to Mayor Rene Trevino, telling the mayor that firing an employee for complaining about workplace safety was unlawful, the Horan suit states. Although Trevino said he would bring the issue to the city attorney, Horan was fired a week later "in complete retaliation for his various complaints about Rawlings," the Horan suit states.

Sanchez was hired in February 2016 and promoted to City Clerk in July 2018, his suit states.

In August 2020, Rawlings told Sanchez that any action having to do with elections had to be brought before him, including any communications with any prospective candidates, the Sanchez suit states.

"This caused unnecessary delay in providing application packages to at least two city of Artesia residents who expressed an interest in becoming candidates for the City Council," the Sanchez suit alleges.

Sanchez complained to Horan

about Rawlings' alleged actions, but withdrew the complaint after Horan told him he would have to bring any issues to the city manager, the Sanchez suit states.

As with Horan, Rawlings allegedly began treating Sanchez more harshly after the City Council reinstated the policy requiring city workers to take any complaints to the city manager, on numerous occasions stripping Sanchez of his duties and generally ostracizing him, the Sanchez suit states.

The city manager also "continued unabatedly to engage in unlawful misconduct and continued to direct Mr. Sanchez and others to do the same," according to the Sanchez suit, which also states the City Clerk "has been subjected to intolerable working conditions that have made it nearly impossible to continue working for the City of Artesia."

Downey purchases new fire vehicles

By Alex Dominguez
Staff Writer

DOWNEY - The Downey City Council on Tuesday approved the purchase of three rescue vehicles - two ambulances and a command vehicle - to replace

aging units currently in use by Downey Fire Department.

The new command vehicle will be purchased from National Auto Fleet Group for a total of \$186,903, replacing a 21-year-old 2001 model vehicle currently

used as a reserve unit.

Downey Fire maintains two units, one frontline and one reserve. The frontline vehicle is in service every day.

The reserve unit is utilized when the frontline vehicle is in need of maintenance and repair or has responded to an emergency beyond the city's borders for an extended amount of time.

Upon delivery, the new apparatus will become the frontline unit, and the current frontline vehicle shall become the reserve.

Similarly, the city will also replace a 19-year-old ambulance with 148,000 miles, and a 14-year-old ambulance with 148,000 miles that are currently used in reserve, spending \$578,491.90 to do so.

Much like with the command vehicle, upon arrival the two units will be designated for frontline use, with two current frontline ambulances then designated for reserve.

Council members approved the purchases unanimously.

In the fiscal year 2019-2020, Downey firefighters responded to 10,019 calls for service, up from 8,920 in 2010.



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Paging Dr. Frischer...

By Dr. Alan Frischer

During 1999, the average person in the United States drank a whopping 50 gallons of soft drinks per year. (50 gallons!) Granted, that was the peak. Since then, the average amount of soda consumed has dropped 20%... and is still an astounding 40 gallons per year. (40 gallons!) Are there benefits to drinking soda, and is it really so terrible?

Soft drinks consist mostly of water, sweetener (usually in the form of fructose or artificial sugar), and other chemicals. Those enormous 32-ounce cups contain a staggering 403 calories and 26 teaspoons of sugar. Today, in the interests of brevity, we won't specifically address diet soda.

The major benefit of drinking a soft drink is the hydration provided by the water content. Many contain caffeine, a diuretic. This makes us urinate more, and detracts from the hydration, but on balance, we still end up more hydrated. Also, as we are all well aware, caffeine is a stimulant. This makes us feel more alert and energized, and has been shown to increase physical and mental performance. In the doses found in soft drinks, it is considered safe. A 12-ounce can of Coke, for example, contains 34 mg of caffeine, which is

considerably less than the 80-100 mg found in a cup of coffee, and similar to the 30-50 mg found in black tea.

That's about it. I can't come up with any additional advantages. However, I could write volumes on the downsides of soft drinks. Here is just a taste:

- Multiple studies report a clear association between soft drink consumption and increased body weight, and show that we tend to drink sugary sodas in addition to the calories we would otherwise consume. Drinking two cans per day can lead to two pounds of weight gain in a month.

- Many sodas contain phosphoric acid, which can draw calcium out of our bones and weaken them. In addition, consuming large amounts of caffeine may affect our bone density by interfering with calcium absorption.

- Soft drinks damage our teeth. Even a diet soda with no sugar contains phosphoric acid and citric acid, which erode enamel. And, of course, drinking sugar sodas bathes our teeth in sugar, and contributes to tooth decay.

- Drinking soft drinks can lead to insulin resistance, which is a feature of metabolic syndrome. Metabolic syndrome frequently precedes the development of type 2 diabetes and its many serious complications.

- Drinking soda contributes to the risk of heart disease because it is linked to high blood pressure, high cholesterol and excess fat. Fructose leads to abdominal, or belly fat, which is the most dangerous kind of fat.

- There is some limited data suggesting that drinking soda and other sugary drinks have been linked to an increased risk of pancreatic cancer, as well as a greater risk of developing uterine cancer in postmenopausal women.

- Drinking sugar soda can increase the level of uric acid in the body, with an increased risk of gouty arthritis attacks.

If you are motivated to eliminate soft drinks from your diet, consider these suggestions: Stock a replacement beverage, like the many different sparkling beverages that contain no sugar, artificial sugar, or other harmful chemicals. Juice contains a lot of sugar, but putting a splash of juice into a sparkling drink or water can be satisfying. If it's the caffeine that you crave, try a glass of iced tea, flavored with lemon or a small splash of juice. Happy hydrating!

Dr. Alan Frischer is former chief of staff and former chief of medicine at Downey Regional Medical Center. Write to him in care of this newspaper at 8301 E. Florence Ave., Suite 100, Downey, CA 90240.

Rio San Gabriel Park chosen for \$1 million renovation

■ The park will be overhauled with a nature garden, new picnic shelters, playground and fitness equipment, and more.

DOWNEY - Los Angeles County Supervisor Janice Hahn today announced nearly \$10 million in grants going to expand, renovate, and acquire parks and open space in cities across the Fourth District, including \$1 million to renovate Rio San Gabriel Park in Downey.

The grants were announced Wednesday by the Los Angeles County Regional Park and Open Space District (RPOSD) as part of the special district's ongoing implementation of Measure A.

Downey will use the money to install new playground and fitness zone equipment, repair sidewalks, create ADA compliant access, install new picnic shelters, install pedestrian and security lighting, create a bicycle station and rest area, install bike racks, and create an interpretive nature garden.

"This funding is huge for the communities I represent, and I am so grateful that of the \$26

million awarded Countywide, nearly \$10 million is going to expand and renovate the parks in my district," said Hahn.

"Our local parks are some of the most important places in our neighborhoods and I think we too often took them for granted before the pandemic. These grants are a way to make sure our cities have the funding they need to expand and improve local parks so we can ensure everyone has access to open space where they can play, exercise, and just enjoy the outdoors."

Mayor Blanca Pacheco and Councilmember Claudia Frometa accepted the grant during a ceremony Wednesday at the park.

"This is incredibly exciting for our city and our residents," said Pacheco. "This grant will help fund much needed improvements at Rio San Gabriel Park and we look forward to getting this project underway."

"Downey residents will benefit tremendously from this grant award, as we realize the park's condition has been of concern to our residents for quite some time," Frometa added. "I'm sure they share our excitement."

In addition to Downey, other

grants awarded in the Fourth District include:

- Maywood - Maywood Riverfront Park Renovation - \$655,364
- Cudahy - Clara Expansion Park Renovation - \$680,000
- Bell - Acquisition for 4773-4777 E Gage Ave - \$1,000,000
- Pico Rivera - Land Acquisition - \$1,000,000
- Palos Verdes Peninsula Land Conservancy - Palos Verdes Blue Butterfly Acquisition - \$1,000,000
- South Gate - Circle Park Renovation - \$1,000,000
- South Coast Botanic Garden Foundation - Children & Family Garden (Rolling Hills Estates) - \$1,000,000
- Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles - Rancho San Pedro Park Promenade City of LA (San Pedro/ Port of Los Angeles) - \$700,000
- Bell Gardens - Marlow Park Renovation - \$893,000
- Lakewood - Development of Carson Street Multiuse Nature Trail - \$1,000,000

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Homeless count begins across LA County

Volunteers are spreading across the county as the homeless population continues to grow year after year.

By City News Service

DOWNEY – Following a one-month postponement due to the surge in COVID-19 cases in Los Angeles County, the 2022 Greater Los Angeles Point-in-Time Homeless Count began Tuesday evening -- with volunteers spreading out to get an accurate count of the number of unhoused people in the area.

The count took place over three nights beginning Tuesday, starting in the San Gabriel and San Fernando valleys.

On Wednesday, the count was in West Los Angeles, Southeast Los Angeles and the South Bay area. On Thursday, counters fanned out in the Antelope Valley, Metro Los Angeles and South Los Angeles.

The effort is essential to understanding how large the region's homelessness crisis has become. It must be conducted by Continuum of Care providers to receive federal funding through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

"This is a moral crisis of a magnitude that governments, the private sector, philanthropy can't end in isolation. It's going to take all of us and you being a participant and volunteering in the count is a perfect example of ways in which you can step up and help us by identifying who needs care and the kind of care they need," Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors Chair Holly Mitchell said Tuesday.



The count's organizers are still seeking more than 1,000 additional volunteers to help the effort through Thursday, according to LAHSA Executive Director Heidi Marston. People can sign up to volunteer at theycountwillyou.org.

This year's count will be the county's first since 2020, as last year's was canceled when LAHSA determined it was not safe to gather 8,000 volunteers amid stay-at-home orders and curfews due to COVID-19. The county received an exemption from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and was not required to conduct a 2021 count.

Due to the ongoing pandemic, volunteers will conduct the count by driving around the area, instead of some volunteers fanning out on foot.

"I am sure it'll feel a bit awkward to participate in the count from your car without the ability to directly offer help, but please know that your contribution this count gives us critical data that every year informs policymakers at every

level of government around policy decisions, resulting in direct services and homes for our unhoused," Mitchell said.

Other changes this year include moving deployment sites outdoors, moving volunteer training sessions online, encouraging volunteers to minimize cross-group interactions, requiring masks and encouraging volunteers to be vaccinated.

Volunteers will also use an app to collect and submit information electronically for the first time, instead of using clipboard and writing down their information physically.

This year's count was originally planned for Jan. 25-27, but the county's surge in COVID cases, fueled by the Omicron variant, forced a change in plans.

Mayor Eric Garcetti noted that the count, along with additional funding, will allow officials to track the progress of programs already funded.

"I can certainly see in encampments, where we've seen successful strategies of the city and county working together with our federal and state partners, where we had huge encampments and are being able to see that sort of progress. But we know we can't get more money if we don't count people where they are," he said.

According to the 2020 count, Los Angeles County's homeless population increased by 12.7% over the previous year, while the city of Los Angeles' homeless population jumped by 14.2%.

In January 2019, Los Angeles County had 58,936 people experiencing homelessness, but by January 2020, the number rose to 66,433. The city of Los Angeles counted 36,165 in 2019 and 41,290 in 2020.

Results of the 2022 count are expected to be made public by LAHSA over the summer.

DA backpedals on Hannah Tubbs sentencing

Hannah Tubbs was sentenced to two years in jail for the sexual assault of a child; George Gascón acknowledges it was lenient.

By City News Service

LOS ANGELES – Los Angeles County District Attorney George Gascón has issued a statement saying that one of his policies, which resulted in a transgender woman being ordered to serve two years in juvenile custody for sexually assaulting a 10-year-old girl in a restaurant bathroom "may not" be an adequate amount of time behind bars.

The county's top prosecutor, who backed away Friday from two of his most criticized directives including one that eliminated the option of trying juveniles as adults for serious crimes, said in the statement that he became aware after Hannah Tubbs' sentencing about "extremely troubling statements she made about her case, the resolution of it and the young girl that she harmed."

"While for most people, several years of jail time is adequate, it may not be for Ms. Tubbs," Gascón said of the 26-year-old defendant who was 17 at the time of the 2014 attack in Palmdale and whose case was handled in juvenile court as a result of a directive the district attorney issued the day he was sworn into office.

He noted that the defendant was arrested years after the crime "rather than the usual case, where a child is arrested close in time to their crime" and that Tubbs had "several charges in other counties after the juvenile offense but never received any services, which both her past behavior and that subsequent to her arrest demonstrates she clearly needs."

"If we knew about her disregard for the harm she caused, we would have handled this case differently. The complex issues and facts of her particular case were unusual and I should have treated them that way. This change in policy will allow us the space to do that moving forward," the district attorney said in his statement.

Gascón vowed in the December 2020 directive that the District Attorney's Office would "immediately END the practice of sending youths to the adult court system," but abruptly changed his position on that with a series of memos Friday to office staff including one in which he noted that "in exceptional circumstances, criminal jurisdiction may be appropriate for youth offenders" and that juveniles may be selectively transferred to the adult court system in the "most egregious cases that warrant a state prison commitment."

Supervisor Kathryn Barger called the outcome of Tubbs' case "unsatisfactory," saying in a Jan. 27 statement that the judge's hands were "tied ... due to the fact that the DA's office failed to file a motion to transfer Tubbs to adult criminal court, which is where she rightly belongs."

In the statement issued Sunday night, Gascón said the office has "now implemented policies to create a different pathway for outlier cases while simultaneously creating protections to prevent these exceptions from becoming the rule."

The district attorney said he remains committed to the "core values of our policies," but has seen "a small number of cases that presented real challenges."

He said his office is making "minor adjustments" to its policies on juveniles, along with life-without-parole sentences for adults in certain murder cases, to "allow for exceptions in the most extraordinary of cases."

Gascón wrote in the statement Sunday that a prosecutor must put a request in writing when they want to "deviate from our core principles" and that the request will go to a committee "staffed by my most trusted advisors, who must evaluate the case and approve any requests to pursue an exception." He wrote that it will ensure "that only in the rarest of cases, where our system has failed, will we diverge from our principles."

The day he was sworn in, Gascón issued a directive mandating that special-circumstance allegations resulting in a sentence of life without parole shall not be filed and should be withdrawn from pending cases on which they had already been filed.

He was met with quick resistance, with the association representing more than 800 deputy district attorneys in Los Angeles County filing a lawsuit in December 2020 challenging some of Gascón's directives, including the requirement that prosecutors seek the dismissal of special-

circumstance allegations in murder cases that were pending. The association contended that the moves were "unlawful," and a number of judges in Los Angeles County refused to dismiss the allegations in cases that had been filed before Gascón took office.

A judge ruled mostly in favor of the Association of Deputy District Attorneys for Los Angeles County last February, but subsequently put the case on hold while Gascón appeals. A trial date is scheduled to be set for the case in April.

In one of the memos issued late Friday, Gascón noted that there "may be the rare occasion" in which special-circumstance allegations may be "necessary" that could result in a life prison term without parole in murder cases.

The policy changes come as the county's top prosecutor has come under fire from families of some crime victims, as well as Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva, former Los Angeles Police Department Chief Charlie Beck and some prosecutors from his own office.

Addressing the policy changes, the district attorney said in his statement Sunday, "Like every responsible office, we learn as we go, take feedback from the community and make necessary adjustments based on our experiences and the complex nature of this work. That is the responsible way to govern. I have always been open to learning and growing in this work."

Gascón is facing a renewed recall effort that was announced in December. Recall supporters are working to collect 566,857 signatures from registered Los Angeles County voters for submission to the county registrar's office by July 6. A similar effort in 2021 failed to gather enough signatures to qualify.

Gascón has repeatedly defended his policies, saying his stances were well-known during his campaign and his election signified public support of his agenda.



George Gascón

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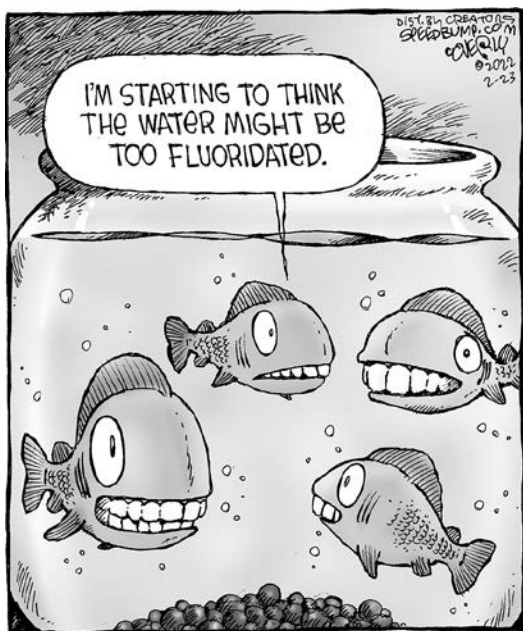
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Downey Community Calendar

CITY MEETINGS

- 1st & 3rd Wednesday, 6:30pm: Planning Commission, Council Chamber at City Hall.
- 1st Tue., 4:00pm.: Recreation and Community Services Commission, Council Chamber, City Hall.
- 2nd & 4th Tue., 6:30pm: City Council, Council Chamber.
- 3rd Tue., 6:30pm: Library Advisory Board, at Downey City Library.
- 3rd Thurs., 6:30pm: CERT, at Downey City Council Chamber at City Hall, for more info call 299-5462.
- 4th Mon., 5 pm: Green Task Force, at City Hall.

Regularly Scheduled Meetings

MONDAYS

- 7 pm: Boy Scout Troop 2, at Downey United Methodist Church, call 869-6478.
- 4:30 pm: Courage Forward Meeting, at 10829 New St, 2nd Floor, call 213-545-6810.
- 2nd Mon., 11 am: American Legion Auxiliary #270, at United Methodist Church, call 310-386-8112.
- 4th Mon., 7:30 pm: Downey Numismatists, at Downey Retirement Center, call 862-6666.

TUESDAYS

- 9 am: Quilters group, at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, call 803-4459.
- 9:30 am: Downey Seniors Club, at Apollo Park, call Irene Vallini at 328-7039.
- 10 am: Downey Bocce Club, at 7850 Quill Drive, call John Fiorenza at 652-4399.
- 12 pm: Rotary Club, at Rio Hondo Events Center, call William Medina 413-3447.
- 6 pm: Toastmasters Club 587, at First Baptist Church, contact Salvador Cervantes: tmsalcpuede@gmail.com.
- 7 pm: Downey Knights of Columbus Bingo, at 11231 Rives Ave., call 923-1932.
- 7 pm: Boy Scout Troop 441, at Apollo Park, email scoutmaster@downeyboyscouts.com.
- 7:30 pm: Downey Master Chorale, at Cornerstone Church, contact info@downeymasterchorale.org.
- 1st Tues., 7:30 am: Gangs Out of Downey, at City Hall training room.
- 2nd Tues., 6 pm: Downey Fly Fishers, at Apollo Park, call 425-7936.
- 3rd Tues., 12 pm: Downey Newcomers Club, call Marilyn 928-2623.
- 3rd Tues., 6:30 pm: Community Emergency Response Team meeting, Fire station 1, 12222 Paramount.
- 3rd Tues., 6 pm: American Legion #270, at Sizzler Restaurant, call 544-0372.
- Tues., Thurs. & Sat., 10 am: Downey Bocce Club, at 7850 Quill Drive, call John Fiorenza 652-4399

WEDNESDAYS

- 7 am: Kiwanis Club, at Rio Hondo Events Center, call Steve Roberson at 927-2626.
- 1 pm: Women's Bocce Club, at 7850 Quill Drive, call Marie Puch at 869-4366.
- 7 pm: Out Post 132 Royal Rangers, at Desert Reign Church, call 928-8000.
- 1st Wed., 11 am: Woman's Club of Downey, call Cheryl Olson 833-8954.
- 1st Wed., 11:30 am: Downey Coordinating Council, Community Center, call Bobbi Bruce 440-5416.
- 1st Wed., 7:30 pm: Downey Stamp Club, at Maude Price School cafeteria, call 928-3028.
- 2nd Wed., 11:30 am: Christian Women's Club, call Marilyn 928-2623.
- 2nd Wed., 3:30 pm: Keep Downey Beautiful, at City Hall, call 904-7102.
- 2nd Wed., 7 pm: Downey Model A Club, at Gallatin School Cafeteria, call 484-8415.
- 3rd Wed.: Downey Dog Obedience Club, for information please call Gina 869-5213 or Valerie 420-2972.
- 3rd Wed., 10 am: Los Angeles County Quilters Guild, at Women's Club, call 860-8821 or 927-3635.
- 3rd Wed., 6:00 pm: Sister Cities of Downey, at Barabara Riley Senior Center, call Gloria Nezahualcoyotl (562) 776-6136.
- 4th Wed., 7:30 pm: US Coast Guard Aux. Flotilla 5-10, First Presbyterian Church, call Brian 419-5420.
- Wed. & Fri., 10:15 am: Senior Bingo, at Apollo Park, call 904-7223

THURSDAYS

- 7:30 am: Connections Networking, at Bob's Big Boy, for info., call Nick Smith, 861-5222.
- 7:30 am.: Soroptimist Int'l of Downey, for information, call Mia Vasquez, 806-3217.
- 9:30 am: Take off Pounds Sensibly, at Barabara Riley Senior Center, call (800) 932-8677.
- 12 pm: Bingo, at Woman's Club of Downey - Proceeds benefit Rancho.
- 12 pm: Optimist Club of Downey, at Rio Hondo Events Center.
- 6:30 pm: Downey United Masonic Lodge # 220, 8244 3rd St., call 862-4176.
- 7 pm: Boy Scout Troop 351, at Furman Park, contact 562-500-5093 for more information.
- 7:30 pm: Downey Elks Lodge #2020, call 803-3557.
- 1st Thurs., 6 pm, All other Thurs. 12 pm: Kiwanis Club of Downey, at Frantone's Downey, call Roy Jimenez 283-2335.
- 2nd Thurs., 12 pm: Creative Purposes, call Bill Wallace 923-2311.
- 2nd Thurs., 7:30 pm: Beaming Rebel Foxes Collectors Club, call Carl D. Jones at 923-2400.
- 2nd & 4th Thurs., 6:30 pm: Downey Lions Club, at Mimi's, call Lenora (310) 283-9825.
- 3rd Thurs., 4 pm: Public Works Committee, at City Hall Training Room.
- 3rd Thurs., 6 pm: Downey CIPAC, at Sizzler's Restaurant, call Rich Tuttle 413-6045.
- 4th Thurs., 10 am: Assistance League, at Casa De Parley Johnson, call 869-0232.
- 4th Thurs., 7:30 pm: Downey Historical Society programs, at Community Center, call 862-2777.

FRIDAYS

- 7:30 am: Pro Networkers, at Mimi's Cafe, call Barbara Briley Beard at 869-7618.
- 3rd Fri., 8:30 am: Women's "In His Glory" Ministry at Los Amigos C. C. 622-3785.

SATURDAYS

- 9 am: Farmers Market, Downey Avenue at 3rd Street, call 904-7246.

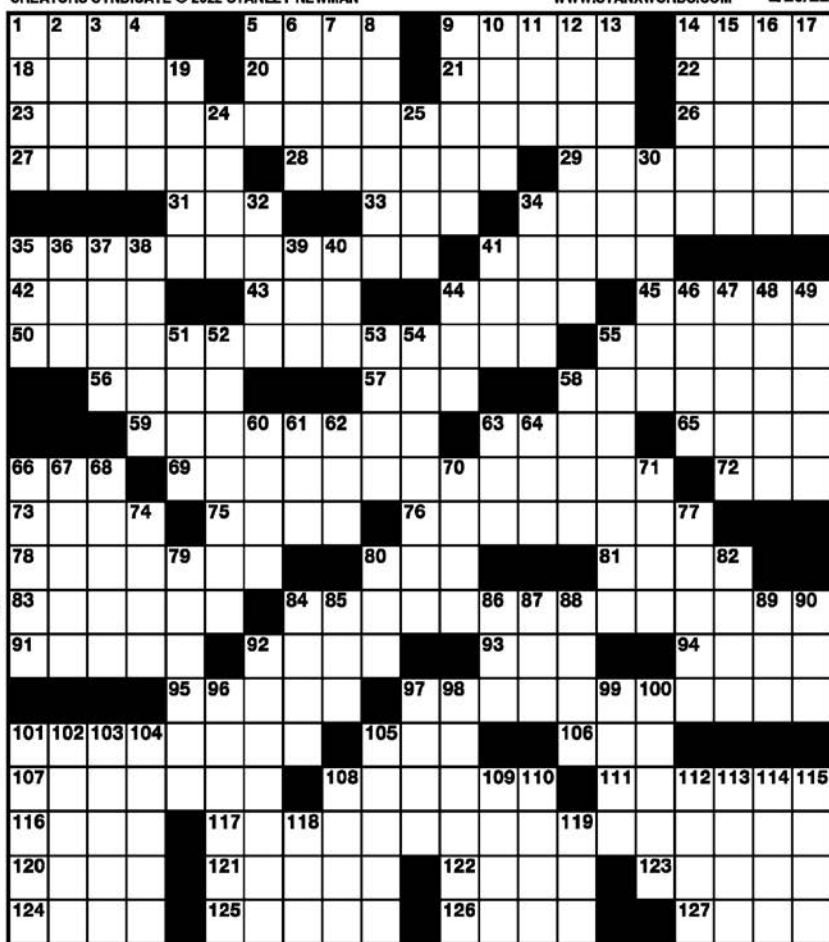
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THE NEWSDAY CROSSWORD

Edited by Stanley Newman (www.StanXwords.com)
THE WEEK IN BRIEF: Moving from left to right
 by Chris Gross & Mark McClain

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- ACROSS**
- 1 Humble acknowledgment
 - 5 Wander aimlessly
 - 9 Hogwarts professor
 - 14 It's true
 - 18 Clip, as wool
 - 20 All wound up
 - 21 New Guinea (Oceanian nation)
 - 22 Out of town
 - 23 Architectural open spaces below ground level
 - 26 Find fault, or a fish
 - 27 Latin carol opening
 - 28 Mete (out)
 - 29 Lie to
 - 31 Eighteen-wheeler
 - 33 Novelist Deighton
 - 34 Earmarked (for)
 - 35 Idaho tributary of the Snake
 - 41 Height of a wave
 - 42 Et (and others)
 - 43 Polar formation
 - 44 Some toy dogs
 - 45 To the point
 - 50 Racetrack transactions
 - 55 Synonym source
 - 56 Erelong
 - 57 Opposite of 'neath
 - 58 DNA maps
 - 59 Put through a sieve
 - 63 Final Four org.
 - 65 Term in trig
 - 66 Crow's comment
 - 69 Academic locales, reverentially
 - 72 Great weight
 - 73 Sore feeling
 - 75 Divulged
 - 76 Miscrants in movies
 - 78 Isaiah or Elijah
 - 80 Actress Long or Vardalos
 - 81 Ground for growing
 - 83 Enjoy a book again
 - 84 Clickable icon that leads to a full-size image
 - 91 Spots of land
 - 92 Part of a roller coaster ride
 - 93 Tick off
 - 94 Frozen princess
 - 95 Rating range
 - 97 Linguistic term for a misleading cognate
 - 101 Lose temporarily
 - 105 Arctic assistant
 - 106 Roadway pavement warning
 - 107 Prehistoric
 - 108 Musical productions
 - 111 Stick on a spindle
 - 116 Bismarck's home: Abbr.
 - 117 German auto
 - 120 Cork's country
 - 121 Houston baseballer
 - 122 Neighbor of Syria
 - 123 Virtuous one
 - 124 What the seven longest answers have, briefly
 - 125 117 Across, for instance
 - 126 Title for Judi Dench
 - 127 Help oneself to
- DOWN**
- 1 Rae (creator/star of HBO's Insecure)
 - 2 Dull noise
 - 3 Philosopher Descartes
 - 4 Yammers on
 - 5 Fun and games, casually
 - 6 Strong smell
 - 7 The rain in Spain
 - 8 Fragrant evergreen shrub
 - 9 Watch secretly
 - 10 Bread with chicken curry
 - 11 Boston Marathon mo.
 - 12 Rainy day accumulations
 - 13 Boardroom accessories
 - 14 Angle of an issue
 - 15 Stand by for
 - 16 Do some whittling
 - 17 Classified
 - 19 Old but cool
 - 24 Dresden denial
 - 25 Arena level
 - 30 Frock fabric
 - 32 Sandpaper coating
 - 34 Octopus octet
 - 35 Syrup source
 - 36 Following, in a phrase
 - 37 Turkish coin
 - 38 Long water carriers
 - 39 Post-op stop
 - 40 Neckline shape
 - 41 Bed in a tent
 - 44 According to
 - 46 Negotiation obstacles
 - 47 Send payment
 - 48 Trial recorder
 - 49 Ruhr Valley city
 - 51 Butterfly cousin
 - 52 Like some director's cuts
 - 53 MGM cofounder
 - 54 Vex
 - 55 True-to-life genre
 - 58 Fancy fundraiser
 - 60 Tremendously
 - 61 Under the weather
 - 62 Oscar nomination, in headlines
 - 63 Goalies' grp.
 - 64 Southern (L.A. school)
 - 66 Spot near Naples
 - 67 Farm measures
 - 68 Fingerprint pattern
 - 70 Pushbutton predecessor
 - 71 Stuffed shirt
 - 74 Blunt sword
 - 77 Egyptian region
 - 79 Big inconvenience
 - 80 Refreshing rest
 - 82 Highway pathway
 - 84 Part of a foot
 - 85 Simpsons bartender
 - 86 Before, in brief
 - 87 MLB stats
 - 88 Luau strings
 - 89 Roadhouse
 - 90 Little guy
 - 92 Milk sugar
 - 96 Wrestling surface
 - 97 Took to the air
 - 98 Far from fearless
 - 99 Overturn
 - 100 Plum tomatoes
 - 101 Unlike lionesses
 - 102 See 109 Down
 - 103 Frightful
 - 104 Toll roads
 - 105 Big name in printers
 - 108 Cajun staple
 - 109 With 102 Down, Taj Mahal locale
 - 110 Line of stitches
 - 112 Exam for HS students
 - 113 Tigers' habitat
 - 114 Tall and thin
 - 115 Suffix for luncheon
 - 118 Inc. equivalent
 - 119 Wind dir.

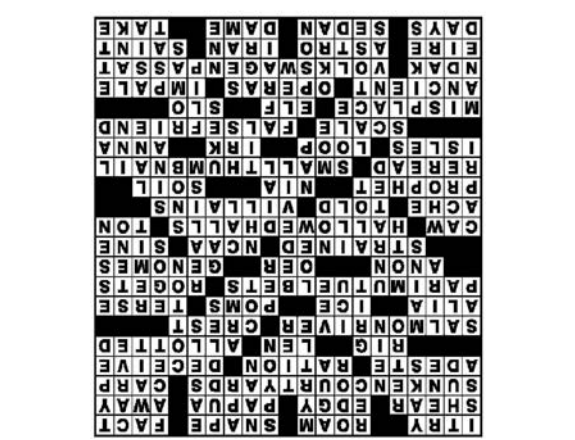


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You can contact puzzle editor Stanley Newman at his e-mail address: StanXwords@aol.com. Or write him at P.O. Box 69, Massapequa Park, NY 11762, Please send a self-addressed, stamped envelope if you'd like a reply.

Of at least nine American waterways called the SALMON RIVER (35 Across), Idaho's, at 425 miles, is the longest. An example of a FALSE FRIEND to English (97 Across) is the French word for bread, pain. In 2018, ISSA Rae (1 Down) was included in the *Time* magazine list of the world's 100 most influential people.



Soroptimist award winners share inspirational stories

■ Soroptimist International of Downey awarded its annual Live Your Dream Awards to single mothers.

By Lorine Parks
Society Editor

DOWNEY – COVID can't stop the Soroptimist of Downey from living their mission: women helping women, to make the world better for women and girls. They work all year raising money, and meet by Zoom when they can't come together in person. Like the Energizer Bunny, they never stop.

Twenty members, all active or retired business or professional women, gathered at Geezers Restaurant to celebrate the recipients of the Soroptimist Live Your Dream Award, given to single moms who provide the primary financial support for their families. Most have overcome enormous obstacles including poverty, teen pregnancy, and drug or alcohol addiction.

"I did this for my son," said Rosemary Ibarra, of her boy James, 6. "He is the one who inspires me."

Rosemary, 34, had brought James to the dinner. "I want to continue at the City College of Santa Ana," she said, "and specialize in the occupational therapy field. I work in it now, with special needs kids."

Scholarships abound at graduation time for high school seniors, but for women at this stage of their lives, few opportunities exist. These Soroptimists can help transform the lives of these three young women.

What makes the Soroptimist grant unique is that it can be used not just for tuition, but

to offset any costs associated with their efforts to attain higher education, such as books, childcare, and transportation. Child care alone is such a huge expense that, lacking it, most women cannot leave home to attend classes, workshops, and labs, and therefore lose out on their employment prospects.

The honorees were poised and focused on using this award to turn their lives around. Maria Landeros had brought her twelve year old daughter Samantha.

"I want to be a surgical technician," said Maria, 37. "I live in South Central and I work at The Little Company of Mary Hospital in Torrance."

When I asked if they had a car, each of the women assented. It's impossible to get around the Los Angeles Basin without one.

That focus was ratcheted up several notches when first place winner Talia Martinez spoke.

"I will put this scholarship money with what I already have," she said. "I want to be a nurse practitioner, and I have figured that will cost me \$36,000. And that's cheap."

I have worked and studied for two years already," Talia added. "And I have six more to go."

Talia, 25, who lives in Lynwood, had brought her son Ishmael.

"He'll be 5 on the 25th," she said. "I left my one-year old boy Akiko with a sitter."

Talia already is half-way to her goal, in prizes and grants she has received. As the local-level award recipient she is eligible for a Soroptimist regional-level award, and then the possibility of an international-level award of \$10,000.

"I was in foster care with

seven other children," Talia said. "When we got to be 18, and we weren't adopted, we were essentially homeless. I was angry when I became homeless and I had to live in my car for two years, with my son. But I knew that I had a choice, and I chose to help others."

"Now only two of us are still alive, and the other girl is on drugs and going downhill. I think a lot about the seven of us," Talia said, "and our stories. But I remember that you always have that choice."

Soroptimist spends all year putting on fund-raising projects, like their famous Roaring Twenties costume party with a silent auction, that was held shortly before COVID shut down indoor events. They welcome new members, and inducted a new member that evening, realtor Georgette Solano.

Soroptimist president Linda Haines introduced the speaker Christina Alatorre from the Camino Real Region.

"The women and girls we serve," Christina said, "are some of the most courageous, powerful and inspiring people you'll ever meet. Each and every one of them is a superhero."

The atmosphere was warm and encouraging, a safe place for these women to share their stories. All the honorees received big cellophane-wrapped bouquets of pink roses and mums, made by Mia Zimmerman.

That night, February 17th, was my birthday, and I got a bouquet too.

"Thank you for the honor," Rosemary Ibarra had said. That should be, "Thanks to the three of you, for giving us the chance to honor you and your dreams."



Arc Walk to be held on Zoom

DOWNEY – The Arc Walk for Independence will return this year but in a virtual format, organizers announced.

The virtual walk is set for Saturday, March 19, on Zoom. Opening ceremonies begin at 9 am followed by special guests, music, stories of hope, and a virtual walk along the actual route.

Registration is \$25 and includes an Arc Walk button, lanyard, goody bag, and a breakfast burrito to be distributed via drive-thru at The Arc.

T-shirts are available for \$15.

The Arc Walk is an annual fundraiser for The Arc, which provides services to people with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Registration can be completed online at thearcclaoc.org. For sponsorship or registration information, call (562) 972-1277.



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Bull riding tour comes to Los Angeles amid possible ban

■ Pending legislation would effectively outlaw bull riding in Los Angeles; animal rights activists say it's about time.

By City News Service

LOS ANGELES — The Professional Bull Riders Tour returned to Los Angeles Tuesday evening for what animal rights activists hope will be the last time, pending a possible city ban on implements used in rodeos that hasn't received final approval.

The PBR Pluto TV Invitational Tuesday night at Crypto.com Arena comes nearly one year after the Los Angeles City Council voted unanimously to ban electric prods, shocking devices and other implements from rodeos.

Last year's motion, introduced by Councilman Bob Blumenfeld, directed the city attorney to prepare an ordinance to prohibit the following devices from Los Angeles rodeos and rodeo-related events:

- electric prods;
- shocking devices;
- flank or bucking straps;
- wire tiedowns;
- sharpened or fixed spurs; and
- rowels.

It was modeled after Pittsburgh's 1992 ordinance, which banned the same tools, according to the motion.

"Rodeos often use a number of inhumane implements ... to encourage aggressive behavior in animals to produce an entertainment product. Animals suffer significant injuries during common rodeo events such as bull and bronco riding, steer wrestling and calf roping," the motion stated.

"Many animals are put down as a result of injuries sustained during these events. ... It is time for our city to act in the interest of animal welfare on this issue as it



has in the past for other issues."

The city attorney finalized the language in December. It still must go before the council's Personnel, Audits and Animal Welfare committee before returning for a final vote of the City Council and then approval by the mayor.

The PAW committee has not scheduled the proposed ordinance for a vote.

Sean Gleason, CEO and commissioner of the PBR, calls the proposed ordinance "unnecessary legislation" that will cancel events that he says

benefit the local community.

"We are keeping a close eye on this legislation. If it passes, we will not have events in LA," Gleason told City News Service. He added that PBR has many rules in place to ensure its animals are treated well, and offered to "invite LA City Council members to come to Crypto.com Center on (Feb. 22) to learn about the animal athletes who are the real rock stars of the sport, get the best care and live a great, long life -- four to five times longer than animals not fortunate enough to compete."

Gleason added that "with all the problems facing LA and all the good that western sports do for our communities, we believe once the City Council members come see a PBR show, they'll reject a harmful ordinance that will kill cowboy sports in a city with a rich western heritage."

PBR also claims that the ordinance would prohibit the Mexican and Mexican-American sport of Charrería, and would harm Los Angeles' Black community by prohibiting the Bill Pickett Invitational Rodeo from holding events in Los Angeles.

The Bill Pickett Rodeo, which honors "Black Cowboys and Cowgirls and their contributions to building the west" according to its website, has events scheduled for July at Industry Hills Expo Center in Industry. The proposed Los Angeles ordinance would not affect those events.

The group Last Chance for Animals is pushing the city to do even more, by banning rodeos outright. LCA is circulating a petition at bit.ly/2NwWpD, which had nearly 24,000 signatures toward its goal of 25,000 as of Sunday.

As they've done in recent years for PBR events at the former Staples Center, activists with LCA and other groups protested Tuesday's rodeo.

"Rodeos are a hideous spectacle of animal abuse and brutality. We need more peace, love and tolerance in our society, NOT violence against innocent farm animals," said Heather, a local animal rights activist with LCA who has been hosting rodeo protests in Los Angeles for more than 10 years.

Professional bull riding can be dangerous for both bulls and riders, although PBR officials say bull injuries occur just .0002% of the times a bull leaves the bucking chute.

In August 2021, PBR rider Amadeu Campos Silva, 22, died

from injuries suffered at a bull-riding event in Fresno.

At Saturday's PBR Tour event in Knoxville, Tennessee, the bull Red Alert suffered a gruesome-looking injury out of the chute and was later diagnosed with a dislocated shoulder. A PBR representative said Red Alert was given treatment on site before being hauled to his home ranch

and was doing well.

"We are hopeful that the diagnosis from the vet provides for a treatment plan that will get him back into the arena," the PBR's Andrew Giangola said. "If the injury doesn't allow for a return to competition but is not debilitating, then Red Alert will be retired to stud service."

POET'S CORNER

Still I Rise

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

Maya Angelou, "And Still I Rise," Random House, 1978

These excerpts from the groundbreaking poem depict Black beauty, and the human spirit. When Angelou, just seventeen, graduated from high school and gave birth to a son, Guy, she began to work as the first African American and first female street car conductor in San Francisco. She died in 2014 at the age of 86. Poetry Matters is curated by Lorine Parks.

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The collage shows several pages from The Downey Patriot newspaper. The central page is the front page, dated Thursday, May 25, 2017, Vol. 16 No. 7. The main headline is "City Council agrees to continue Stay Gallery financial support" with a photo of the Stay Gallery building. Other headlines include "HEALTH Taking tetanus serious", "NEWS Perfect attendance", "NEWS Commencement speaker", and "NEWS Gang member sentenced". A "Calendar" section lists events for May 29 (Memorial Day ceremony), May 31 (Columbus High graduation), and June 1 (Alli grand opening). A "Weekend at a Glance" section shows weather for Friday (70°), Saturday (71°), and Sunday (76°). A "THINGS TO DO" section lists a Memorial Day Ceremony. A "FROM OUR FACEBOOK" section discusses city council support for Stay Gallery. A "Downey Patriot wins 5 journalism awards" section is also visible at the bottom.

Tips to avoid mortgage loan modification scams

Millions of homeowners struggled to make their mortgage payments during the COVID-19 pandemic, and it's important for all homeowners to know about mortgage loan modification scams and how to avoid them.

Mortgage loan modification scams are schemes to take your money - often by making a false promise of saving you from foreclosure. These so-called foreclosure or mortgage consultants often use public notices or lists of distressed borrowers purchased from private companies to find their targets. They may offer to "prevent" foreclosures or "rescue" desperate homeowners from foreclosure through advertising, email, phone calls or in person.

Examples of scams related to mortgage modification and foreclosure prevention include, among others:

Foreclosure rescue and refinance fraud. Scam artists offer to act as intermediaries between homeowners and lenders to negotiate repayment plans or loan modifications. They may even "guarantee" to save your home from foreclosure. They tell you to make mortgage payments directly to them so they can forward payments to your lender. Instead, they may pocket your money and leave you in worse shape on your loan.

Fake "government" modification programs. Scam artists create websites that mimic federal websites and use business names like those used by government agencies. They may use "federal," "TARP" or other words, acronyms and abbreviations associated with official government programs. These tactics are designed to fool you into thinking they are approved by, or affiliated with, the federal government.

Leaseback and rent-to-buy schemes. Con artists entice

you to transfer your home title to them with promises of new and better financing. They say you can rent your home and eventually buy it back. But, if you do not comply with the terms of the rent-to-buy agreement, you can lose your money and your home. Scammers have no intention of selling your home back to you; they want your home and money.

Scammers may:

Ask you to pay fees upfront to receive services

Promise to get you a loan modification

Ask you to sign over the title to your property

Ask you to sign papers that you do not understand

Say you should start making payments to someone other than your servicer or lender

Tell you to stop making mortgage loan payments altogether

If you believe you have been contacted by a scammer or if you have been the victim of a mortgage scam, report the scam to the Federal Trade Commission, or to your state Attorney General. Stop paying the scammer. You can also seek help from an attorney.

If you can't pay your mortgage or are worried about missing a mortgage payment, you have options. The first thing to do is call your mortgage servicer. Learn the steps to take, relief options, and places to go to get help with your mortgage.

Contributed by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau

LA County easing indoor mask regulations

Starting Friday, face coverings will not be required at places that verify vaccination statuses.

By City News Service

DOWNEY - In a major policy shift, Los Angeles County will ease its indoor mask mandate to allow people vaccinated against COVID-19 to remove face coverings indoors at establishments that verify patrons' vaccination status, health officials confirmed Wednesday.

The change will take effect at 12:01 a.m. Friday, according to the Department of Public Health.

The new health order, however, will put the onus on businesses to ensure that all customers permitted indoors are either fully vaccinated or can provide proof of a recent negative COVID test. Even after that verification, only fully vaccinated customers will be permitted to remove masks indoors. Unvaccinated customers must continue wearing masks indoors, even after showing proof of a negative COVID test, unless they are actively eating or drinking.

The same basic rules will apply to workers at indoor establishments.

"While there are powerful tools that impede virus transmission, none are perfect, which is why we often need to use a variety of safety measures to reduce transmission," county Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer said in a statement. "When transmission is very high, we need to create the most complete shield we can, so that's why it's important that we layer in all the protections at hand."

"As transmission drops and there is less virus circulating, some tools may afford significant protections against the very worst risks associated with

COVID. Because vaccines are one of these tools, with lower rates of hospital admissions and COVID hospitalizations, it is appropriate in settings verifying vaccination or negative test status, that we transition to strongly recommending masking instead of requiring masking."

The change follows rising pressure from two members of the county Board of Supervisors for a loosening of the mask mandate to more closely align with the state, which completely dropped its indoor mask mandate last week. Los Angeles County, however, kept its mandate in place, setting parameters for ending the requirement that likely will not be met until the end of March.

Supervisor Kathryn Barger initially pushed for the county to align with the state, saying the contradictory requirements were leading to apathy and lax compliance among residents. Supervisor Janice Hahn joined Barger in that call last week, pointing to the recent Super Bowl in Inglewood as an example of people willfully ignoring the county's masking guidelines.

Hahn broke the news on Twitter Tuesday that the county planned to ease the indoor mask mandate for businesses that

verify vaccination status. On Wednesday, she called the move a "step in the right direction."

"I still think that the better and less confusing approach would be to fully align with the state of California, but this is a welcome step in the right direction as our cases decline and we learn to live with this virus," she said in a statement.

Barger on Tuesday said she was "glad to hear" of the pending policy change.

"I've been calling for this all along," she wrote on Twitter. "This is another step toward living (with) COVID-19 in a balanced way. But piecemealed policies are frustrating and confusing."

The county lifted its outdoor mask mandate for large event venues, schools and child-care centers last week. Masks will continue to be required indoors at schools under a state requirement that is expected to be re-evaluated at the end of February.

The county's indoor mask mandate will remain in effect at businesses that do not verify customers' vaccination status. That mandate will not be lifted until:

-- the county's level of COVID transmission falls to the "moderate" level as defined by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and remains there for two weeks; OR

-- COVID vaccines have been available to residents under age 5 for at least eight weeks; AND

-- no emerging COVID "variants of concern" have been identified that could spark another surge in cases.

According to Ferrer, reaching the CDC's "moderate" level of transmission requires the county to have a seven-day cumulative infection rate of less than 50 per 100,000 residents. As of Wednesday, the county's rate was 133 per 100,000 residents.

Ferrer noted that the county's rate has been steadily declining, and at the current pace, the county would reach the "moderate" designation by March 16, meaning the indoor mask mandate would be completely lifted by March 30.

Meanwhile, Los Angeles County reported another 36 COVID-related deaths on Wednesday, raising the overall pandemic death toll to 30,447.

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