Sequoia families rally for students to return to classrooms

By Angela Swartz

After nearly a year of distance learning, about 125 Sequoia Union High School District parents, students and teachers gathered outside of the district office in Redwood City on Tuesday afternoon to urge officials to reopen classrooms once San Mateo County entered the less restrictive red tier. That same day, county officials announced that local conditions had improved enough to allow its move to the red tier starting Wednesday, Feb. 24.

Reopen SUHSD, a group of about 500 district parents, students, teachers and community members that formed several weeks ago, organized the rally, stating that students learn most effectively — and their social, emotional and mental health is best served — by attending school in person. An online petition from the group urging the school board to reopen schools had garnered nearly 1,600 signatures as of Tuesday afternoon.

“It is time for the Sequoia Union High School District to follow the science, and bring kids and teachers back to campus safely in the red tier,” the group said in a statement.

Menlo-Atherton High School parent Paige Winikoff, a group organizer, said she’s frustrated the district doesn’t have a plan to reopen. She hoped the rally could promote the group’s work.

Impact on students

A new district report, presented at the Wednesday night school board meeting, shows that high school students are struggling academically this quarter. There was a 34% increase in the number of students with three or more D’s & F’s at the end of the second quarter compared to the same time last year.

The average freshman GPA dropped from 3.0 to 2.85 during the same period. The second quarter GPA of socioeconomically disadvantaged ninth graders dropped from 2.33 to 1.84.

In October, district officials reported that the percentage of students with more than one failing grade in the fall jumped to 29% from 19.7% in 2019.

Kevin Shvodian, an M-A senior and co-captain of the varsity lacrosse team, said a lot of students have struggled with distance learning. He said physics labs are impossible to conduct over Zoom, so teachers send a video of the lab being conducted. Students don’t get to learn or problem solve with this format, he noted.

“It’s still just so different from the school we’ve grown up with that high school students are struggling academically this quarter compared to the same period. The second quarter compared to the same time last year.

Steve Kryger, co-athletic director at M-A, a math teacher at the school and a parent of students who attend public schools in the area, supports students returning to classrooms.

“From my perspective, there are lots of occupations that have not signed up to get COVID but have gone back to work: bus drivers and so on. We can get back to doing what we all love to do.”

Magali Gauthier

San Mateo County improves to red tier for COVID-19, allowing for indoor dining and reopening schools

By Sue Dremann

California public health officials approved San Mateo County’s move from the most restrictive purple tier COVID-19 designation to the less-restrictive red tier on Feb. 23, allowing more businesses and activities in the county effective 12:01 a.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 24.

Five counties moved to a less restrictive tier on Tuesday: Humboldt, Marin, San Mateo, Shasta, and Yolo moved from purple to red. Trinity County worsened, going from orange to red. Forty-seven counties remain in the purple tier, nine in the red tier and two stayed in the orange tier, according to state data.

San Mateo County officials said the movement to the red tier and downward trend in infections are encouraging.

“This is great news for our small businesses and our entire community,” said San Mateo County Board of Supervisors President David J. Canepa. “And this move is a direct result of all of us taking personal responsibility for our actions. If we wear our damn masks, keep our distance and follow commonsense health and safety protocols, we can get back to doing what we all love to do.”

San Mateo County progressed to the red tier due to two metrics, calculated by the state: the case rate, which has dropped to 5.6% and the health equity quartile positivity rate, which is now down to 3.7%. The health equity quartile measures rates of infection with the virus in the county’s most disadvantaged communities based on the California Health Places Index.

Louise Rogers, San Mateo County Health System chief, told the Board of Supervisors on Tuesday that the county has among the lowest disparities percentage in the Bay Area. “We
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Santa Cruz Avenue closures to remain in effect through end of next January

By Kate Bradshaw
Almanac Staff Writer

Three downtown street segments in Menlo Park will remain closed to encourage outdoor dining until the end of January 2022, following a unanimous vote by the City Council Tuesday night.

The northbound lane of Santa Cruz Avenue headed toward El Camino Real will remain closed on both the 600 block and the 800 block, or from Curtis Street to Doyle Street and from Evelyn Street to Crane Street. In addition, Ryan’s Lane will be closed in both directions from Crane Street to Escondido Lane to provide a new outdoor dining area between Ann’s Coffee Shop and Ristorante Carpaccio.

The outdoor street dining area has received widespread support from local residents, many of whom emailed the City Council to tell members how much they’ve appreciated the option of outdoor dining during the pandemic. The council received at least 155 emails expressing support for continuing the street closures to permit outdoor dining where it is now, and only a handful opposing the street closures. That opposition came primarily from downtown retailers who said that the outdoor street dining where it is now, and only a handful opposing the street closures. That opposition came primarily from downtown retailers who said that the outdoor street dining revenue is a blow to their business.

Bistro Vida customers eat on a blocked-off section of Santa Cruz Avenue in downtown Menlo Park in July. In response to widespread support for outdoor dining, the street closure in front of Bistro Vida will continue through January 2022.

COVID vaccinations begin for law enforcement, educators and farmworkers in San Mateo County

By Angela Swartz
Almanac Staff Writer

The county’s Office of Education said Feb. 18 that it plans to host two vaccination days for educators at the San Mateo County Event Center within the next two weeks. The county’s health department will reach out to those who qualify with an invitation to make an appointment, said communications director Patricia Love in a Feb. 18 email.

Those who qualify for vaccines at these events are among the highest priority groups: school staff who are working in person and serving students with some of the greatest needs, including students from households with limited financial resources, those learning English, and those in the foster care system.

After eight months, Portola Valley’s weekly BLM demonstrators stay committed

By Angela Swartz
Almanac Staff Writer

Every Sunday morning at the corner of Alpine and Portola roads in Portola Valley near Roberts Market, a handful of people meet to demonstrate support for the Black Lives Matter movement.

The group started meeting shortly after Minneapolis police killed George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, in late May. They formed in June after the eruption of “so much conversation and demonstration throughout the country,” said Lucy Neely, Neely Wine’s sales and marketing director and a Portola Valley resident. She and her wife felt bereft at the lack of any visible public discourse in town on racism, she said.

“One night my wife said ‘we’ve got to do something,’ so I just put a notice out on our community listserv inviting people to gather in solidarity with BLM that Sunday,” Neely said in an email.

Dr. Judith Murphy, a longtime Portola Valley resident, also received the invitation from people agreeing to join the group. She said the group has continued assembling every week for eight months.

“It feels important to me to continue to bear witness,” she said. “Lots of people go by that corner. We get a lot of reactions: thumbs up and thumbs down, ‘go home’ and ‘thanks for doing this.’”

Over the summer and fall, attendees also met for an hour-long socially distanced “Whiteness Discussion Group” after the 11 a.m. protests, though they discontinued the discussions in October when the weather got colder and attendance dwindled. The rallies maxed out in size with about 100 people and now draw about seven to eight core members every week, said resident Kim Marinucci Acker, who facilitated the discussion group.

“The focus was really on understanding ourselves and what is the culture of whiteness, and how do we act out these behaviors in our blindness because we never talk about it?” Acker said.

Neely said uncovering racial biases, and talking about them, is delicate, important work.

Reactions from passersby

Dr. Gwen Stritter, a Portola Valley resident since 1981, joined the protests over the summer. Stritter, who is Black, said the predominately white community has been very welcoming to people of color over the years, in general. The latest census data from 2018 shows 81% of the town’s residents at the time were white, 7.3% were Asian, about 6% were Hispanic, 4% were multiracial and just 14 people identified as Black.

Stritter said the group sometimes would get negative feedback. These passing bicyclists and drivers shook their fists, called the protesters “commies” and said things like “you’ll believe anything you see on TV.”

“I could tell you a couple times, standing on the corner holding up my sign demonstrating, you could see the other side of Portola Valley,” she said. “I know they’re in the minority, but they are there.”

In the past when she was part of discussions with white people about race, Black people were expected to lead them through meetings and set the tone.

“It’s the first time I’ve been part of a group of white people who, on their own, decided to do this (talk about race),” she said, which impressed her. “It was, was people decided to not stand by silently and unwittingly continue the social habits/behaviors that create racial discrimination in this country. These are people who are really determined to examine themselves for their unconscious biases; it blew me away.”

It also stands out to Stritter that white people are starting to wrestle with how discrimination has played out in the Portola Valley community, not just in the rest of the country. For example, housing laws restricted where people of color were allowed to buy homes on
State Sen. Josh Becker calls for San Mateo County schools to reopen

By Angela Swartz
Almanac Staff Writer

State Sen. Josh Becker on Tuesday called on San Mateo County schools to reopen for in-person learning once the county returns to the less restrictive red tier — which the county entered Wednesday. Becker, D-Menlo Park, said in an interview with The Almanac that the social and emotional costs of remote learning are too high for students.

“Safety comes first, but data is showing that there is a pathway,” he said. “We can get kids back safely and protect teachers and students, and not lose a generation. We can’t afford to lose those critical academic years.”

Other schools have found ways to safely reopen with little to no transmission of COVID-19 between teachers and students, according to recent studies. If that means schools official need to buy more air purifiers, then they should buy more air purifiers, he said.

Becker said the medical science and data show during long, vaccines (the county began vaccinating teachers this week), air filtration systems and common sense steps will protect communities from virus outbreaks when schools reopen.

“We’re seeing school is much more than just learning,” he said. “That’s the priority.”

The “severe” mental health impacts of social isolation on teens are many, according to recent data from University of California at San Francisco. • 75% increase in children requiring immediate hospitalization for mental health needs. • Children’s Hospital in Oakland’s autism admissions were up 130% in 2020. • 50% increase in children requiring hospitalization for eating disorders.

The percentage of children screening positive for recent or active suicidal thoughts increased threefold from March to October.

Becker, who has a freshman and a junior at Menlo-Atherton High School, said he wouldn’t send his own children back to school if he didn’t think it was safe to do so.

Several of the counties’ public school (and no public high school) districts are open for in-person instruction. Menlo Park City, Las Lomitas Elementary, Woodside Elementary and Portola Valley school districts are amnesties those that began offering in-person learning in the fall.

This call came the same day that parents and students in the Sequoia Union High School District held a rally at the district office, urging officials to reopen local high schools for in-person learning as soon as the county enters the red tier.

Two weeks ago, Becker urged San Mateo and Santa Clara counties to set aside a week to vaccinate teachers and school district employees who have direct contact with children before the county made the announcement it would begin vaccinating educators this week.

With San Mateo County averaging 9,000 doses per week, and the number of teachers in the county at 5,000, Becker said that the overall numbers allow for a countywide vaccination effort that can be managed efficiently.

Email Angela Swartz at aswartz@almanacnews.com

Civil grand jury identifies obstacles to building backyard housing units

By Kate Bradshaw
Almanac Staff Writer

There is potential for many thousands of new secondary housing units in single-family areas throughout San Mateo County, and more should be done to make them easier to build, argued a Civil Grand Jury report released last year.

San Mateo County cities were required to provide feedback on the report, and most communities were largely in agreement with the report’s findings. The availability of housing, especially housing considered “affordable” in San Mateo County, is considered by county housing leaders to be at a crisis point, the report stated. About 68% of the county’s land is protected from development as agricultural or open space, and of the already developed land, two-thirds is occupied by single-family homes — about 155,000 within the county.

However, there are about 4,000 known secondary units on those properties, the report stated.

Several rounds of laws passed at the state level that took effect in 2017 and 2020 are expected to make constructing secondary units easier for homeowners. Just since 2017, about 1,000 new secondary units in the county increased to an average of 269 per year, up from 60 per year in the years 2010 through 2016, according to the report.

And new laws that took effect on Jan. 1, 2020, streamlined the process further. These included laws that bar homeowner associations from banning secondary units, require local governments to include incentives and promote the creation of affordable second units in their general plans, and prohibit impact fees, additional parking or owner occupation requirements for second units that are 750 square feet or smaller. In addition, second units are not allowed to be used as short-term rentals, for less than 30 days, to disrupt their use as vacation rentals.

In January of last year, the county also started an amnesty pilot program for homeowners who want to upgrade existing non-permitted second units. It allows those second units to be brought up to code and receive permits, and offers homeowners a no-risk option to back out of the process without bringing the unit up to health and safety standards.

Yet the biggest obstacles that remain to building new secondary units or upgrading non-permitted ones are obtaining financing, a limited supply of contractors willing to work on them, and a spike in the number of children requiring hospitalization for eating disorders.

The percentage of children screening positive for recent or active suicidal thoughts increased threefold from March to October.

Becker said a Civil Grand Jury report recommended that the county and its cities keep reaching out to homeowners to let them know about the new laws that streamline the process. Their officials should create a list of financial partners that can help homeowners secure funding to build or upgrade secondary units, and develop a list of contractor resources and work with training institutions to recruit and train more general contractors and inspectors. And they should encourage homeowners whose second units were built without a permit to get one.

Various models have been studied to encourage jurisdictions to make second units more accessible to homeowners. San Jose has created a position for an “ADU Ally,” who helps people with their questions about

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In controversial vote, City Council picks new firm for Menlo Park’s legal services

By Kate Bradshaw
Almanac Staff Writer

In a tense 3-2 vote, the Menlo Park City Council opted to end its decadeslong ties with the Menlo Park-based law firm Jorgenson, Siegel, McClure and Flegel in favor of a new contract with the firm Burke, Williams and Sorenson, which has offices statewide.

Mayor Drew Combs and Councilman Ray Mueller were opposed to the new city attorney contract, while Vice Mayor Betsy Nash and council members Jen Wolosin and Cecilia Taylor voted to approve it.

The designated city attorney for Menlo Park will be attorney Nira Doherty. She is currently interim city attorney for South Lake Tahoe, general counsel for the Tahoe Transportation District and assistant city attorney for the cities of St. Helena and Pacifica, according to the Burke Williams Sorenson website.

She graduated from law school at University of California, Davis and college at University of California, Berkeley, according to her firm’s website.

During the council’s discussion, Councilwoman Betsy Nash said that Doherty would be working solely with the city, but when Mueller asked for that to be written into the contract, Nash and Wolosin declined to add it.

Wolosin said that Doherty may still do some consulting with the jurisdictions she is currently working with, adding, “I’m confident we are going to be the priority for her.”

The new contract treats the city attorney like an independent contractor and pays an hourly rate, without a retainer fee or cap on general legal services. Services will be generally billed at rates of $270 to $305 per hour, while paralegals are billed at $135 per hour, according to a staff report. The program will also increase hourly rates $5 per year as a cost of living adjustment starting July 1, 2022.

Since former City Attorney Bill McClure retired, attorney Cara Silver from the Jorgenson, Siegel, McClure & Flegel firm has worked as the city’s interim city attorney on a month-to-month agreement, according to a staff report.

Last year, the council created an ad hoc committee with members Mueller and Combs to discuss recruitment for city attorney services, and the city put out a request for proposals for city attorney services.

In addition, in November, after the initial request for proposals had gone out, Mueller, Combs and then-Councilwoman Catherine Carlton had made a closed-session recommendation to the future City Council to retain the existing city attorney, noted special counsel Greg Rubens.

Council members Carlton and Nash were appointed to analyze the proposals and perform reference checks, according to the report.

Then, on Feb. 9, the new council majority — Nash, Taylor and Wolosin — moved forward with the proposals and perform reference checks, according to the report.

Council members Carlton and Nash were appointed to analyze the proposals and perform reference checks, according to the report.

Combs explained his opposition to the decision for several reasons, saying that the transition to a new firm would be “incredibly disruptive.” The city’s existing firm is involved in dozens of legal matters and “has an insane amount of institutional knowledge,” he said. In addition, staff had “nothing but complimentary things to say about the interim city attorney and services provided by the Jorgenson firm,” he said.

“No one has laid out to me the exact value add of this transition,” Combs said, noting that nobody had made a case for any specific type of expertise the new law firm would add, or anything that had been lacking from the former firm.

Mueller said he disagreed with the council majority’s decision because the new firm is more expensive, has more clients, and its locations are farther away from Menlo Park than the previous firm.

“Basically, all the ‘mores’ is less in services to the city,” he said. “It’s going to take more time to get critical projects done in our city. We are already backlogged because of the pandemic.”

“We already had a problem before the pandemic where people thought the city was slow,” Mueller said. Now, he said, “we’re going to pay more money and move slower.”

“I hope I’m proved wrong,” he added.

In a statement by Nash and Wolosin, which Wolosin read, the two council members said that the “decision is not one taken lightly” and that they believed Doherty is the “right fit for Menlo Park.”

Today, they argued, Menlo Park has “unprecedented legal needs” with the large amount of development in the city’s Bayfront area and other complex land use, public health, safety, election and labor law needs, and that they believed the city would benefit from the legal advice of a firm with “broad, multi-city experience.”

After hearing the statement, Combs responded, “If I’m paying more for something, I want someone to be very specific about why. … It still hasn’t been presented to me.”

Email Kate Bradshaw at kbradshaw@almanacnews.com

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Coronavirus central: San Mateo County loosens restrictions

In Santa Clara County, youth sports and performing arts can resume

**By Embarcadero Media staff**

San Mateo County as of Tuesday had 38,552 cumulative cases of COVID-19, with 502 deaths. There were 56 people hospitalized. Santa Clara County as of Tuesday had 109,506 cumulative COVID-19 cases and 1,747 deaths. The rolling seven-day average of new cases ending Feb. 15 was 274. There were 224 people hospitalized, 32 of which were new.

County moves to red tier

California has allowed San Mateo County to move from the most-restrictive purple tier to the red tier, effective 12:01 a.m. Wednesday. The change allows the county to loosen restrictions, which lets restaurants and gyms accommodate people indoors with modifications, among other activities.

Vulnerable communities

The number of people in the most vulnerable communities across Santa Clara and San Mateo counties who are testing positive for COVID-19 are finally coming down, health leaders in both counties told their respective board of supervisors on Tuesday.

Performing arts, youth sports can resume

Santa Clara County health officials announced an update to the county’s COVID-19 health order Monday, allowing for multiple outdoor activities including youth sports and performing arts to resume.

The health order revision will take effect Friday, Feb. 26, according to county officials. The county also plans to relax restrictions on multi-household outdoor gatherings to discourage residents from gathering indoors, where the risk of coronavirus transmission is higher. The update follows the state’s announcement Feb. 19 that it would allow outdoor youth sports to resume with a handful of caveats, requiring regular testing for contact sports like football and rugby and linking the resumption of some sports like baseball to the reopening of a tier in which a county is placed.

Santa Clara County Health Officer and Director of Public Health Dr. Cara Cody acknowledged the need to maintain mental and physical health as the region nears the anniversary of the first coronavirus-related stay-at-home order.

“Children and adults alike need to participate in the many activities that support their mental, physical, and social wellbeing,” Cody said in a statement. “We know that the state...
Palo Alto plans to sell annual passes for Foothills Park

By Gennady Sheyner

After moving to dramatically curtail access to Foothills Park last month, Palo Alto officially agreed on Monday to further revise entry rules to the scenic nature preserve and allow free entry to local students, veterans and visitors with disabilities.

By a unanimous vote, the City Council approved new rules that largely comport with recommendations from the city’s Parks and Recreation Commission. This includes creating an annual pass for Foothills Park entry that would cost $50 for Palo Alto residents and $65 for visitors from other cities. The Palo Alto residents and $65 for annual pass for Foothills Park is the latest attempt by the council to lower the cap to 300 if conditions warrant. The Monday changes were the latest attempt by the council to balance the public’s appetite for visiting the preserve, which has traditionally been open only to Palo Alto residents and their guests, and a desire to maintain safe traffic conditions and protect wildlife. Since the park opened to the general public on Dec. 17, residents, council members and city staff had reported unsafe traffic conditions both inside the park and on Page Mill Road, as well as an increase in “social trails” made by visitors who wander off official paths in popular areas such as Boronda Lake and Vista Hill.

In response to surging demand, the council approved on Jan. 11 an emergency ordinance imposing a $6 fee and lowering the visitor cap to between 400 and 500. The emergency ordinance that the council approved Monday supplants the January ordinance.

Kristen O’Kane, director of the Community Services Department, told the council that since the January action, the city has received quite a bit of feedback from users, with some expressing concern about the $6 fee.

“For those that come up to park four or five times a week, a vehicle fee of $6 each time was not feasible,” O’Kane said.

The annual pass, she said, was identified as the best path forward to accommodate these visitors. The Parks and Recreation Commission refined the proposal for an annual pass, as well as for a revised visitor cap, at its Feb. 11 meeting.

In some cases, the council

See FOOTHILLS PARK, page 12

A server waits on a group of customers at Farmhouse Kitchen in Menlo Park on Oct. 17. With San Mateo County’s move to the red tier on Feb. 24, limited capacity indoor dining is once again an option for local restaurants.

25% of capacity.

The four-tier system — yellow, orange, red and purple — has criteria for tightening or loosening activities based on the state of COVID-19 cases and infection positivity rates, according to the state’s Blueprint for a Safer Economy. Purple is indicated for counties where there is widespread risk of infection; red is substantial risk, orange moderate and yellow is minimal risk. As conditions improve, counties can progress to the less restrictive tiers.

Rogers said the county is also in a good position with testing and vaccines. San Mateo County has performed 821 tests per 100,000 people, the second highest testing rate in the state, behind Yolo County, Rogers said. The county has vaccinated 130,514 people: 59.1% of people 65 and older and 66.4% of those who are 75 and older have been vaccinated. Dr. Anand Chabra, medical director of the Family Health Services Division and lead for the county’s vaccination efforts, told the supervisors.

Email Sue Dremann at sdremann@paweekly.com

Ruth Fredkin Seiler

November 7, 1929 – February 9, 2021

RUTH ANN FREDKIN SEILER — Passed away peacefully February 9, 2021 at home surrounded by her family. She was born November 7, 1929, to Eva Kaplan Fredkin and Perry Fredkin, in Oakland and raised in San Jose. Ruthie is survived by her loving family, daughter, Carol Seiler Roberts, son Richard Seiler and his wife Susan. Devoted grandmother to Cory Roberts, Mark Roberts and his wife, Fereshta, Matthew Seiler, and Alexandra Seiler Speiser and her husband, Alexander Speiser, and great granddaughter, Madison Roberts. Loving sister to Bernard (deceased) and Henne (deceased) Fredkin and to Stuart Seiler and his wife, Gaye, and nephews and nieces.

Ruthie and her husband, Donald (deceased), met in college, at UC Berkeley, and shared a long loving marriage of nearly 62 years. They married in San Francisco in 1950. Together, they were each other’s catalyst for success in all aspects of their lives. By 1960 they moved to the mid-peninsula, where they built their lives and raised a family. They loved to travel and Ruthie enjoyed the many years she and Don traveled the world, many times with friends and family.

Ruthie was a loving, compassionate, kind-hearted, and generous woman. She was devoted to her family and loved spending time with them, especially her grandchildren and great granddaughter. Ruthie also made extraordinary contributions to the community along with husband, Don. Together Ruthie and Don founded and chaired Friends of Cardiovascular Medicine at Stanford. Through the years they supported numerous community organizations and programs to help enrich the lives of others.

With special thanks to her wonderful caregivers Sola Taimani and Louise Saukitoga.

In lieu of flowers, the family asks that donations be made in Ruthie’s memory to one of the following charities:

Ronald McDonald House Charities Bay Area, Feed-the-Love program, 520 Sandhill Road, Palo Alto, CA 94304.

Link: Support RMHC Bay Area Kids - Ronald McDonald House Charities Bay Area (convio.net) or Lucile Packard Foundation for Children’s Health in memory of Ruth Seiler, 400 Hamilton Avenue, Suite 340, Palo Alto, CA.

94301.

Link: http://supportlpch.org/ or A charity of your choice.

OBITUARIES

Local residents who died recently include Anders Klaseen Prokop, 30, a Menlo Park resident, on Jan. 29, and Ruth Fredkin Seiler, 91, an Atherton resident and co-founder of Friends of Cardiovascular Medicine at Stanford, on Feb. 9.

To read full obituaries, leave remembrances and post photos, go to Lasting Memories at almanacnews.com/obituaries.

A server waits on a group of customers at Farmhouse Kitchen in Menlo Park on Oct. 17. With San Mateo County’s move to the red tier on Feb. 24, limited capacity indoor dining is once again an option for local restaurants.

25% of capacity.

The four-tier system — yellow, orange, red and purple — has criteria for tightening or loosening activities based on the state of COVID-19 cases and infection positivity rates, according to the state’s Blueprint for a Safer Economy. Purple is indicated for counties where there is widespread risk of infection; red is substantial risk, orange moderate and yellow is minimal risk. As conditions improve, counties can progress to the less restrictive tiers.

Rogers said the county is also in a good position with testing and vaccines. San Mateo County has performed 821 tests per 100,000 people, the second highest testing rate in the state, behind Yolo County, Rogers said. The county has vaccinated 130,514 people: 59.1% of people 65 and older and 66.4% of those who are 75 and older have been vaccinated. Dr. Anand Chabra, medical director of the Family Health Services Division and lead for the county’s vaccination efforts, told the supervisors.

Email Sue Dremann at sdremann@paweekly.com

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FOOTHILLS PARK
continued from page 11

guessed that the commission’s recommendations to make park entry easier for some segments of the population. Council member Greer Stone, who teaches history at Gunn High, successfully lobbied for giving all students free entry into the park. The council also adopted council member Alison Cormack’s suggestion individuals should receive free entry if their vehicles have placards indicating a disability, going beyond the commission’s recommendation to offer these individuals a 25% discount.

Similarly, the council voted to provide free entry to low-income visitors with annual passes, a step that goes beyond the commission’s recommendation to provide discounts of between 25% and 50% for these individuals.

Vice Mayor Pat Burt made the motion to adopt the commission’s recommendation but revised it so that the fees for these categories of visitors would be waived entirely. Stone agreed. “We know low-income neighborhoods generally have far less access to green space, and I think it’s really important to be able to provide that opportunity and to be able to, frankly, show the world that in Palo Alto, we’re not trying to exclude these groups, that we’re opening the door and want to be good neighbors,” Stone said.

The council quickly coalesced around the adjusted proposal, despite concerns from other council members about some of the details. Cormack predicted that instituting fees at the entrance gate will create long lines of cars and possible backups to Page Mill Road. She proposed only charging entrance fees on the weekends.

Council member Greg Tanaka, meanwhile, suggested that the city may be exempting too many people from paying the entrance fee. He questioned the need to provide free entry for drivers with student IDs and suggested that the city only provide discounts to low-income visitors. “Maybe the student driver is from Atherton or Los Altos Hills or Portola Valley or Old Palo Alto and they’re very wealthy,” Tanaka said. “They probably don’t need a free pass. Isn’t low-income just what we’re trying to get at?”

Despite some hesitation, both Cormack and Tanaka supported the emergency ordinance, which required six of seven votes to pass. With the new rules in place, the city plans to launch online sales of the annual passes on Feb. 27, according to Daren Anderson, assistant director at the Community Services Department.

To underscore the preserve’s sensitive habitat, the council also approved on Monday the renaming of Foothills Park to the Foothills Nature Preserve — a change that was recommended by both the Parks and Recreation Commission and the Palo Alto Historical Association.

Email Gennady Sheyner at gsheyner@paweekly.com

CRIME BRIEFS
continued from page 6

the 600 block of High Street. In that incident, a woman in her 40s reported that she was about to unlock the front door of her residence when an unknown man approached her from behind and ripped a small purse out of her hands and fled on foot.

An investigation found that a credit card that belonged to the woman was used at a gas station in East Palo Alto shortly after the reported robbery. Police said surveillance footage from the station showed the same person from Saturday’s arrest using the credit card.

Police arrested the 16-year-old from East Palo Alto on suspicion of committing multiple felonies, including robbery, possession of a stolen vehicle and evading arrest, and they transported him to Santa Clara County Juvenile Hall.

Police ask that anyone with information about this incident call the department’s 24-hour dispatch center at 650-329-2413. Anonymous tips can be emailed to paloalto@tipnow.org or sent by text message or voicemail to 650-383-8984. Tips can also be submitted anonymously through the police’s free mobile app.

—Bay City News Service

CORONAVIRUS
continued from page 10

has made rapid changes to its rules on athletic activities. It is important that changes are consistent across the board."

The updated guidance on outdoor activities was expected to be posted to the county’s coronavirus website at sccgov.org/coronavirus in the coming days.

Comprehensive COVID-19 coverage

View interactive charts tracking the spread of the coronavirus in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, plus answers to common questions and links to resources. Access the page at tinyurl.com/COVIDVaccinequestions. Have a question? Send it to editor@paweekly.com and we’ll do our best to answer it.

Your COVID-19 vaccine questions — answered

We’ve compiled a list of who can currently get vaccinated in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties, plus answers to common questions and links to resources. Access the page at tinyurl.com/COVIDVaccinequestions. Have a question? Send it to editor@paweekly.com and we’ll do our best to answer it.

Palo Alto Online, and the Mountain View Voice, at tinyurl.com/c19-Almanac. CalMatters and Bay City News

THE 35TH ANNUAL PALO ALTO WEEKLY

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MICHAEL REPKA
DELEON REALTY CEO & MANAGING BROKER

In addition to running the top listing team in Silicon Valley, Michael Repka is also the Chief Executive Officer and General Counsel of DeLeon Realty. Michael has two law degrees, including an advanced law degree in taxation (LL.M) from NYU School of Law, the #1 tax program in the nation. Prior to joining DeLeon Realty, Michael was a practicing real estate and estate-planning attorney. Michael also worked at PricewaterhouseCoopers, focusing on mergers and acquisitions, and later at Baker & McKenzie, specializing in tax law.

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Community kicks in to spruce up Woodside’s Village Hub

By Kate Daly

Encouraging a sense of community. That’s one goal fundraiser Melissa Petkov said she sought when she launched a GoFundMe campaign to spruce up the landscape at The Village Hub.

About a week or so after she posted the request online last month, more than 200 people donated a total of $8,030. By now installation should be completed under the live oaks and redwoods at Woodside Village Church in Woodside.

Petkov turned to her Woodside neighbor, landscape architect Cynthia Livermore, to draw up a plan, which includes hybrid native dogwood trees, manzanita, ceanothus and salvia.

Livermore said she wanted “to add to the serenity, the feeling of being under the trees and having a nice peaceful place to sit and have coffee or read.”

Petkov says after spending most of the last year at home with three young children, she craved connecting with people during the pandemic. Just walking across the street from school to grab a cup of coffee at the Village Hub meant a lot to her, but she felt that with a little “landscape love” the courtyard could become an even more attractive and natural environment,” she said.

She said she has been delighted to see so many volunteers work on improving the site.

Livermore moved into town three years ago and says she is also grateful for all the donors she doesn’t know yet, but figures she might meet at their newly refreshed gathering place.

\[N E W S\]

‘One year in’ series seeks readers’ perspectives on the pandemic

Almanac residents and their perspectives on life.

And as part of this reporting project, we’d like to hear from you, our readers. What’s your tale of the unprecedented year of isolation? What will the legacy of the pandemic be in how you live your life?

The health and economic crises have impacted different groups of people in divergent ways: Front-line hospital workers are increasingly exhausted, and some are angry, at the never-ending influx of patients; those who have been unemployed are facing mounting debt and fearing the day that back rent will be due; others have volunteered to help others and, in doing so, experienced the world in new ways.

The Almanac’s “One year in” will publish in two parts starting next Friday. Our journalists are busy interviewing and photographing people from different walks of life, but we’d also like to include your contributions. So what’s your story been during the pandemic? How are you different today than you were one year ago?

We welcome your thoughts, whether brief or lengthy. Send us your perspective by emailing editor@paweekly.com or by leaving us a three-minute voice-mail message at 650-223-6514 by Wednesday, March 10. You’ll need to leave your full name and a way for us to contact you.

—Almanac staff

From left: Rene Magana, Melissa and Lillian Petkov, Cynthia Livermore, Nancy Ridgway and Natalie Heerema install new landscaping at The Village Hub in Woodside.

\[VACCINATIONS\]

continued from page 5

youth program. County Superintendent Nancy Magee also noted in a Feb. 19 newsletter that the county will be holding vaccination clinics over the coming weeks for teachers. "The county health department hosted a vaccine clinic on Wednesday for some 2,300 educators at the county event center. "Getting school staff vaccinated is critical to getting students back on campus and to mitigating additional long-term impacts of interrupted education on our young people," she said. "Far too many of our students are not fully engaged or supported in their learning and are disconnected from their school community, teachers and peers. We must do all we can to ensure our students receive the critical social and emotional supports and academic engagement that in-person interaction provides."

The county anticipates it will take about six to eight weeks to vaccinate its education workforce, Magee noted.

"I hope when staff receive the vaccine they are encouraged and reassured about their safety, so that when we consider how to open up school in the fall, that is not a barrier," Sudaria said.

San Mateo County announced Feb. 11 that it would expand COVID-19 vaccinations beginning Feb. 22 to teachers and child care providers, first responders, and food and agricultural workers who are eligible under the state’s Phase 1B, as supply allows.

There are an estimated 5,000 teachers countywide, according to state Sen. Josh Becker, D-Menlo Park.

The county hosted a vaccination clinic at the San Mateo County Event Center on Monday to vaccinate 800 law enforcement members, including members of the county’s Sheriff’s Office.

Detective Rosemerry Blankswade, spokesperson for the Sheriff’s Office, received the vaccine on Monday along with others like detectives, sergeants, administrators and patrol officers. Blankswade said that San Mateo County Sheriff Carlos Bolanos was scheduled to receive the vaccine Monday afternoon.

Blankswade said she felt no side effects except a sore arm, as if she had been lifting at the gym. Overall, the drive-thru clinic went smoothly and faster than she expected. “It’s so simple,” Blankswade said. “The first couple of weeks when you start anything new there’s a learning curve, but County Health has really done a great job of making it a super streamlined process.”

Dr. Anand Chabra, the county’s section chief for COVID-19 mass vaccination, said in a statement that the county expected to receive a Moderna shipment at the beginning of this week. These doses will facilitate additional clinics for grocery and agricultural workers, such as a Thursday clinic in partnership with Puente de la Costa Star, a Coastside nonprofit that serves the communities of Pescadero, La Honda, Loma Mar and San Gregorio.

The Thursday clinic was expected to cater to up to 300 farmworkers, and Puente plans to host vaccine clinics on Fridays, too. Puente’s Community Outreach Associate Dalia Huerta said that their contact with farm owners through email, social media and flyers has been going well. With the high demand for the vaccine, she said they haven’t had to convince people to sign up.

“The response has been very positive and we’re getting quick feedback from them,” Huerta said. “They want it and they’re excited.”

As of Sunday, 130,205 people have received at least the first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine in San Mateo County, including about 60% of county residents 65 years and older.

Bay City News Service contributed to this report.

Email Angela Swartz at aswartz@almanacnews.com

Courtesy Kate Daly
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closures have harmed business. Karsten Iwers, who owns Harvest Furniture at 639 Santa Cruz Ave., which has operated in the city for more than 20 years, said that the street closure has been devastating.

“We have experienced a 30-plus percent reduction in revenue over the past seven months in Menlo Park compared to the same period a year before while our other Harvest Furniture locations have seen an increase in sales over the same period,” he wrote in an email to the City Council.

Stephen Miller, who runs the Stephen Miller Gallery, also supported reopening the street. “We’ve been playing in front of Bistro Vida since August, and Sundays have been one of the only music opportunities to play with other people due to the amount of space in the streets. It’s amazing being able to make music with friends, and we would all miss that if the streets were closed again,” he wrote. In their deliberations, council members noted that the pandemic is far from over, and promoting social distancing and additional precautions like the option to eat outdoors instead of indoors would continue to be important for some time.

“We are still in the middle of a pandemic,” said Councilman Ray Mueller. “It’s far too premature to say we can … stop these precautions. We are going to need precautions in place for a very long time, and there will be flare-ups again.”

The council raised some concerns that perhaps just the 600 block should stay closed, and the 800 block, where Galata Bistro has on-street seating, could be reopened for vehicle traffic, but the council ultimately agreed to keep the existing closures in effect. Vice Mayor Betsy Nash noted that the block has parallel parking, rather than angled parking, so there’s less space to take over parking areas while leaving the street unimpeded for vehicle traffic than on other downtown blocks.

“It’s not as well-used,” she said. “I’m hoping that will change as more people feel comfortable coming out.”

In addition, Councilwoman Jen Wolosin asked that the Walgreens owners who sought 10-minute parking spots at the rear of the store be permitted to install those to make it easier for customers to easily pick up pharmacy items.

“I think most of the impacts are more pandemic-related than street-closure-related,” she said. “The more people that come out and enjoy the music, the more they’ll go to the stores. I think this can be a win-win.”

Reimagining downtown
There have long been visions for creating a “paseo” or downtown area where vehicle traffic is barred and pedestrian activity encouraged to add vitality as part of the city’s “Downtown Specific Plan.”

But in recent years, a pilot project to create a car-free parklet by blocking off and laying down astroturf on a side street fell flat when faced with widespread opposition to the noise it generated and its blocking of vehicle access. One business owner paid to have an outside firm test the cleanliness of the turf carpet and found elevated bacterial levels, and the pilot ended shortly thereafter.

But now, with the pandemic-driven street closures, Chamber of Commerce President Fran Dehn said, the city has a “working model for a successful pilot.”

“This is an ideal time to study the public appetite for a future paseo,” she said.

In the long term, Mueller added, he continues to encourage the idea of building a downtown parking structure that would include a small movie theater and possibly housing on top. The mixed uses could help to pay for the project, and having a family-friendly entertainment venue downtown could help add vitality, he said.

In addition, he said that he and Councilwoman Cecilia Taylor are looking into assembling a request for information that would invite consultants or architects to weigh in on what it would take to renew the architectural and hardscape aesthetics downtown.

Email Kate Bradshaw at kbradshaw@almanacnews.com
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the Midpeninsula in the past.

Why Portola Valley?

Acker said she thinks protests have been held in smaller towns as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I was too afraid to go to San Francisco or Palo Alto because of the virus,” she said. “I knew I could go down there to (Alpine and Portola roads) and I could imagine myself to distance myself. A lot of people had that same kind of feeling. With the outrage and heartbeat, it became something else; many friendships forged over these months.

Portola Valley felt like a “silly” place to hold the protests at first, she said.

“Portola Valley? Seriously, come on,” she said. “It’s a predominantly white community, the fourth most affluent city in the U.S. How is this (racism) relevant here? It’s everywhere — there’s no place that is exempt. It’s in me. It’s all around us. It’s the water we swim in.”

Acker said that about a half year before the protests began, she felt fear when a Black man pulled up next to her in the parking lot for a hike.

“Then I immediately felt ashamed,” she said. “I didn’t like it in myself. I got out of my car and started talking to the guy. But I overfocused on my shame. There I am making it all about me again” which gets in the way of working on dismantling white supremacy, she said.

“There are deep patterns that have been implanted in us (for) generations; they’re passed down in subtle ways,” Acker said.

She said she was recently driving down Alpine Road when she saw a Black man to her left riding his bicycle. She felt a neutral response. When she looked to her right she saw a white man jogging.

“I had a visceral response that (the white man) was the scary person,” she said. “I thought, ‘Wow, this is the first time I’ve had even just a taste of what it feels like to be Black in America.’”

She said this response to the white man may have been influenced by the storming of the Capitol in January by a group that included white supremacists.

Acker said that going out every Sunday, they get a pulse on how people are feeling about this issue. She’s seen “haters respond” to the protests in a way that she had only previously seen on TV.

Acker has been most moved by the responses of children to the protests. She recalls a little girl sitting in the backseat of her parents’ car, making the shape of a heart with her hands as they drove by the demonstration.

“It gives me hope; seeing that kind of thing happening over and over,” she said.

Did she expect to see the longevity of the Portola Valley protests?

“No way,” she said.

Email Angela Swartz at aswartz@almanacnews.com

COMMUNITY BRIEFS continued from page 6

Washington Week Online from March 14 to 18
Nori will also receive a $10,000 scholarship.

High school students develop app
Students from TIDE Academy in Menlo Park and The Nueva School in San Mateo have developed a productivity and task management app called Condution.

The students spent 10 months developing the app, said Michah Robinson, a TIDE student.

“We were fed up with the insanely pricy and complicated task management apps in the market, so after doing some research, we decided to take matters into our own hands and create an open-source task management app and share it with the community,” he said in an email.

Download the app at condution.com.

—Angela Swartz

Blood donations needed
Blood centers already in need of donations due to the COVID-19 pandemic face more shortages due to severe winter weather around the country.

Local hospitals rely on a national supply of blood, which is facing a shortage due to severe winter weather in much of the country, according to officials with the Stanford Blood Center, which faces a critical need for all blood types, especially O-positive.

Stanford Blood Center has locations in Mountain View, Menlo Park and Campbell.

“O-positive is the most frequently-needed blood type for patients and, as of today, we only have about a two-day supply,” said Dr. Suchi Pandey, the center’s chief medical officer. “Our current collections of O-positive cannot sustain our support of our regular hospital partners as well as additional hospitals in critical need right now, so we need your help in the coming days.”

Appointments to donate blood can be scheduled online at various sites around the Bay Area, including the Stanford Blood Center at stanfordbloodcenter.org or by calling (888) 723-7831 for same-day appointments; the American Red Cross at redcross.org and Vitalant at vitalant.org.

Grand jury applicants sought
San Mateo County is seeking residents to serve on its Civil Grand Jury for the next term, which runs from July 1 to June 30, 2022.

Those eligible include anyone who has been a resident of San Mateo County for more than one year, is a U.S. citizen at least 18 years old, of ordinary intelligence, sound judgment and good character, with sufficient knowledge of the English language and who is not an elected public official.

Applications can be obtained online at samateocourt.org/documents/grand_jury/appliation_form.pdf, by phone at 650-261-5066, or by writing to the following address: Grand Jury Clerk, Court Executive Office, 400 County Center, Redwood City, CA 94063.

COVID relief grant application window now open
Qualifying restaurants, wineries and breweries in San Mateo County can now apply for COVID-19 relief grants of up to $10,000.

The county opened the grant application site at restaurantrelief@smcgov.org on Monday. The online application is available at smcstrong.org/restaurantrelief.

Grants will help qualifying applicants pay employees, cover rent and cover the cost of health and safety modifications due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Board of Supervisors voted on Jan. 26 to establish the Restaurant, Brewery and Winery Relief Program, which has $2.384 million of available funding.

The board allocated $1 million toward the fund, matching a $1 million donation from the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. An additional $384,000 came from the Silicon Valley Community Foundation.

To be eligible, applying restaurants, breweries and wineries must have a “brick and mortar” location in the county and must have been operating before Mar. 11. Full eligibility information is available on the grant website.

The online application portal will remain open for two weeks after it opened on Monday. The application will be reviewed and grants will be awarded based on a lottery system.

People can email questions to restaurantrelief@smcgov.org.

—Bay City News Service

Demonstrators continued from page 5

Seeing Floyd’s death on camera motivated Clark to get involved in BLM. He’d spoken up about racial injustice with other students — who he said would say things like “All lives matter” — and described Clark as “intense” about his conviction about BLM.

“That doesn’t justify a Black man getting killed in the street for no reason,” said his classmates’ comments. Fellow students seem to finally be understanding, he said.

“Going (to the rallies) and seeing people really want to make a change and really care about my culture and my color and my race, it’s very heart-warming to see and that they aren’t taking it,” he said.

Group achievements
If nothing else, some Portola Valley youth have received the message that there are people in the community that care about racial justice, Neely said.

“This feels important to me, having grown up here,” she said. “Also, some people were annoyed. We get snarky emails, public and private, and salty people flipping us off as they go through the intersection. I think it’s fine or even important when people feel uncomfortable in these ways.

Our intention isn’t for it to be a partisan issue, though. The intention is for our demonstrations to give energy to universal human values — justice, dignity, peace, equity. So hopefully our efforts have moved the needle on those issues in some hearts, even a tiny bit,” Neely said.

Neely said it’s going to take as much effort to dismantle white supremacy as it has taken to create it.

“If our efforts are just a flash in the pan when it’s popular, then we’re not going to get far,” she said. “And what we’ve seen is that there is energy in this community to do this kind of work, and that more structure would help facilitate that. As a group we’re currently listening to see where to put our energy and what the community wants. Do we keep demonstrating on the street corner every Sunday? Do we advocate for the official creation of a justice committee in Portola Valley that will continue to focus on these topics?”

Acker said that going out every Sunday, they get a pulse on how people are feeling about this issue. She’s seen “haters respond” to the protests in a way that she had only previously seen on TV.

Acker has been most moved by the responses of children to the protests. She recalls a little girl sitting in the backseat of her parents’ car, making the shape of a heart with her hands as they drove by the demonstration.

“It gives me hope; seeing that kind of thing happening over and over,” she said.

Did she expect to see the longevity of the Portola Valley protests?

“No way,” she said.

Email Angela Swartz at aswartz@almanacnews.com

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By John Orr

When "Thom Pain (based on nothing)," by Will Eno showed up in 2004, many theater critics were almost at sea when trying to describe it. But pretty much all of them were in awe of its beautiful writing.

It was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and was otherwise honored. Still, what is it about?

Local actor Michael Champlin will be giving audiences chances to think about it themselves when he delivers the one-man show Los Altos Stage will have livestreamed this season. The first two, "Fully Committed," starring Max Tachis, and "Ann," starring Judith Miller, were both excellent. Santa Clara County's COVID restrictions disallow live audiences but both Tachis and Miller delivered strong performances anyway, and Champlin can be trusted to do the same.

Even in normal circumstances, actors can't usually see the audience in the theater, Champlin pointed out, because of the way stage lights limit their vision. But, of course, live audiences can be heard, which gives a certain live feedback to the actors.

All that will have to happen in Champlin's mind.

Champlin is doing the show "for a host of reasons, not the least of which is that, as an actor during the pandemic, having the opportunity to get on a stage again. I jumped at it."

"And, also, I am thrilled to return to Los Altos Stage. Gary (Landis) is a fantastic director. When I read the script — I wasn't familiar with it — I thought it was incredible, and that I would love to dive into it."

A familiar face to local theatergoers, Champlin was born and raised on Long Island, and lived in New York for most of his life. He got into theater at a young age, partly thanks to family trips to Manhattan theaters, and thanks to a grandfather who would read the New York Times Arts section with him.

"I started focusing on theater in middle school," said Champlin. "I did plays in school, went to Tufts University, studied theater there, then came out of college focusing more on directing in film."

But theater continued to pull him in, and he taught theater and storytelling in East Harlem and the Bronx.

His first wife brought him to the Bay Area 15 years ago. The marriage didn't last, but Champlin quickly came to like the Bay Area's theater community. And theater is now a family business. He met his second wife, Katie O'Bryon Champlin, while performing in "Northanger Abbey" at The Pear Theatre in Mountain View in 2008. His son Jack, 14, from his first marriage, is doing theater at Palo Alto High School; second son Henry, 6, with O'Bryon Champlin, is "doing kindergarten in the living room."

By Feb. 19, Champlin had already started running "Thom Pain" at the Bus Barn, and had gotten comfortable in the environment.

"It fits for this character. The entire show is direct to audience. It's written to deliver to an engaged audience. It's a fit for the void we all exist in now (during the COVID lockdown)," he said.

"This surreal kind of existence, when you can almost trick yourself into thinking the outside doesn't exist. So much of that fits the theme of "Thom Pain.""

More information is available at losaltosstage.org/livestream-shows. 

Contributor John Orr can be emailed at johnorr@regardingarts.com
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By Elena Kadvany

Susie is a local sous chef who spends her days on the line, making Mediterranean grain bowls with turmeric-coriander rice, chicken, roasted vegetables, crispy garbanzo beans and drizzles of a spicy, bright-red chermoula sauce. She’s the ideal employee: She works impossibly long hours without complaint, maintaining near-perfect consistency no matter how many bowls she turns out. Susie forgoes benefits and vacations. She also doesn’t get paid.

Susie is a robot, a collection of software and hardware inside a massive 20 by 8 foot shipping container. She will soon be the newest employee of Mezli, a local startup that wants to use robotics to make cheap, convenient, high-quality food available to the masses.

The founders of Mezli — two Stanford University graduates and one current Ph.D. student with experience in artificial intelligence, robotics and software and mechanical engineering — envision a future in which prefabricated Susies can be installed in parking lots, shopping malls, universities and sports stadiums. Because there are no humans involved or expensive rent to pay, that means you can get a cauliflower and turmeric-rice bowl for $4.99.

“(We) started looking into what makes it so expensive to serve great quality food at a restaurant,” said CEO Alex Kolchinski, “and realized if we actually applied some robotics to the problem, we could significantly reduce the price point of high-quality food.”

Kolchinski is an AI researcher who dropped out of his doctoral program to start Mezli with co-founders Alex Gruebele and Max Perham. Gruebele, Mezli’s chief technology officer and an avid home cook, is finishing his doctoral degree in robotics and sensors while experimenting with home-curing meats and pickling. Perham is an aerospace engineer who once worked at McDonalds and In-N-Out Burger. As hungry, broke graduate students with little time to cook, they felt like there was no good option for high-quality restaurant food that’s both quick and affordable.

Enter Susie, who once she’s ready for prime time will be churning out a menu that was created by a human chef. The Mezli founders teamed up with Eric Minnich, a classically trained chef with experience at Michelin-starred restaurants, to develop a menu that a robot can confidently execute 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Unlike a human sous chef, Susie cannot work with open flames or oil. Minnich said he had to “reimagine the limits” of cooking, including freezing ingredients or keeping them cold until they’re reheated and served. (The rice-making method they came up with is also unconventional, and proprietary.) Sauces and toppings like crispy chickpeas and pumpkin seeds are all prepackaged. Until Susie is fully operational, Minnich is making the bowls, his hands imitating the actions of the robot.

“It’s the exact same preparation and steps of reheating and cooling and saucing that the robot’s going to do,” he said. “Essentially, I’m just the robot.”

Minnich, the former chef de cuisine at the Michelin-starred Madera in Menlo Park and executive chef of The Commissary in San Francisco, is now the culinary director at Kitchentown, a food startup incubator that’s housing Mezli. He said he wasn’t convinced out when a group of Stanford software and hardware engineers approached him with the idea of a mass-produced robot that could do his job. Food robots are nothing new — Bay Area companies have already applied automation to burgers, salads, ramen, pizza and croissants — and he knew firsthand the costs and challenges of the local restaurant labor shortage.

“The industry has its own struggles it’s going through as far as finding people who actually want to wash dishes and be cooks. There was already a need and demand for technology like this to come in and work with restaurants,” he said. “If you can’t hire anybody to fill the position anyway, a robot’s not really going to take anybody’s job.”

Kolchinski doesn’t see Mezli as supplanting traditional restaurants, where people go for social interaction as much as to eat. Mezli will never offer sit-down service and is geared toward takeout and delivery for people who want a convenient, fast meal they can eat at their desk or grab after work.

“A sit-down restaurant is a social activity; it’s a neighborhood fixture; there’s the human interaction side,” Kolchinski said. “This is much more, honestly, utility.”

For now, you can order Mezli bowls out of Kitchentown in San Mateo, but they’re still made by Minnich. They plan to have Susie up and running in the next month or two, and then test her more widely in other locations by next year. (They hope to start at their alma mater’s campus.) Down the line, the robots could expand into more cuisines, including Indian, Chinese, Mexican and Vietnamese, Kolchinski said. They recently debuted lamb kofte bowls, the most expensive menu item at $7.99.

Mezli is open for takeout and delivery Monday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 2 p.m. at 1007 Howard Ave. in San Mateo. More information is at order.mezli.com.

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