Local school officials ‘confident’ they can remain open amid omicron surge

Two Atherton private schools temporarily go remote following holiday break

By Angela Swartz and Zoe Morgan

It felt a bit like déjà vu on Saturday when Menlo School students opened an email from their head of school. Classes would be conducted remotely the first week back from winter break.

With the highly contagious omicron variant sweeping across the country, seemingly infecting fully vaccinated people, local public school districts are handing out COVID-19 tests and hoping to avert a spread on campuses following winter break.

Menlo School, a private school in Atherton that serves grades 6-12, decided to move all classes online for the first week back from winter break, having heard from many students they are testing positive over the last week. Head of School Thuan Healy told families in a Jan. 1 email. Staff will also be preparing more outdoor learning spaces on campus, since the virus spreads more easily indoors. He added that the move to distance learning should also be able to “capture the impact of large gatherings around the new year as well as travel.”

Classes will be suspended on Friday so students can take PCR tests on campus.

Healy said the school plans to evaluate if it will reopen on a week-by-week basis, but he doesn’t anticipate the shutdown will be long.

Sacred Heart Schools’ Atherton campus, which has preschool aged through 12th grade students, also went remote for the first two days back to school to give students time to get tested, reported Elizabeth Nixon, associate director of communications and PR for the school, in an email. The school was set to resume classes in person on Thursday, Jan. 6, she said.

In 2021, Menlo Park worked to restore a community bruised by the pandemic

By Kate Bradshaw

Within the oddly-shaped strip of the Peninsula that defines Menlo Park city limits, the past year brought about many efforts dedicated to building the community back from the impacts of a global pandemic, preparing for a new climate change reality — on top of the usual bustle that comes with being a desirable Silicon Valley community where there never seems to be enough homes or office buildings.

On one hand, as COVID-19 vaccines became more widely available, many Menlo Park residents were able to slowly return to activities that they enjoyed pre-pandemic. On the other, the year ended with a startling rise in COVID-19 cases as the omicron variant has spread quickly through communities, even in well-vaccinated ones like Menlo Park. San Mateo County Health reports that 100% of Menlo Park residents 5 and up had been vaccinated, but notes that the number may be slightly off because it compares self-reported cities of residence among people who received vaccinations to 2019 population estimates, generated prior to the 2020 U.S. Census.

However, cases of COVID-19 are also on the rise in Menlo Park. As of Dec. 30, there had been 405 confirmed cases of COVID-19 identified citywide within the previous 30 days, representing nearly 16% of the 2,600 total cases identified citywide since the county began tracking COVID-19 infections.

When it came to Menlo Park politics, the City Council tackled its fair share of controversial policies and its decisions were frequently split.

Mayor Drew Combs set a priority of rebuilding from the worst of the pandemic’s impact on city operations. After dramatic staff cuts last year, the city brought back about 22 staff positions that had been eliminated in the city’s 2021-22 fiscal year budget. The city also managed the task of figuring out how to reopen city services safely, from day care to library services to City Hall.

The council hashed out which environmental policies to adopt to work toward its ambitious goal of becoming a zero carbon city by 2030, cutting carbon dioxide equivalent emissions by 90% from 2005 levels and eliminating the rest of the emissions through carbon removal.
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Redevelopment galvanizes residents to protect neighborhood trees

By Leah Worthington

Tjaswini Ravindra is nervous about traveling over the holidays. It’s not so much the omicron variant or the trip itself that are weighing on her — she’s been looking forward to a vacation with her husband and son — but what might happen in her absence.

“I’m worried about leaving because, when my back is turned, what if some trees get cut down?” Ravindra is not your average tie-dye-wearing tree hugger but a mother and resident of North Fair Oaks, an unincorporated area between Redwood City and Menlo Park that has been the center of recent redevelopment by the Los Angeles-native realty company Thomas James Homes. She and other residents say that as homes have gone up, trees have come down.

“The first casualty was on 14th Avenue,” said resident Niket Sirsi. “Ever since I’ve lived here, it’s been about 10 years now, that street has always been very beautiful. You’ve got these majestic ashes that are lining on both sides. And as soon as (TJ Homes) put up the fences, there was a permit to remove the tree.”

Since coming last December into North Fair Oaks, TJ Homes has purchased half a dozen properties, tearing down the existing houses and building larger, more expensive ones in their place. The firm has also proposed the removal of 12 trees, of which three are protected, and has preserved 17, with the intention of planting 14 new ones.

The situation has become so concerning that Ravindra, Sirsi and dozens of other residents in the North Fair Oaks neighborhood known as “the Avenues” have found themselves in an escalating battle with the developer.

What began as a small group of disgruntled neighbors has grown into a coalition of residents locking arms against the tide of new developments and tree removal — and the changes it may spell for their neighborhood.

On a recent walking tour through the quiet, shaded pocket of North Fair Oaks that borders Menlo Park, 36-year resident Susanne Beattie admired the dense greenery overhead, pointing out a few notable trees.

“One, in particular, is a point of pride for the community. “That’s the Granny tree, right here,” Beattie said as she gazed across the street, “They wanted to cut that down.”

“Granny,” as neighbors affectionately call the 250-300-year-old oak tree, comes into view, its extensive network of branches forming an impressive canopy. Were it not for the neighbors this towering heritage tree might not exist. In 2011, resident Mary Ann Muller launched a campaign to protect the 65-foot oak, ultimately halting a water pipeline project that would have damaged the tree or possibly uprooted it altogether.

Residents of the Avenues take stewardship of their greenery seriously. According to Laura Caplan, resident and current president of Fair Oaks Beautification Association, a volunteer urban forestry group, the neighborhood has planted some 400 trees since the 1990s, and they’re working on getting permits to plant more.

“Those trees have grown up to become quite a beautiful mature canopy in this area. And very much appreciated by everyone who lives here,” said Caplan. “And also it’s made it more attractive, I think, to developers because, ‘Oh, here’s this little gem of a neighborhood.’”

“(The neighborhood) changed so much over the years. It’s just amazing.” Beattie said during the walking tour, nostalgia in her voice as she pointed out the newly constructed houses. “Back then when we first bought, this was a more blue collar, much more rundown kind of place.”

She paid about $160,000 for her house, with three bedrooms and one story, in the 1980s. Her home was “one of the nicest” at the time, she said.

“This is twofold, what we have going on, said Chris Boedeker, another frustrated NFO resident, from her house on 15th Avenue. “It’s about the trees. That’s number 1. Number 2 is TJ Homes…”

“And the monstrosities they’re building,” Beattie said, interjecting.

Housing and development were top of mind in Woodside in 2021

By Angela Swartz

P otential development in town took center stage in Woodside in 2021.

With state mandates taking effect, it was a year of planning for what the town will look like with more housing units. A proposal to allow the development of outdoor community gathering spaces of the Town Center area closely divided residents. With vaccinations against COVID-19 rolled out and new equipment for recording and streaming, government meetings began to take place in person for the first time in a year and a half.

Measures A and B, passed by just a handful of votes in November, Measure A, allows for expanded use of two residentially zoned parcels. After the votes were tallied, a town resolution surfaced

showing that the land along the Cañada and Woodside roads intersection, known as Cañada Corners and owned by George Roberts of Roberts Market, had been placed under an open space conservation easement.

The Roberts have not brought a plan to the Town Council yet, but the council can choose not to enforce an easement (or amend it), if members deem it to be for the public good.

By Angela Swartz

S ome semblance of normalcy returned to local schools in 2021

By Angela Swartz

I n 2021, there was somewhat of a return to normalcy at local schools. Students were back on campuses full time by the fall. High schools held in-person commencement ceremonies and some schools even held modified proms.

Enrollment continued to rise as students returned to local schools in 2021. There was somewhat of a return to normalcy in 2021, with staffs having to fill in.

New principals started at local high schools, while the Sequoia Union High School District welcomed a new superintendent.

Full-time return to campuses

Although elementary-aged students returned to schools on a hybrid basis in fall 2020, it was different for public high schools. Sequoia district pupils didn’t return to campus until spring, and on a part-time basis, much to the ire of some families who wanted their teens back in classrooms sooner despite the risks of the pandemic.

Once back full time in the fall, rules around COVID-19 exposure began to loosen in public schools, while private schools actually saw more students interested in enrolling.
Atherton welcomes nearly complete new civic center, grapples with burglaries in 2021

By Angela Swartz

M uch of the focus in Atherton during 2021 was completing the town’s long-awaited $32 million civic center. In the fall, staff moved into the new Town Hall and the Town Council commemorated the opening with a ribbon cutting ceremony and tour of the facilities in December. The council and committe members continued to meet remotely during the pandemic. They plan to resume in-person meetings once the Council Chambers are complete in 2022.

Like other small towns on the Midpeninsula, Atherton began to grapple with a big increase in state housing mandates.

Civic center and other construction

After a little over two years of construction, the two-story, cream-colored, nearly 30,000-square-foot City Hall building between Fair Oaks and Dinkelspiel Station lanes is nearly complete. The police and town administrators began working on the first floor in Town Hall this fall. Public works, building and planning departments moved into the second floor of the building. Though government meetings remained remote, the council plans to start meeting on a hybrid basis once the 50-seat Council Chambers are completed sometime in February. Some audience members would dial in through Zoom, while others could attend in person.

The 10,000 square foot library is expected to be completed around February 2022. Atherton’s original 1,696-square-foot Town Hall opened in 1924.

Menlo College, at El Camino Real and Encinal Avenue, broke ground on its new $20 million 288-bed residence hall in the spring. This will be the first new housing built on the campus in more than 30 years, according to the school.

Town Council updates

After Vice Mayor Mike Lempres moved to Paris in the fall, the Town Council voted unanimously to replace him with longtime audit and finance committee member George Rodericks.

Burglaries and cameras

There was a new string of burglaries, which police said is likely tied to a 2018 crime spree in town. Town officials decided to install more automated license plate readers in Atherton in response to break-ins. There are now a total 47 license plate readers, according to Town Manager George Rodericks.

State housing allocations

Town officials also kicked off their housing element planning processes in 2021. The town faces significant increases in the number of units they’re required to designate for development by the state in the 2023-31 Regional Housing Needs Allocation. Atherton is required to plan for the development of 348 new housing units compared to just 93 during the 2014-22 cycle.

Atherton’s new civic center is one of the town’s key achievements in 2021.

Menlo Park briefs

Public input sought for redesigning process

Menlo Park’s independent redistricting committee is moving through its process to draw new boundaries and collecting public input on how city council districts should be drawn within and what areas represent a “community of interest,” or “a population that shares common social or economic interests that should be included within a single supervisory district for purposes of its effective and fair representation,” according to state law.

Go to is.gd/XOcwkG to complete a survey to provide input. The committee’s next meeting is a public hearing set for 6 p.m. on Thursday, Jan. 13 via Zoom.

The deadline for Menlo Park to complete the entire redistricting process is April 17.

Sidewalk lawsuit settled

Menlo Park has settled a lawsuit with a resident group that sought to halt plans to have sidewalks installed on Sharon Road, near La Entrada Middle School in west Menlo Park.

In December, the Menlo Park City Council voted unanimously to modify its sidewalk design to be 5 feet wide on the north side of Sharon Road between Alameda de las Pulgas and Alschul Avenue. The modified design also shifts the center of the road 1 foot north from the previously approved design, which shifted the center of the road 2 feet south.

The previous plans, approved in January 2021, set the new sidewalks to be 6 feet wide. However, that March, a group called “Save Our Menlo Park Neighborhoods” filed a petition alleging that the sidewalk plans “violated the California Environmental Quality Act,” according to a staff report. The group favored an alternate proposal to install an asphalt strip along the side of the road with restricted parking during the day but permitted parking at night.

While the new sidewalks will be slightly narrower, they will still comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act and trees will be protected except for one street tree, which will be replaced in accordance with the city’s heritage tree ordinance. Parking will be restricted on the north side of the street and a 15 miles per hour zone will be enforced when children are present.

Construction bids for the project are set to be sought in the spring, and the project is expected to be completed before the 2022-23 school year starts, according to the report.

— Kate Bradshaw
In 2021, development and fire risk dominated the conversation in Portola Valley

By Angela Swartz

Much like in 2020, Portola Valley residents continued to push back against new development projects in town and raised concerns about fire hazards. Some vocal residents even staged their own evacuation drill to make a point about their fire safety concerns. And the Town Council continued meeting remotely over Zoom, but town services resumed in-person in 2021.

Development pushback

The group Portola Valley Neighbors United continued to oppose the Portola Terrace housing proposal, known as the Stanford Wedge project.

Although some residents have supported the 39-unit project, others have concerns that the addition of housing could cause a traffic jam on two-lane Alpine Road in the event of a fire emergency and about fire hazards on the property itself.

A draft environmental impact report on the project is expected in early 2022.

Residents also expressed opposition to a proposed tasting room and event center at Neely Winery.

One project that is receiving widespread endorsements across town is the development of 13 units of housing for adults with disabilities. The developers said they expect a fast-tracked approval process (between 15 to 18 months) since the units proposed are allowed “by-right.”

Fire risk discussion

Homeowners, including former mayor Maryann Derwin, shared their struggles to insure their houses, as insurance companies became increasingly wary of densely wooded neighborhoods in the wake of a slew of wildfires in the West.

Fearful of what would happen if a catastrophic fire forced residents to evacuate, a group of neighbors decided to take matters into their own hands after town officials said such an exercise wasn’t worthwhile. They hosted their own grassroots drill over the summer.

Other happenings

A ban on gas-powered leaf blowers took effect, which residents said made the town noticeably quieter.

Chabad Portola Valley & Woodside, a new Jewish organization, opened its doors to residents in the spring, saying it hoped to fill a void in Jewish services in the area.

By Monica Corman

Real Estate Q&A

Dear Patricia:

I rebuilt an existing guest house (minus a kitchen) 20 years ago and now would like to add a kitchen and other space. Have the allowable floor area limits been expanded? Patricia B.

Dear Monica:

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Dear Patricia:

A new law in California that took effect Jan. 1, 2022, expands the previous laws regarding ADUs (Accessory Dwelling Units). There are several changes and the one pertaining to square footage would allow you to expand the floor area limit by up to 800 square feet. Based on your description, you should be fine adding a kitchen and more to your current ADU. Consult the building department of your city for confirmation of the specific rules.

Contact me at monica@monicacorman.com: Office: 650-465-5971, COMPASS. WSJ Nationally Ranked. Real Trends Bay Area Top 100 Agents
FDA expands Pfizer booster eligibility to kids ages 12-15

By Eli Walsh/
Bay City News Service


The FDA opened booster vaccine eligibility to everyone ages 16 and up in November, arguing that an additional dose of any of the three available vaccines would bolster one’s immune response to the virus.

On Monday, the agency said it would expand that eligibility after reviewing data from more than 6,300 children in Israel, which showed no new safety concerns for children ages 12-15 after they had received a booster.

“With the current wave of the omicron variant, it’s critical that we continue to take effective, life-saving preventative measures such as primary vaccination and boosters, mask wearing and social distancing in order to effectively fight COVID-19,” acting FDA Commissioner Dr. Janet Woodcock said in a statement.

The FDA and officials at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention began approving the use of booster vaccines in August — at that time, only for people with weakened or compromised immune systems — as data has shown vaccine-triggered immune responses to decline in the months following the initial vaccination series.

While the available vaccines remain highly effective at preventing serious COVID-19 illness and death, public health officials at all levels have argued that bolstering the body’s immune response will maximize protection against existing and potential variants of the virus, which could become more contagious and even circumvent vaccine protections.

The FDA also announced Monday that it will reduce the time Pfizer vaccine recipients must wait before being eligible for a booster dose from six months to five.

Moderna vaccine recipients will still be required to wait at least six months to get a booster dose while Janssen/Johnson & Johnson recipients will still be required to wait at least two months after receiving their initial shot.

For children ages 5-11, the FDA said it would expand the primary vaccination series from two vaccine doses to three if the child is immunocompromised due to illness or a solid organ transplant.

The Pfizer vaccine is currently the only vaccine option for children ages 5-11. FDA officials said that the third dose will allow eligible immunocompromised children to receive the full expected protection of vaccination.

The FDA has previously made a third vaccine dose as part of the initial vaccination series for people ages 12 and up if they have a weakened immune system.

**SCHOOLS 2021**

**continued from page 5**

the previous school year, high schoolers were required to quarantine if they were exposed to the virus, but during the 2021-22 school year, only those who were unvaccinated needed to quarantine. Some 175 cases were reported to the district in total during the fall of 2021. Of those, 58 were at Menlo-Atherton High School, 5 were at TIDE Academy and 27 were at Woodside High.

Middle school students were “willing to do anything it takes” to stay in school and followed precautions well, one Menlo Park school official said.

Teachers expressed anxiety about coming back to instruct in-person amid the pandemic. A shortage of substitute teachers proved to be a particular pain point for schools on the Peninsula. Districts got creative, with principals, counselors and other school staff covering classes. Teachers in some cases have been filling in for their absent colleagues during free periods meant to be set aside for grading and lesson planning.

With the return came higher spending to cover the safety costs to bring students back to campuses.

When the 2020-21 school year wrapped in the spring of 2021, M-A seniors masked up for an outdoor prom on the soccer field.

Unlike the Class of 2020, the Class of 2021 got the opportunity to walk across a stage to receive their diplomas. Graduations were scaled back, with fewer attendees and shortened ceremonies.

**Sports competitions return**

In January, high school sports teams resumed play, after athletes spent almost a year of being limited to conditioning work.

The California Interscholastic Federation (CIF), the state’s governing body for high school sports, said seasons would resume in late 2020, but the start date was pushed back.

Families rallied in January to let athletes fully return to competition, including indoor sports, as part of the “Let Them Play” effort.

**Leadership changes**

The Sequoia district hired Darnise Williams as its new superintendent in the summer.

She took over for Crystal Leach, who led the district on an interim basis after former superintendent Mary Strashely was forced to resign following a vote of no confidence by the teachers union and top administrators.

M-A, Woodside and TIDE Academy welcomed new principals in the fall of 2021.

M-A Principal Simone Rick-Kennel left her longtime post to lead TIDE and the district’s small schools. She replaced Allison Silvestri at TIDE. Karl Losekoot, M-A’s instructional vice principal, took the helm at M-A.

Woodside Principal Diane Burbank retired this year as well. Her replacement was Karren van Putten, who most recently was a principal at Saratoga.

**MPCD tax measure passes**

The Menlo Park City School District’s parcel tax, Measure B, passed in November with overwhelming support (74.4% voters said “yes”).

The measure asked for $598 per parcel annually, a $193 bump from the current rate of about $405. It will raise $4.6 million annually for the district, which serves about 2,700 students in Menlo Park and Atherton.

Measure B will sunset after 12 years, expiring in 2033. It replaces Measure X, a seven-year parcel tax which expires in June 2024.

Email Staff Writer Angela Swartz at aswartz@almanacnews.com.
Palo Alto considers relaxed rules for Foothills Nature Preserve entry

By Gennady Sheyner

When Palo Alto opened the once-exclusive Foothills Park to the broader public at the end of 2020, the number of visitors instantly spiked and one Palo Alto City Council member described a weekend visit to the normally serene nature preserve as “Disneyland.”

With rangers reporting deteriorated trails and residents complaining about parking and traffic problems, the council reacted by lowering the cap on the number of people who can be at the newly christened Foothills Nature Preserve, by instituting a $6 vehicle fee and by exploring new policies, such as a reservation system for people wishing to book a visit.

A year later, the hype has diminished and so have most of the problems. According to Community Services Department staff, the number of visitors hasn’t reached the capacity limit of 500 since early April. There hadn’t been any parking problems at the preserve and the early problems with visitors wandering off path have been alleviated through signage and, in some cases, rope barriers.

The number of visitors remains far higher than it had been historically, when only Palo Alto residents and their visitors were allowed to visit the preserve. But it has also dipped substantially since the early days. According to Community Services Department data, there were about 42,000 visitors to Foothills in January 2021, just before the city implemented its entrance fee. This is 32% in comparison to January 2020, when the preserve was still going public, according to Filoli.

“As staff at Filoli, we are stewards of an institution and collections held in public trust,” said Filoli CEO Kara Newport in a statement. “The accreditation process has provided valuable insight into how we are reflecting our mission and our critical alignment between staff and board. We have emerged from it with renewed assurance of our trajectory towards a truly visitor-centric organization, where stories connect our visitors with history, nature, and the diversity of our region.”

Of the country’s estimated 33,000 museums, over 1,095 are currently accredited by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), the highest national recognition afforded the nation’s museums, according to a recent release from the Woodside estate.

Accreditation signifies excellence to the museum community, to governments, funders, outside agencies, and to the public,” said Newport.

To earn accreditation, a museum must conduct a year of self-study, and then undergo a site visit by a team of peer reviewers. An accreditation commission then considers the self-study and visiting committee report.

“Engagement is a key driver of our mission,” Newport said.

“Thankfully, I am feeling fine and am grateful to be vaccinated and to have received my booster shot. I will be quarantining at home and look forward to returning to work as soon as possible,” he said.

In separate tweets, Becker also encouraged people to get vaccinated and boosted.

“If you have not received your vaccine or booster, I strongly encourage you to do so. You can find information and schedule an appointment here: myturn.ca.gov,” he said. He also directed people to covid19.ca.gov/get-tested, a state website with information about where to get tested for COVID-19.

Becker didn’t specify which variant he contracted, but federal health officials on Wednesday said that 95% of cases throughout the country are now caused by the highly transmissible omicron variant. Only about 5% of cases are now found to be the previoulsy ubiquitous delta variant.

—Sue Dremann

Supervisor Don Horsley named board president

The San Mateo County Board of Supervisors on Jan. 4 appointed Supervisor Don Horsley as board president for the upcoming year.

It is the third time that Horsley has been appointed board presidnet by his colleagues. He is in the final year of his third term on the board and is not eligible to run again due to term limits.

In a statement, Horsley called for an equitable recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

“The optimism that we had in 2021 we’ll be able to move back to a semblance of what we used to think of as normal life,” he said. “But I know that things will continue to be challenging in the next few weeks and months. It is not over.”

Horsley represents District 3, which covers Half Moon Bay and much of the coastal part of San Mateo County stretching east to cities like San Carlos and Atherton. He is replacing David Canepa as board president. The board also appointed Supervisor Dave Pine as its vice president.

SamTrans to offer free WiFi on all buses

SamTrans passengers will soon be able to access free Wi-Fi on all 70 routes throughout San Mateo County, the public transportation service announced on Jan. 3. As part of this service, the agency will use an internet connection on their 800-series articulated buses, though the entire fleet will be online by February 2022. Passengers will be able to text, email, browse social media and play online games by connecting to “SamTrans-Wifi” aboard any SamTrans bus.

“The modern world is an interconnected world,” said SamTrans Board Chair Dave Stone in a statement. “Having onboard WiFi will help SamTrans riders to stay connected while riding, making our service even more valuable to those who rely on it. This is another reason SamTrans is the best ride wherever you’re going in San Mateo County.”

More information on the service can be found online at samtrans.com.

—Bay City News Service

COMMUNITY BRIEFS

COVID booster clinics for local students

The Menlo Park City School District will host a booster clinic with SafeWary Pharmacy for students over 12 years old and district-affiliated adults on Thursday, Jan. 13.

The clinic will run from 2-7 p.m. at the district office, 181 Encinal Ave. in Atherton.

The appointment scheduling tool will open Saturday, Jan. 8. The district will first offer clinic spots to its families/staff members and open it up to others if registrations don’t fill up, said Parke Treadway, the district’s public information officer, in an email.

Sign up to volunteer at the clinic at https://volunteer.focusinc.org.

The Ravenswood City School District will also host vaccine clinics next week for children ages 5-11.

Clinics will be held on the following dates:

- Monday, Jan. 10, from 3-7 p.m. at Belle Haven Elementary, 415 Ivy Drive in Menlo Park.
- Tuesday, Jan. 11, from 3-7 p.m. at Costano School, 2695 Fordham Ave. in East Palo Alto.
- Wednesday, Jan. 12, from 3-7 p.m. at Los Robles-Ronald McNair, 2031 Pulgas Ave. in East Palo Alto in the BGCP Parking Lot.
- Portola Valley Town Hall closed this week due to rise in COVID cases

With the rapid spread of the omicron variant, and the potential for inadvertent exposures during the holidays, the town closed Town Hall the week of Jan. 3 while staff worked remotely, according to a town email.

The Town Hall is expected to reopen the week of Jan. 10. All of the office’s services will be available during the closure on the town’s website portovalley.net.

Draw a redistricting map for Woodside

The town of Woodside is making a change in how voters elect the Town Council. Beginning in 2022, voters will choose a Town Council member who lives in their district. This will replace the current system of “from-district” elections in which voters town-wide can vote for all Town Council members.

The next step in the process is for residents to submit proposed district maps for consideration. Visit mapwoodside.org to learn more and contribute maps.

Woodside Planning Commission openings

The Woodside Planning Commission is recruiting members in District 3 and 4.

Commissioners serve four-year terms that run from February to February of the following year. It is the best ride wherever you’re going in San Mateo County.”

More information on the service can be found online at samtrans.com.

—Bay City News Service

LEHUA GREENMAN

“May you have…

The Spirit of the New Year which is Peace. The Courage of the New Year which is Hope. The Heart of the New Year which is Love. And may we all give ourselves the time to enjoy today’s simple pleasures.

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January 7, 2022 — AlmanacNews.com • The Almanac
Menlo Park minimum wage to rise to $15.75 per hour

By Kate Bradshaw

In Menlo Park, the new year brings with it a new increase in the minimum wage. As of Jan. 1, it’s $15.75 per hour, up 50 cents from last year.

The increase is derived from the maximum allowed inflation adjustment of 3% per hour, which was $15.46, rounded up to the next increment of $0.05.

Prices in the San Francisco area rose 3.7% between August 2020 and August 2021, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, part of the U.S. Department of Labor and measured by the "Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers." As part of that, food prices rose 5.1%, energy prices increased 21.5% while other items overall increased by about 2.5% over the course of the year.

Gasoline prices were up 5.4% over the year while electricity was down 9.3%. Recreation rose 12.9%, and new and used motor vehicles rose 12.8%, according to a September press statement from the agency.

The new minimum wage applies to Menlo Park employees working at least two hours or more per week, and applies only to businesses located within the geographic boundaries of incorporated Menlo Park; unincorporated areas are not subject to the law.

Employers are expected to post the city-provided official notice to all employees in a visible place.

Employees have a right to file a complaint and inform the city about any minimum wage violations and to inform people of their potential rights and help others to report a business not complying with the city’s local minimum wage regulations.

To report a suspected violation, people should contact the Menlo Park City Manager’s office. Access the contact form at is gilminuw.

Complaints are considered confidential "to the maximum extent permitted by law," according to the city website.

Minimum wages in other cities

Here’s how other communities’ minimum wages stack up. Palo Alto’s is $16.45, while Santa Clara, Los Altos and Cupertino have raised the pay floor to $16.40.

Redwood City’s and San Jose’s minimum wage rose to $16.20 on Jan. 1. Mountain View and Sunnyvale’s rose to $17.10, the highest minimum wage in the region.

Even the highest minimum wages in Santa Clara County are predictably far away from the living wage for the region, which is approximately $27.29 for one adult with no children, according to the Living Wage Calculator designed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The wage hikes come as the region sees a lopsided economic recovery. Giant tech companies are booming and well-positioned to weather the pandemic, while consumer-facing businesses that mainly rely on minimum wage workers, such as retailers, restaurants and hotels, continue to struggle, reports found.

“There is a concern that (the wage increases) could have a chilling effect on businesses that are already in uneven recovery,” Derrick Seaver, head of the San Jose Chamber of Commerce, told San Jose Spotlight.

“And a lot of times, wage increases or increases in business costs overall are simply passed on to consumers, and that tends to impact folks that are on the lower end of the income scale.”

Email Staff Writer Kate Bradshaw at kgradshaw@almanacnews.com.
WOODSIDE 2021
continued from page 5

State housing allocations and other development

Town officials also began to kick off planning for the housing element. Woodside faces significant increases in the number of units they’re required to designate for development by the state (from 62 units in the last cycle to 328 units in the 2023-31 Regional Housing Needs Allocation). They also addressed increased development that will result from Senate Bill 9, which allows homeowners in single-family zones to split their lots and build up to four housing units. SB 9 requires local agencies to grant ministerial approval to certain lot splits and up to two units on each resulting lot, with 4-foot minimum side and rear setbacks.

The Town Council and other residents expressed concerns about preserving the town’s “rural character” and not increasing wildfire risk with building.

Woodside council members adopted a resolution stating they “feel strongly” that state housing legislation deprives towns of their abilities to meet the needs of their communities.

Other happenings

Town Hall reopened. In September, the Town Council began meeting in person for the first time since March 2020. The council welcomed audience members both in Council Chambers and over Zoom.

Construction workers completed the $2 million rebuilding of the aging Portola Road bridge. A new Jewish organization for Woodside and Portola Valley opened its doors to residents in the spring, saying there was a void in Jewish services in the area.

Woodside’s population increased by only 0.4% — to 7,188 people — from 2010 to 2020, according to the latest census data. Email Staff Writer Angela Swartz at aswartz@almanacnews.com.
Contributions to the Holiday Fund go directly to programs that benefit Peninsula residents. Last year, Almanac readers and foundations contributed $260,000 from more than 170 donors for the 10 agencies that feed the hungry, house the homeless and provide numerous other services to those in need.

Contributions to the Holiday Fund will be matched, to the extent possible, by generous community organizations, foundations and individuals, including the Rotary Club of Menlo Park Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation and the David and Lucile Packard Foundation. No administrative costs will be deducted from the gifts, which are tax-deductible as permitted by law.

All donations to the Holiday Fund will be shared equally among the 10 recipient agencies listed on this page.

The Almanac will make every effort to publish donor names for donations unless the donor checks the anonymous box. All donations will be acknowledged by mail.

The organizations below provide major matching grants to the Holiday Fund.

**The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation**

**The David and Lucile Packard Foundation**

The Almanac will make every effort to publish donor names for donations unless the donor checks the anonymous box. All donations will be acknowledged by mail.

Please consider donating online, which enables your gift to be processed immediately. The secure website is: siliconvalleycf.org/almanac-holiday-fund

Enclosed is a check for $__________

Name__________________________

Business Name__________________

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I wish to designate my contribution as follows: (select one)

☐ In my name as shown above

☐ In the name of business above

☐ In honor of: ☐ In memory of: ☐ As a gift for:

______________________________

(Name of person)

The Almanac Holiday Fund is a donor advised fund of Silicon Valley Community Foundation, a 501 (c) (3) charitable organization.

A contribution to this fund allows your donation to be tax-deductible to the fullest extent of the law.

**Boys & Girls Clubs**

Provides after-school academic support, enrichment, and mentoring for 1,800 low-income K-12 youth at nine locations across Menlo Park, East Palo Alto, and the North Fair Oaks neighborhood of Redwood City.

**Ecumenical Hunger Program**

Provides emergency food, clothing, household essentials, and sometimes financial assistance to families in need, regardless of religious preference, including Thanksgiving and Christmas baskets for more than 2,000 households.

**Fair Oaks Community Center**

This multi-service facility, serving the broader Redwood City community, provides assistance with child care, senior programs, citizenship and immigration, housing and employment, and crisis intervention. Programs are available in Spanish and English.

**LifeMoves**

Provides shelter/housing and supportive services across 18 sites in Silicon Valley and the Peninsula. Serves thousands of homeless families and individuals annually on their path back to permanent housing and self-sufficiency.

**Literacy Partners — Menlo Park**

Supports literacy programs and projects through fundraising and community awareness. Helps community members enhance their reading, writing and related skills and education to improve their economic, professional and personal wellbeing.

**Ravenswood Family Health Center**

Provides primary medical and preventive health care for all ages at its clinic in East Palo Alto. Of the more than 17,000 registered patients, most are low-income and uninsured and live in the ethnically diverse East Palo Alto, Belle Haven, and North Fair Oaks areas.

**Second Harvest Food Bank**

The largest collector and distributor of food on the Peninsula, Second Harvest Food Bank distributed 52 million pounds of food last year. It gathers donations from individuals and businesses and distributes food to more than 250,000 people each month through more than 770 agencies and distribution sites in San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

**St. Anthony’s Padua Dining Room**

Serves hundreds of hot meals six days a week to people in need who walk through the doors. Funded by voluntary contributions and community grants, St. Anthony’s is the largest dining room for the needy between San Francisco and San Jose. It also offers take-home bags of food, as well as emergency food and clothing assistance.

**StarVista**

Serves more than 32,000 people throughout San Mateo County, including children, young people and families, with counseling, prevention, early intervention, education, and residential programs. StarVista also provides crisis intervention and suicide prevention services including a 24-hour suicide crisis hotline, an alcohol and drug helpline, and a parent support hotline.

**Upward Scholars**

Empowers low-income adults by providing them with financial support, tutoring, and other assistance so they can continue their education, get higher-paying jobs, and serve as role models and advocates for their children.
Thank you for donating to the Holiday Fund

### Almanac Holiday Fund Donor List

As of Dec. 30th, 139 donors have contributed $252,773 to the Almanac Holiday Fund.

#### 16 Anonymous $9,248

#### New Donors

- Calhoon Family Fund $250
- Pegasus UNMC Foundation $1,000
- The UMC Charitable Fund $100,000
- Margaret & Jamie Machiniven $100
- Dan & Kathy Francis $1,000

#### In Memory Of

- Bob Berk $125

#### Previous Donors

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- Charles Bacon $200
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- Maggie Markda Silva $300
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- Donald & Judy MacMillan $500
- Laura Hofstadter & Leonard Shar $750
- Jerry & Shirley Carlson $250
- Margo Sensenbrenner $100

#### In Memory Of

- Donna Whitson $500
- Doris & Jerry Carlson $100
- Robby Babcock $250
- Jean Zoner $1,000
- Bill Land $100
- Duncan Matteson $500
- Paul Bosman $500
- Frank & Celine Halet $500
- Bill Hewlett & Dave Packard $750

#### Businesses & Organizations

- Packard Foundation $15,000
- Hewlett Foundation $8,750
- Griffin & Sons Construction $100
- Rotary Club of Menlo Park Foundation $10,000
- Menlo Park Firefighters’ Association $500

* Donor did not want to publish the amount of the gift.

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**Ravenswood Family Health Network offers community-based care for the whole family**

By Jessica Yee

Christopher Mendoza’s first visit to the Ravenswood Family Health Network was when he was 5, and his mother Maria noticed soot, round bumps in his mouth. Having heard positive things about Ravenswood, she booked an appointment for her son the next day.

At his appointment, a pediatrician checked Cris’ mouth and diagnosed him with a common bacterial infection. He was prescribed an antibiotic ointment that they could pick up at Ravenswood’s in-house pharmacy. After a week, the infection improved and Cris was feeling better.

Almost two years ago, Mayview Community Health Centers in Palo Alto, Mountain View, and Sunnyvale became part of Ravenswood Family Health Network. Since then, Ravenswood has successfully operated Mayview’s three sites and its East Palo Alto clinic to continue to provide access to health care for communities in both San Mateo and Santa Clara counties.

Across these sites, Ravenswood Family Health Network serves over 20,000 patients. It is one of the beneficiaries of this year’s Almanac’s Holiday Fund. Because The Almanac and its partner the Silicon Valley Community Foundation cover all the administrative costs, every dollar raised goes directly to this year’s 10 nonprofit organizations. Donations to the Holiday Fund can be made at almanacnews.com/holiday_fund.

When Maria felt overwhelmed about Cris’ asthma, Ravenswood was there to help. Cris was diagnosed with asthma as an infant, and over time it has become more severe. Maria was desperate to feel more secure with Cris’ condition, and said “talking to the nurses at Ravenswood helped me understand the steps I must take to support his health.” Maria first gives Cris his inhaler, puts Vick’s VapoRub on his body, and then helps direct his breathing. When he feels sick, they bring him to Ravenswood for asthma treatment. If his asthma worsens, they use the emergency room as a last resort.

Maria says she is so grateful for Cris’ stable health. Now, both of her children, Cris, who is now 10, and his sister Stacy who is 7, are seen by the same pediatrician. Stacy says, “I like that (Dr. Davis) explains why I’m sick to my mom.”

Their doctor takes care of Cris and Stacy’s routine check-ups, is attentive of their allergies, and is on-call to prescribe medication as needed. Cris enjoys the relationship he has built with his doctor too and says, “Dr. Davis is not only my doctor, but my friend too.”

Having such a great experience at the start of Cris’ health journey encouraged his mother to enroll the rest of her family as Ravenswood patients as well. The whole Mendoza family has

See [RAVENSWOOD](#), page 15

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Classes at Woodsi Pride, a private, Catholic Benedictine co-ed day and boarding school that serves grades 6-12 in Portola Valley, were held virtually this week. There was no school on Monday so students could be tested for COVID-19 on campus. The school has had just two positive COVID-19 cases on campus since September 2021, according to its website.

Local public school teachers reported that, they’re hopeful schools will be able to remain open during this surge.

“The news reports certainly have my constant attention,” said John Davenport, a teacher at Corte Madera School and president of the Portola Valley Teachers Association, in an email the first day back at school from winter break on Monday.

“That said, I’m pretty confident that the measures the district has put in place (making, testing, etc.) are sufficient to keep us safe and keep the school open.”

Andy Stuart, a service learning and special education teacher at Menlo-Atherton High School in Atherton, said on Monday, a day before students returned to campus, that he’s excited to see his students and doesn’t see another shutdown happening.

Kevin M. Harris
July 6, 1957 – December 25, 2021

Kevin Harris (age 64) passed away at his home in Menlo Park, California, on Christmas morning, surrounded by his wife and children. He was shocked by his recent diagnosis of lung cancer. He was healthy, a never smoker, and a life-long runner. He was brilliant, adventurous, courageous, and profoundly good.

Kevin was born in St. Paul, Minnesota, to John and Molly Harris, who both predeceased him. He earned a BA in Archaeology from the University of Pennsylvania, a MALD from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, and a JD from UC Berkeley School of Law. He had a long and successful career as an international technology lawyer with leading technology companies in Silicon Valley and Europe, and also in private practice with major law firms in Silicon Valley and Washington, DC.

Kevin married Nancy Cox in 1988, and they were married for 33 years. He was a devoted and loving father, raising three beautiful children. He lived with his family in Paris and Geneva from 1996 to 2002, and showed his family the world.

Kevin was survived by his beloved wife Nancy, children Virginia, Kevin Jr. and Caroline, sister Cecily Harris, and countless wonderful friends. Kevin loved the redwoods, so in lieu of flowers, donations can be made to sempervirens.org/kevin-harris

“I think kids need to be in school,” he said. “There’s not many places for teenagers to go during the day when school is in session. ... I feel like it’s all going to be OK.”

He did arrange an alternative work plan for one student with compromised health.

Dylan Shelley, a special education and history teacher at Sequoia High School in Redwood City, said the right choice was to reopen campuses after winter break.

“Lockdowns are horrible for the poor and working class; they’re bad for kids,” Shelley said. “As I understand omicron symptoms, it presents as a cold. I’m not planning on losing my mind about a cold. If you have comorbidities you have higher risks; that’s why we have the vaccines.”

Omicron kits and beheaded up safety measures

In anticipation of increased cases after gatherings, holiday travel and the emergent variant, the state distributed COVID-19 rapid tests to every K-12 public school student in California.

The state gave the San Mateo district, “all” caught by the free rapid tests the district gave families on Dec. 16 and 17, said Superintendent Steve Frank in a Monday email. Some 17 of it’s 1,853 students reported positive cases before school resumed Monday, he said.

Before winter break, students and staff in the Portola Valley School District (PVSD) each received two rapid tests (almost 600 test kits) through the state. Over winter break, the district received an additional 491 rapid tests (500 test kits) and distributed them on Sunday, a day before classes resumed, at the district office.

Kevin Harris of Menlo Park, California, was active in local school districts and served on the boards of the Midpeninsula County Library District and the Menlo Park Unified School District. He was also a member of the Portola Valley Library District Board of Trustees.

Kevin Harris was a dedicated advocate for education and community involvement. He served on the boards of several organizations, including the Portola Valley Library District, the Menlo Park Unified School District, and the Midpeninsula County Library District.

Kevin Harris passed away on Christmas morning, surrounded by his family. He will be missed by all who knew him, and his legacy will continue to inspire generations to come.

Kevin was a dedicated volunteer and supporter of local schools and charities. He was an ardent supporter of the Portola Valley Library District, the Menlo Park Unified School District, and the Midpeninsula County Library District.

Kevin Harris was a respected member of the local community, and his contributions will be remembered for years to come. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family during this difficult time.

The Sequoia district began handing out rapid tests to students on Monday. The district is also providing KN95 masks for students and staff, according to a Monday district newsletter.

The Ravenswood City School District offered testing for students, families, and staff on Monday “to identify positive
cases to mitigate any spread before returning to school” on Tuesday, said Superintendent Gina Sudaria in an email. “It is tough to feel confident with so much uncertainty, but I do remain optimistic as our staff and families make health and safety a priority,” she noted. “In addition to the testing yesterday, we continue this week with our weekly testing at each site.”

The district will also host vaccine clinics at its Ravenswood elementary schools next week for 5-11 year olds.

PALO ALTO UNIFIED SCHOOLS HEAD LESS HOPEFUL THAN LAST WEEK

Palo Alto Unified Superintendent Don Austin said the district is going to do everything in its power to minimize the spread of the virus in schools, including providing Monday’s testing to staff and students, but recognized that a spike in cases is inevitable. “What’s pretty predictable is we’re going to have large numbers of cases,” Austin said. “Anyone who’s going to pretend that that’s not the case is just lying.”

The district tested 508 teachers and staff at the district office on Monday, Austin said. Prior to the omicron variant taking hold, Palo Alto Unified saw relatively few cases among students and staff. Most weeks during the fall semester, case counts were in the single digits, with at most 11 students testing positive in a single seven-day period.

Only one special education classroom has been shut down this school year due to COVID-19 cases, Austin said. That’s likely to change soon, with Austin predicting that classes will have to be closed in the coming weeks. If things get worse, full schools could shutter, he said.

Palo Alto Unified plans to limit closures as much as possible. Students impacted by closures will switch to online learning, Austin said.

A closure could happen for two reasons: at the state or county’s behest due to high case numbers or because staff absences make it impossible to operate classes. The second, Austin said, appears more likely. “I think the state and county are really going to try their best not to close schools, but there could be a day when we just can’t staff them,” Austin said.

New CDC guidelines and unchanged local guidelines

It’s still unclear if new, more lax quarantine and isolation guidelines issued by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention at the end of December, will impact local schools’ guidance to students and staff who test positive or are exposed to the virus. The Sequoia district is following the state and county guidance, according to a Dec. 30 district email.

“SUHSD will maintain our current protocols and timelines until further notice from our county partners,” Superintendent Vincent Williams said in the email.

County health spokesperson Preston Merchant said the state health department is working through if they are not showing symptoms. If they are unvaccinated or have been close contact with someone with COVID-19 and both were wearing masks, they will quarantine for 10 to 14 days or continue attending school, with particular attention paid to the omicron variant, including questions about what the school closure metrics will be.

“Under current guidance, students and staff who come in contact with someone who tests positive for COVID-19 do not need to quarantine if they are vaccinated and not showing symptoms. If they are unvaccinated or have been close contact with someone with COVID-19 and both were wearing masks, they will quarantine for 10 to 14 days or continue attending school,” Austin said. “We can’t answer all the questions that we have — it’s just not possible.”

Santa Clara County’s COVID-19 media relations team said in a statement that Santa Clara County has aligned with the state’s safety guidance for schools.

“Through the Santa Clara County Office of Education, the county hosts regular COVID-19 meetings with local districts, proactively communicates anytime the state of California provides new guidance, and reaches out as other relevant information becomes available,” the county said. “Additionally, the Santa Clara County Office of Education is accessible whenever superintendent or schools require additional support.”

Email Staff Writers Angela Swartz at aswartz@almanacnews.com and Zoe Morgan at zmorgan@paweekly.com.
programs. The council is considering the possibility of banning new gas-powered heaters and gas-powered lawn mowers (ahead of a state mandate to phase those leaf blowers out), as well as programs to encourage commuters to ditch driving solo to work.

Another significant topic of discussion was how the city should go about complying with new state mandates to plan for roughly 5,000 new housing units citywide, including 802 homes for very low-income households, 299 low-income homes, and 389 moderate income homes. There are already 3,053 homes in the city’s development pipeline for households in the “above-mod-erate” income bracket, starting above 120% of the area median income, according to staff and consultants.

An idea put forward to consider building housing in some single family homes—a concept that until this year was widely considered out of the question—moved forward. State laws, in the form of Senate Bills 9 and 10, passed this year, changing to single family homes to not rule out possible zoning changes to enable building housing in some single family homes, only one was previously allowed, while SB 10 allows cities to enact zoning changes to enable construction of 10-unit housing developments in transit-rich and urban-infill areas.

To support housing affordability, the city council also recently discussed the possibility of creating a community land trust to boost affordable homeownership. In addition, the city council hired a new city attorney, Nora Doherty of Burke, Williams & Sorensen, and swapped out interim police Chief David Spiller for a new police chief, David Norris.

One thing that did not slow down over the past year were development plans for Menlo Park’s new community center in Belle Haven, funded by Meta (formerly Facebook).

From left: Belle Haven resident Rose Bickerstaff, Zakye Waller and Menlo Park Councilwoman Cecilia Tichi. (Photo courtesy of Meta.)

Continued on next page
Program to evaluate using three Teslas as police vehicles.

Efforts to protect the environment also occupied city and residents’ priorities. Big Basin remains closed a year after the CZU wildfires struck in August 2020, and Gov. Gavin Newsom spoke to reporters at the site of the park’s headquarters. “The most powerful force in the world is Mother Nature, and right now we are struggling, as are many of our colleagues around the Western United States (and) all around the rest of the globe, to reconcile her fury,” he said at the time.

Meanwhile, Menlo Park advanced in a highly competitive grant application process to receive $50 million from the federal government as part of the SAFER Bay Project aiming to protect a number of communities along the bay from the impacts of sea level rise by constructing levees. The city has teamed up with PG&E and Meta on the application.

The city’s downtown scene also changed some this year. Ann’s Coffee Shop closed in April after 75 years in business; e-bike shop Pedego opened; and Feldman’s Books moved to Curtis Street after being displaced from its former location by new development. The new Guild Theatre is wrapping up construction, with plans to open up for concerts starting in February, according to Drew Dunlevie, president of the Peninsula Arts Guild, the organization leading the project to rebuild the former arthouse movie theatre into a state-of-the-art nonprofit live music venue.

There were goodbyes too. After 40 years of service with the Menlo Park Fire Protection District, Chief Harold Schapelhouman retired. Other influential and beloved residents died in 2021, including former planning commissioner and civic volunteer Katherine Strehl and Riekes Center founder Gary Riekes.

This reporter found herself drawn to writing about stories of resilience in the community during challenging times. The Almanac ran stories about people making pizzas and virus-shaped piñatas to spread cheer amidst quarantines; about a phone buddy program launched by two Menlo Park friends to support lonely seniors; about a number of children’s books that Menlo Park authors published this year — about picky eating, youth activism, the harms of gasoline and the inspiration of stars. Highlights included a Menlo Park family that created a food locker to feed the hungry after someone stole food from their garage; how a Menlo Park couple serves the community in quiet ways, donating platelets and being foster parents; and how a Menlo Park doctor helped out a researcher in distress while on vacation in the Florida Keys — a few of the stories that brought joy and inspiration in a tough year.

**House fire displaces Menlo Park family**

A fire that broke out at a Menlo Park home Monday night left no injuries but displaced the family living there, according to Fire Marshal at the Menlo Park Fire Protection District, Jon Johnston.

The fire, which occurred at 1275 Hermosa Way in Central Menlo Park appears to have been accidental in nature and related to a Tesla vehicle charger in the garage, according to Johnston.

The fire caused extensive damage to the garage and attic, making the home uninhabitable and causing about $750,000 in damage to the home and its contents. The family living there had to move out, but there were no injuries, he said.

As of now, it’s not clear what the failure was that caused the fire, but it will be under investigation, he added.

— Kate Bradshaw

**CRIME BRIEFS**

**Shooting victim identified**

East Palo Alto police are investigating the death of a man found with gunshot wounds late on Dec. 28, according a news release issued by the department. This week, he was identified as Moises Estrada of East Palo Alto. Shortly before 8 p.m. on Dec. 28, officers responded to a report of shots fired in the 1600 block of Bay Road, just east of University Avenue, and found a 33-year-old man with gunshot wounds lying on the ground of an apartment complex parking lot.

Paramedics from Menlo Park Fire Protection District provided medical care to the man, but he died of his injuries at the scene.

**Coroner identifies motorcycle crash victim**

A motorcyclist who died in a crash with another vehicle last week on U.S. Highway 101 in Menlo Park has been identified by the San Mateo County coroner’s office as 36-year-old San Jose resident Adam Wolf.

The crash was reported at about 3:50 a.m. on Dec. 28 on southbound Highway 101 just north of Willow Road.

According to the California Highway Patrol, a man driving a Honda Accord crashed and the car came to rest in a lane of the highway with its lights off. Wolf, riding a Kawasaki Ninja motorcycle, came from behind and struck the right rear passenger door of the Honda.

Wolf was pronounced dead at the scene while the Honda driver suffered injuries that were not life-threatening.

Investigators have ruled out impairment as a factor in the crash, CHP officials said.

— Bay City News Services

**TOWN OF WOODSIDE**

**INVITES APPLICATIONS FOR PLANNING COMMISSION**

Districts 3 and 4

New Term from February 2022 to February 2026

The Planning Commission participates in the administration of the planning laws and policies of the Town. It is responsible for recommending to the Town Council ordinances and resolutions necessary to implement the General Plan and adopted development policy. The Commission also conducts necessary public hearings to administer the planning laws and policies of the Town and acts upon applications for zoning amendments, conditional use permits, variances, subdivisions, and other related functions as may be assigned by the Council.

The Planning Commission meets on the first and third Wednesday of the month at 6:00 p.m.

Interested residents may check residency requirements, request information, and submit applications to the Interim Town Clerk by emailing Melissa Cardinale at mcardinale@woodsidetown.org.

**APPLICATION DEADLINE:**

Friday, January 28, 2022, by 5 p.m.

**INTERVIEW AND APPOINTMENT BY TOWN COUNCIL:**

Tuesday, February 8, 2022, 7:00 p.m.
In late June of 2021, TJ Homes purchased three more properties on 15th Avenue, each of which included a “significant tree,” meaning a tree of a specific size, as articulated by a county ordinance.

“And literally after they put up the fence, there’d be a tree permit,” Sirsi said. “And that’s again when we started saying, ‘Okay, what’s going on?’ We started trying to investigate.”

The residents built a website, collected signatures for a petition to protect the canopy and planted accusatory signs on their lawns. “Say No to TJ Homes” became their rallying cry. They created spreadsheets to track the new developments and tree removal permits. They began to scrutinize TJ Homes’ every move, documenting alleged violations like instances of construction happening outside of working hours and damage caused to heritage trees.

Tree activists say the neighbors are right to be worried. Cutting down trees not only hurts the resident wildlife but also affects community health and resilience to climate change, according to one expert.

“There has to be more understanding that the health of the community is really tied into canopy cover and that if you’re removing a lot of large trees, heritage trees, then the next 15 years of that community are going to be impacted,” said Maya Briones, Community Forestry Coordinator for Canopy, a local forestry nonprofit. “That should matter, you know. That should be taken seriously into consideration when creating plans.”

According to TJ Homes, their intentions are simply to address the need for more housing, which sometimes requires the removal of a tree.

“We’re big believers in trees. Trees are great for everybody,” said Jon Tattersall, president of TJ Homes’ Northern California office, adding that, while some were removed for design purposes, others posed a threat because they were diseased or in poor health. “We are not in the business of removing trees unnecessarily. Do we have to remove trees at times because it does conflict with a new build? We do.”

He also said TJ Homes tries to work with the natural environment and employs three landscape architects to “maximize trees” and “improve the tree canopy on every single home that we build.”

Per ordinance, removing a tree requires the completion of a permit application, including a report from an arborist, which must then be approved by the county. While the neighbors acknowledge that the developers have been approved to remove all trees, they worry about a conflict of interest in the permitting process.

“The people who are applying to cut down the trees are the ones who are hiring arborists,” said Ravindra.

Boeddiker expressed concern that the city may be “rubber-stamping” the permit applications. In examining the approved permits, she said, the neighbors found errors, including one permit that included a former owner’s name (without her approval) and another that underreported the size of a date palm.

The community is asking for a more consistent system. “The consistent refrain we’re getting from anybody who we asked about this is ‘What kind of neighborhood and community do you want to live in?’” he said.

“How do these laws and regulations help control gentrification and large-scale developments?”

But he admitted that resources are finite, and the current system is a “complaint-driven” one.

Slocum said he expects to meet with the North Fair Oaks neighbors again in the new year to discuss his staff’s findings and next steps. Ultimately, he said, “I’d like to find the balance between the private rights of property owners and trying to maintain the integrity of a neighborhood.”

—SUPERVISOR WARREN SLOCUM

“I’d like to find the balance between the private rights of property owners and trying to maintain the integrity of a neighborhood.”

—SUPERVISOR WARREN SLOCUM

A large banner opposing developer TJ Homes hangs in front of a North Fair Oaks house.

Mary Gilles
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Lic. #01789730

MaryGillesRealEstate.com — Each Office is Independently Owned and Operated.

Email Staff Writer Leah Worthington at lworthington@rwcpulse.com.
The best, the worst and the most memorable movies of 2021

By Peter Canavese

It was the best of films, it was the worst of times. 2021 was a terrible year for humanity, but — cold comfort though it may be — a wonderful year for cinema (perversely, alas, not for cinemas).

COVID-19 continued to play cat and mouse with the populace, the consequences of climate change intensified and U.S. institutions repeatedly failed. And so it was when Adam McKay’s apocalyptic tragi-comedy “Don’t Look Up” (Netflix) entered the conversation and, incidentally, sparked a renewed conversation about whether film critics have any idea what they’re talking about. That, dear reader, remains for you to decide.

“Don’t Look Up” begged the question, “Once apocalypse is undeniable, how will our art reflect it?” Of the films that have gone before, there (mostly documentaries and sci-fi thrillers, but notably Paul Schrader’s searing 2017 drama “First Reformed”), but surprisingly few in 2021 even acknowledged a pandemic-transformed world, much less extinction-level climate disaster. McKay furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted furiously validated, for many, their perception of the insanity we all experienced in recent years: His film cathartically gifted

The top ten films of 2021

10. ‘Procession’ & ‘Strip Down, Rise Up’ (both Netflix)

Two of the most powerful films of the year documented alternative group therapy; Robert Greene’s ‘Procession’ gathers six middle-aged American men, survivors of childhood rape within the Catholic church, and proposes that they work together to make short films that exercise their experiences through art. Michele Ohayon’s ‘Strip Down, Rise Up’ shadows a group of American women in a pole-dancing class geared toward banishing the demons of sexism, abuse and body dysmorphia. During dark days of unprecedented trauma and mental illness, both films movingly focus on the healing process.

9. ‘The Lost Daughter’ (Netflix)

Actor Maggie Gyllenhaal makes her directorial debut with this compelling adaptation of Elena Ferrante’s novella about the dark side of mothering. Olivia Colman (in another devastating and original performance) and Jessie Buckley (fiercely commanding in flashbacks) share the role of an anxious, mood-swinging woman haunted by the “crushing responsibility” of motherhood. Fine assists from Dakota Johnson, Peter Sarsgaard and Ed Harris bolster Gyllenhaal’s investigation of the shame of regretful parents and those thoughts you’re not allowed to say out loud.

8. ‘Licorice Pizza’ (in theaters now)

Paul Thomas Anderson again proves the master of his domain with this sophisticated, breezy comedy that keenly evokes the 1970s, when California briefly felt like the Wild West again. In a town full of hustlers, an irresistible, self-possessed 15-year-old child actor/entrepreneur (Cooper Hoffman, son of the late, great Philip Seymour Hoffman) befriends and pitches woo at a 25-year-old woman (Alana Haim) still in search of herself. Patiently observing the unconventional central relationship, Anderson also tells tales out of school about the waning days of Old Hollywood.

7. ‘Red Rocket’ (in theaters now)

Sometimes a film comes along that’s just plain note perfect. With “Red Rocket,” director/co-writer Sean Baker (“The Florida Project,” “Tangerine”) demonstrates that his docudramatic style and commitment to telling stories of the American underclass are the gifts that keep on giving. An ex-porn star (powerhouse Simon Rex) returns to his depressed Texas hometown and immediately sets to manipulating his ex-wife, her mother and a teenage donut shop worker. This wildly entertaining comedy is funny because it’s true in capturing the charm and poison of malignant narcissism.

6. ‘In the Same Breath’ (HBO Max)

In narrating her new documentary, Nanfu Wang (“One Child Nation”) personalizes the story of the global pandemic while incisively diagnosing the institutional rot that has allowed COVID-19 to run free. Most devastating, Chinese-American Chiclo Wang compares and contrasts the responses of the Chinese and U.S. governments and populates, calling out the Chinese secrets-and-lies campaign that delayed an effective response, and the U.S. misinformation crisis that has overshadowed our presumptive advantage of free speech.

5. ‘A Hero’ (Amazon Prime Video starting Jan. 21)

Two-time Oscar winner Aghash Farhadi (“A Separation”) contrives to keep you guessing with plot turns and onion-peeling layers of characterization with his latest drama. This Iranian morality play concerns a naïve protagonist (Amir Jadidi, terrific) whose impulsive poor choices overwhelm the good deed that puts him in the spotlight, taking him and us on a roller-coaster ride enabled by media and social media hungry to create and prolong an attention-getting narrative. Farhadi honors the complexity of his characters by allowing different vantage points on their behavior and motivations, thereby luring viewers into judgments they’ll be forced to reconsider.

4. ‘The Green Knight’ (4K Blu-ray, Blu-ray, DVD and video on demand)

With a sure hand, writer-director David Lowery adapts the 14th-century’s poetic fable of Sir Gawain (a never-better Dev Patel). Gorgeous, dreamy, painterily, sumptuous, with an exceptional score by Daniel Hart and pitch-perfect performances all around, “The Green Knight” investigates honor, the entropy of life and the peripheral terrifying inevitability of death. As such, this exquisitely realized medieval period piece captures equally well the ways we’re living now, writing large the immutability of human nature and the elusive courage to live honorably in spite of existential fears.

3. ‘Drive My Car’ (in theaters now)

Ryusuke Hamaguchi is having a moment. The Japanese director and screenwriter released two sublime films this year:...
“Wheel of Fortune and Fantasy” and “Drive My Car,” adapted from Haruki Murakami’s short story. Unfolding over three hours, the quietly moving drama patiently accumulates emotionally unsparring intimacy to explore the communion between people bonded by like-minded pain or by art: most notably, a stage production of Chekhov’s “Uncle Vanya” that lends “Drive My Car” the legendary playwright’s philosophic grandeur and template of achingly naturalistic characterization.

2. ‘The Power of the Dog’ (Netflix)

Jane Campion tops her Oscar-winning “The Piano” with this adaptation of Thomas Savage’s 1967 novel. Himself a closeted gay man, Savage created the rage-filled rancher Phil Burbank (a fiery Benedict Cumberbatch, in a career-best turn) dealing poorly with his own repressed sexuality in 1925 Montana. In a year of exemplary ensembles, none beats this cast, with Kirsten Dunst, Jesse Plemons and Kodi Smit-McPhee all turning in awards-worthy performances. Add the low-key menace of Ari Wegner’s cinematography and Jonny Greenwood’s score, and you get a gift from the cinema gods.

And the best film of 2020 goes to:

1. ‘Memoria’ (theatrical bookings TBD)

Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s films contain multitudes. With “Memoria,” Weerasethakul invites you “to feel and to be in a space” along with Tilda Swinton’s befuddled protagonist. As she seeks to identify and explain a hallucinatory sound, “Memoria” parses dreams, curses, viruses, altered states and unreliable memories, and maps many roads to transcendence: consciousness and unconsciousness, sanity and insanity, the physical and the metaphysical, drugs versus religion. Woven through it all is the intertwined importance of art and investigation, as in a jazz improvisation and one line of dialogue implicitly linking cinema and detective work. Typically hypnotic, Weerasethakul’s latest trails the ineffable, the mysteries of life always just out of reach despite the obsessive human quest for understanding.

Honoroble mention


The bottom five films
5. ‘Tom & Jerry’

This tin-eared attempt to revive the old animated cat and mouse duo takes the “Who Framed Roger Rabbit” tack of integrating CGI versions of the characters with hapless live action in the hopes that something or someone will amuse. The effects impress. The acting, characters, story and jokes don’t.

4. ‘The Starling’

Even with the always-welcome Kevin Kline doing his level best as a psychiatrist-turned-veterinarian (don’t ask), this mawkish dramedy is out to give you an inspiration concussion. Just like Melissa McCarthy, you will feel uplifted and investigation, as in a jazz

3. ‘Space Jam: A New Legacy’

In case the original “Space Jam” didn’t crush the Looney Tunes legacy enough, Warner Bros. drops another anvil on it with this quarter-century-later sequel that replaces Michael Jordan with the slightly more talented actor LeBron James. The result is an interminable ad for Warner Bros.’ properties.

2. ‘There Is No I’ in Threesome’

As self-indulgent as documentaries get, this dumpster fire asks the not-so-burning questions “What would happen if my fiancée and I explored an open relationship before our wedding?” and “Would it help if I documented the whole situation on video?” Even the most sex-positive of viewers will be clawing their eyeballs out to make it stop.

And the worst film of 2020 goes to:

1. ‘Central Park Dark’

This execrable psychological thriller sports Hollywood outcast Tom Sizemore, who does the impenetrable script no favors. It’s a toss-up as to the film’s worst element: its narrative incoherence, bizarre and unlikeable characters, poor production value, terrible acting, or sleazy, exploitative tone. Trust me, you don’t want to find out.

Of course, there’s plenty more to remember beyond 2020’s highest highs and lowest lows. Read on for our take on the top documentaries and the most magical animated movies.

More top documentaries
5. “The Velvet Underground” (AppleTV+)
4. “Flee”
3. “Faya Dayi” (The Criterion Channel)
2. “Just Don’t Think I’ll Scream” (MUBI)
1. “Ascension” (Paramount+)

More animated winners
5. “Belle”
4. “Encanto” (Disney+)
3. “Flee”
1. “Cryptozoo” (Blu-ray, DVD and video on demand)

Editor’s Note: The term “video on demand” has been used for films that are available for home viewing on multiple online platforms, such as iTunes, YouTube rental, etc.

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Food & Drink

7 predictions about the future of dining on the Peninsula

From cross-cultural innovation to more casual fine dining, here’s what to watch for in the new year.

By Sara Hayden

It’s Friday evening in Menlo Park. Bells are ringing, marking 5 o’clock at a church just down the road. At Flea Street, the team is finishing their family meal before guests arrive. Jesse Cool energetically whisks around the restaurant she opened 41 years ago.

The stainless steel Blodgett oven in the kitchen has been in constant use since then, but there’s a lot that’s new, recently installed to adapt with the COVID-19 pandemic. With the help of a restaurant relief grant, Cool was able to do a renovation: There are now high-tech air filters, and new doors and sliding windows for fresh air.

“Do you remember when we used to have to stand by the tables and iron out the tablecloths?” Cool reminisced. That’s unthinkable now. Wood tables are on full display, tablecloths free for easier sanitization. Instead of a fleet of staff catering to each table, there are service stands where guests can help themselves to take and leave what they need.

The team has replaced stemmed glassware with stemless glasses for outdoor dining. “Everything’s beautiful, but it’s different,” Cool says.

These physical changes are priceless in an attempt to preserve everyone’s health during the pandemic. There have been less visible but equally significant changes too — in operations, attitudes and mindsets.

“What is the future of fine dining?” I want to know. Cool corrects me: “This isn’t fine dining,” Cool says. “This is thoughtful dining.”

Imagining the possibilities of what “thoughtful dining” entails, I have faith that the future of dining — fine, casual and otherwise — is full of hope. Over the past several months, I spoke with movers and shakers who’ve helped define the Peninsula food landscape over the years about their predictions for what’s to come. I know it’s a loaded question, one that’s impossible to answer.

“If I had that crystal ball, I don’t know if I would be in the restaurant business,” Manresa executive chef David Kinch says. But among the uncertainty, what I do hear is revealing. For ROOH’s chief operating officer Anu Bhambri, there’s constant change. “Hopefully things will come back soon. But I don’t know what the new normal is,” Bhambri says. “The definition of normal keeps changing.”

As the changes come, these are some things that will likely stay a while.

Face masks and proof of vaccination remain essential

These days when going out to eat, it’s important not only to check a restaurant’s menu, but also a restaurant’s COVID-19 guidance as cases of the omicron variant have spiked in the Bay Area. California recently issued a mandate that requires everyone to wear a mask in indoor public spaces through Jan. 15. Santa Clara County also issued a health order recommending that everyone who’s eligible get vaccinated and boosted, and that restaurants and bars require patrons to be up-to-date on their vaccination and show proof upon entry.

Restaurateur Keith Richardson of Keith’s Chicken-N-Waffles advises that businesses continue to take precautions and follow government guidelines. “As restaurateurs, we have to make sure we cover the COVID protocol and sanitation to make people feel comfortable in their dining experience,” Richardson says.

Small businesses continue to be vital

In San Mateo County, the U.S. Census Bureau reports that small business is big business: More than 97% of employers had fewer than 100 employees in 2018.

In 2021, local leaders made moves to support these critical contributors to the economy’s recovery during the pandemic. The San Mateo County Board of Supervisors approved new grants for small businesses, more multilingual resources, cultural outreach and legalization of home food businesses. Dishing up osso bucco, crepes, cake with white chocolate and lemon curd lava and more, entrepreneurs across the Peninsula have since received permits to use their home kitchens for retail purposes.

Cross-cultural innovation drives Peninsula cuisine and conversation

These are just a few businesses that have recently emerged in the Peninsula’s food and drink scene that are evolving flavors and techniques.

In Belmont, Eats Meets West Bowls has Indian curries and Panamanian salas on the menu. At Sushinaloa in Redwood City, the team uses chipotle, chili, epin and jalapeño and other flavors from the Mexican state of Sinaloa to add spice to sushi. In Menlo Park, dishes at The Mandarin are influenced by Cantonese, Szechuanese, Japanese cuisine and more. Brewing With Brothas is putting its own twist on Belgian and German beers in East Palo Alto.

As they push culinary styles forward, one essential skill that these entrepreneurs share is storytelling. To introduce their concepts to customers, they foster connection through social media, menu writing and more. San Mateo’s chef Martin Yan has branched out from television to social media, promoting the transition from cooking techniques that depend on fossil fuels to induction cooktops.

At Warung Siska in Redwood City, the team shares not only Indonesian cuisine, but also culture and language. On the website, they include phrases in Bahasa.

“I think adding those phrases really helps to make the experience more in-depth... Having those words on the website was a way to expand the dining experience for our non-Indonesian diners as well,” principal partner Anne Le Ziblatt said in a previous interview.

At Aurum in Los Altos, chef Manish Tyagi writes menus that tell a story about his influences as someone who grew up in northern India and professionally trained in French and Italian cuisines.

On his dish “I’m Not Pasta — Spinach & Paneer Lasagne” (which gained renown on the reality show “Beat Bobby Flay”), Tyagi says, “The representation is Italian, but there is nothing Italian except using that style or technique. Everything is Indian after that.”

For the Mr. Potato — Potato Spiral Chaat, Tyagi says, “Here I’m using a Korean technique to cut the potatoes to make a tornado potato in a spiral and using the same method the way we make our chaats in India.”

With different interpretations of these dishes, Tyagi hopes guests take away a new appreciation for the varied cuisines of his country: “Indian food has much more to offer,” Tyagi says.

Fine dining flexes toward casual

Fine-dining establishments had to rethink business models that once heavily depended on what could be experienced in person — attentive service throughout the meal, the careful orchestration and timing of multiple courses, crisp tablecloths, the luxury price points. These historic hallmarks of “fine” don’t readily translate toward the takeout model that local ordinances required at the start of the pandemic.

Along with other sectors of the food and beverage industry, fine dining suffered during the pandemic. Operators reported that their off-premise sales accounted for less than 20% of

Jesse Cool sits in a booth in her restaurant, Flea St. Café, in Menlo Park.

A server clears plates from customers dining on the patio at The Village Pub in Woodside.

Veronica Weber

Megali Gauthier
their on-premise sales. More than 60% said that their staffing levels were more than 20% below normal.

The Bacchus Group, which counts the Michelin-starred Wild Fish, Selby’s and Spruce among its restaurants, experienced this. Founding partner Tim Stannard recalls the pain of being presented with laying off workers.

The team met, and decided they’d try a limited run of three-course meals delivered via DoorDash. They called it the “three-hour meal” and sold out in 40 minutes. Could the more casual meal service keep the team together? At the peak of the program, the Bacchus Group opened all its kitchens to support demand.

“It was a strange thing. I never thought I’d be cooking spaghetti and meatballs and chocolate pudding, but here we are,” Stannard says.

After the onset of the pandemic, three-Michelin-starred Manresa offered a takeout menu for more than a year. Though expensive, they weren’t expensive menus, they were everyday menus for everybody on a Tuesday or Thursday — not just a special occasion, executive chef David Kinch says. “I think people appreciated that. People were coming in on a regular basis.”

Other fine-dining restaurateurs are experimenting with casual angles too, both out of necessity and a desire for more creative freedom. Meichih and Michael Kim, formerly co-chefs at Palo Alto’s fine-dining destination Maum, launched Bao Béi the fall. At State Street Market in Los Altos, they serve $9.50 spicy pork belly and fried shrimp bao and $15 dan dan noodles. “The potential for community fostered by a food hall environment was the main draw.

“Given how the pandemic forced us to stay indoors, I think we lost touch with connecting, and that feeling of being around others,” Meichih Kim said prior to Bao Béi’s opening.

Bruno and Christie Chemel recently spun out a new concept, separate from their restaurant Baumé that maintained two Michelin stars between 2011 and 2019. B2 Go (also known as “B 2 Go”) serves sandwiches priced at $14.98 from the door of the same kitchen where they prepare Baumé’s multicourse meals that run thousands of dollars per person. On B 2 Go’s menu, the croque-style sandwich’s béchamel sauce is simply noted as “white sauce.”

“The concept is honest sandwiches for honest people,” Chemel said in a previous interview. “There’s nothing fancy.”

There are still plenty of opportunities for luxurious tablecloths and multicourse dinners, but because of these new, more flexible approaches, guests who might not have had access to “fine dining” can now experience very fine food because of them. Still, fine dining is here to stay, Kinch says.

“I think that what fine dining is truly all about is to offer a truly stellar experience. Fine dining is not going to go away. There’s always going to be people who demand this type of experience, but there are things that are going to have to change. We’re starting to see that now,” Kinch says.

“There’s a certain degree of casualness coming into it, and a little bit more flexibility with people’s dietary concerns.”

Diners get social — with dogs

On March 16, 2020, San Mateo County instituted an ordinance to “shelter in place” — urging people to isolate themselves as much as possible following a state of emergency declared by Gov. Gavin Newsom.

Just as soon as the new restaurant ROOH Palo Alto had opened, it had to close.

“When we left, we were like, ‘It’s a couple of weeks. We’ll be back soon,’ Bhambrí remembers. ‘And it went on and on.’

Now, people are hungry for restaurants not only for their food, but for the connections they foster.

‘I strongly feel like restaurateurs are an essential part of our life. We all go out, connect with people, connect with family,’ Bhambrí says. ‘That social aspect of life is so important. We are social animals.’

Recently, the ROOH Palo Alto team has stocked up on blankets and other outdoor dining amenities to keep guests warm during the winter, ramping up for an increased demand in on-site dining.

While some people are eager to get out, they’re also reluctant to leave their pets behind. Many people turned to animals for support during the pandemic. In a National Geographic survey, 87% of respondents indicated that their animal helped them cope with the pandemic.

Ali El Safy’s Bistro Vida in Menlo Park has long taken inspiration from France in multiple ways, from the décor to the open-air markets. Now, there’s also beautiful outdoor spaces to enjoy leisurely meals with friends and family — including dogs.

“We become dog-friendly,” says El Safy, who has a pitbull named “Basha.” “Everybody in the pandemic, they get dogs. Now everybody wants to go with their dog. It’s the whole family — (the dog) is part of the family.”

Teams prioritize well-being and care

In August, the New York Times reported that San Mateo County experienced the largest increase in food stamp enrollment in the state since January 2020. There was a more than 40% increase in the number of people depending on the CalFresh food benefit program.

As the need for meals rose, dozens of local restaurants donated. As one example, 84 restaurants participated in the Great Plates program and served 2.7 million meals to 4,689 clients in San Mateo County. Federal funding for that program ended in the summer, but the need for meals remains.

“Those who have (must) take care of those who don’t have,” Flea Street’s Jesse Cool says.

At the same time, restaurateurs are working on avoiding burnout for themselves and their teams. Creating a supportive culture is essential.

Cool says that the pandemic brought to light industry issues that had already been glaring.

“(That) was justice in our industry, how many dysfunctions and inequalities (and) unhealthy lifestyles there were,” Cool says.

It’s essential to ensure that people are paid well and have sufficient time off, she says. The Flea Street team will be on break Jan. 1 through Jan. 10.

“Right now’s my opportunity to figure out how to give a better lifestyle to the people who take care of others and who take care of me and the business,” Cool says.

“We’re still a little buttoned up. If we take care of where the food comes from, and the people who wash the dishes and the people who cook, then we will take care of the guest.”

Flea Street only serves dinner instead of three meals a day, giving the team more time to recharge between meal services. The restaurant also closes twice a week.

Cool also looks for more equal compensation between kitchen and service staff — what Cool calls “Heart of House” instead of “back of house” and “front of house.”

“We simply still believe that both service and production are a much more equal part of a guest’s meal,” Cool says.

It’s a time when more than 3 out of 5 restaurant workers have reported abuse or disrespect from customers — from refusing to follow pandemic precautions to other forms of harassment — restaurateurs must find ways to support their staff.

“Those who gave our staff a really hard time, sometimes I’d just have to say to them, ‘It’s OK if you don’t eat here,’” Cool says.

Humans team up, and sometimes robots too

Nationally, 4 out of 5 restaurateurs say recruiting and retention is their greatest challenge. This hits close to home: According to Tony Han of Tai Pan in Palo Alto, just about every Bay Area restaurant in an industry group of 36 reported having a staffing shortage.

“Lately, these restaurants are on a skeleton crew right now,” says Wyatt Fields of Breakwater Barbecue in El Granada. “You cannot find anyone to work right now.”

Restaurateurs have been devising different ways to handle this, including offering more competitive incentives and flexibility, sharing staff with other restaurants or pivoting operations to make the most of their teams’ bandwidth.

Dino Tekdemir closed Anatolian Kitchen and has plans to reopen as Naschmarkt Palo Alto — a sister restaurant to a location in Campbell. The idea is to bring talent from the Campbell location to the Palo Alto one, so the existing team can use their existing skills, without having to retrain.

The team at Roger Bar and Restaurant in Menlo Park has been experimenting with robots, from Redwood City’s Bear Robotics. The team has programmed robots to return dishes to the kitchen. That helps free up the human team to focus on other guest interactions.

“What we don’t want for the guest is for them they’re not getting any service,” food and beverages director Jacky Li says.

In that regard, robots are no substitute for humans. Restaurateurs still have a strong demand for more people.

“If we play this out, we have to entice people to work for us, which means we have to raise the wages,” Han says. “Now we’re essentially in a very competitive state, with our fellow restaurant owners trying to secure these helps. A lot of the skill sets, we’re looking for the same people, but we’re paying more than double the cost. The cost is going to snowball and be reflected to the customer.”

As the labor shortage continues, Fields says that restaurants stay in respectful communication with staff about what they need, and have compassion.

“We’re only human back there,” Fields says.

Looking forward

The pandemic isn’t over, and new guidance emerges daily. We’ll need to adapt to a new set of scenarios and keeping changing, keep learning. That’s the only way going forward,” ROOH’s Bhambrí says.

“I think the time of pandem-ic has reset values as people seek support and safe reconnection.

“Something happened. We (had) lost the value of food,” Flea Street’s Cool says. “A lot of us are weaving our way out...The kind-ness I feel now again, the collaboration, the respect is really wonderful. And of course you taste that in food.”

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