East Palo Alto community mourns the loss of ‘remarkable’ youth leader

Christian Sbragia, founder of CoolineKids, was 19

By Angela Swartz

Christopher Sbragia, an educator in the East Palo Alto community who started the nonprofit CoolineKids, died on Jan. 5 at the age of 19 from a suspected blood clot, according to his mother, Nicole Sbragia. The purpose of CoolineKids was in line with what would become his personal motto: “service above all else.”

Born in Redwood City on June 2, 2004, Christian was a mere 9 years old when he noticed a dire need in his East Palo Alto neighborhood: there weren’t safe places for kids to play outside of school. So he took it upon himself to start after-school programs at elementary schools in the area and summer camps.

The organization also serves students from East Menlo Park and Redwood City. “I had seen a lot of the kids around the streets,” he told The Almanac in 2022 when he was profiled as one of the area’s most promising high school graduates.

His high school alma mater, East Palo Alto Academy, created the Positive Impact award in 2022 to recognize his work for the community.

East Palo Alto Academy Principal Amika Guillaume said in an email to the high school community that “Christian will be remembered for far more than his many accomplishments.”

“He was compassionate and wise beyond his years, thinking of others and always considerate of peers and teachers alike. He is someone who continues to inspire so many of us,” she said.

“He gave many of us tremendous hope for a future led by young people like him. Though he left us too soon, Christian Christian Sbragia on the Bay Trail in 2020.

Menlo Park sees big increase in impact fees

By Neil Gonzales

The largest increase in developer-impact fees that Menlo Park has seen in recent years should bode well for upcoming infrastructure projects worth tens of millions of dollars.

Menlo Park collected nearly $7.3 million in transportation, construction and storm-drainage fees during the 2022-23 fiscal year, according to a staff report for the Jan. 9 City Council meeting.

That amount is the highest in the past five years the report covered. It also represents a considerable upward trend since the economic shutdowns during the height of the pandemic.

“In a broad sense, construction activity did pick up after the pandemic, which triggers the payment of impact fees,” Menlo Park Assistant City Manager Stephen Stolte said in an email to The Almanac. “The size and use of buildings also affect the amount of fees paid to the city.”

For previous years, according to the report, the city collected $4.1 million in 2021-22; $5.9 million in 2020-21; $3.1 million in 2019-20; and $6.1 million in 2018-19 from those fees.

The council held no discussion on the report as it was part of the meeting’s consent calendar, in which items are typically approved without deliberation. Council members could not be reached for comment.

Impact fees are what local governments often charge developers to help fund public improvements that mitigate adverse effects of their projects.

For transportation fees, according to the report, Menlo Park took in $5.4 million from developers in 2022-23.

“Due to growth and development in the city of Menlo Park and surrounding cities and the region, increased pressure has been put on the transportation system,” the report said. “The purpose of the transportation-impact fee is to provide adequate transportation improvements to serve cumulative development within the city.”

The report pointed out that the city needs $48 million in transportation fees to fund transit-related projects over the next five fiscal years.

Construction fees paid by developers totaled $1.8 million in 2022-23, according to the report. The city will need $11 million in these fees for street resurfacing and reconstruction projects in the coming years.

Storm-drainage fees from developers came in at about $138,000 last fiscal year, according to the report. These fees go toward storm-related projects such as those in preparation for a major tempest.

The city has identified $12 million in improvements against a two-year storm while an additional $27 million is required for a 10-year event.

The city could see funds from the fees continue to increase. “There are a number of pending and approved development projects,” Stolte said. “Various factors affect construction timelines for developers. Impact fees are paid closer to the time of actual construction.”
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Menlo Park district to vote on boundary change

By Joshua Picazo

An upcoming Menlo Park City School District (MPCSD) Board of Trustees meeting on Thursday, Jan 18th, after The Almanac's Wednesday afternoon press deadline, will include a discussion and possible approval of a shift in internal enrollment boundaries aimed at addressing anticipated enrollment increases.

Some students who live in the boundary zone for Encinal School in Atherton may soon shift to Oak Knoll School in Menlo Park, depending on the outcome of the meeting. However, it would not affect currently enrolled students or their incoming siblings.

During the meeting, the board will review the new zoning map, which would see families living between Valparaiso and Middle Avenues and up to Alma Street down to University Drive shifted over to Oak Knoll School’s zone.

That expected enrollment increase comes from Stanford University's Middle Plaza housing development at 400 El Camino Real, which opened last July, as well as other projects in downtown Menlo Park.

“The district’s demographic data shows that over time Encinal’s enrollment is predicted to be most impacted by new housing development within Menlo Park,” a press release from the district stated ahead of the meeting. “Planning now for future enrollment will allow a more balanced outcome for both schools.”

There has been some expectation of a decline in enrollment throughout the Menlo Park City School District due to an aging population and affordability issues. However, the district feels these internal boundary changes are the right move and that they are actually bucking the statewide trend of declining enrollment.

“Currently, enrollment at our schools is within the facilities’ capacities, although Oak Knoll’s enrollment — at 577 — is the lowest among our elementary schools,” said MPCSD Public Information Officer Parke Treadway.

“We had tremendous growth between 2010 and 2017, then saw a slow decline, which increased with the pandemic,” added Treadway. “Our most recent demographer report shows gradual decline as is the statewide trend, although not predicted to be as precipitous here in MPCSD. So our schools have been very crowded (including Oak Knoll), now are within capacity, and could again face over-enrollment as new housing is developed within Menlo Park, especially within the Encinal attendance area.”

Treadway added that the district feels these internal boundary changes are the right move and that they are actually bucking the statewide trend of declining enrollment.

Notably, the Oak Knoll boundary change stems from Stanford University’s Middle Plaza development.

“Planning now for future enrollment will allow a more balanced outcome for both schools.”

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See BOUNDARY, page 17

Google to close child care centers, impacting Peninsula sites

By Zoe Morgan

Google plans to close its employee child care centers later this year, impacting two facilities in Mountain View that it rents from the Mountain View Whisman School District.

The tech giant has four locations near its Mountain View campus where it offers child care for employees’ children, all of which it intends to close in August, Google spokesperson Ryan Lamont told this news organization.

The sites offer about 300 enrollment slots, Lamont said. He would not release the locations of the child care centers, citing the safety of parents and children. However, the California Department of Social Services search portal for child care facilities showed two locations - one at Sunnyvale and one in Palo Alto.

The two Mountain View centers are both leased from the Mountain View Whisman School District — one at Theuerkauf Elementary School and another at the former Slater Elementary School campus, which the district closed in 2006.

9to5Google, a tech-focused website, first reported the news of the child care closures last month.

According to Lamont, Google is supporting families in finding alternative child care, as well as offering additional days of subsidized backup child care. The closures will also allow Google to “reinvest in enhancing our faculty with assistance and resources and a generous package — including outplacement services to help them find their next job.”

Between the Slater and Theuerkauf sites, Google pays the Mountain View Whisman School District roughly $3 million annually in rent, according to copies of the lease agreements.

See CHILD CARE, page 18

A rainbow after a storm

A rainbow over the Menlo Park Fire Station District Headquarters at 300 Middlefield Road in Menlo Park on Jan. 10.

A rainbow over the Menlo Park Fire Station District Headquarters at 300 Middlefield Road in Menlo Park on Jan. 10.

Sidewalk chalk art greets students for the first day of school at Oak Knoll Elementary in Menlo Park on Aug. 23, 2023. The Menlo Park City School District is considering shifting its enrollment boundaries, which would impact future Oak Knoll students.

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Repaired Holbrook-Palmer Park playground reopens, community surveyed for possible new structure

By Joshua Picazo

The Atherton City Council will consider whether to build a new play structure for older children in its only public park.

When Holbrook-Palmer Park’s older children’s play structure (for ages 5-12) was found last February during a significant deterioration and repairs alone (roughly $150,000) would be about twice the cost of the park, as well as upgraded restrooms.

At the time that initial repairs were discussed during a city council meeting, Ovadia said building a new structure would be about twice the cost of the repairs alone (roughly $150,000 to $200,000) due to the cost of installations.

A survey revealed that a little over 80% of those who responded thus far visit the park at least once a month, with over 42% visiting weekly.

Most respondents are also hoping to see swings added if a new structure is built at the park, as well as upgraded restrooms.

When asked what sort of theme for the potential new playground they would prefer, the most popular answer was “nature inspired,” with a traditional or fitness-focused structure trailing.

Shade was also a high priority for many who visit the park. Participants in the survey were also asked about preferences for color in the new structure and 66% responded with a green/tan/brown color scheme.

While a majority of visitors come from within Atherton (33%), 31% are from Menlo Park and 13% are from Redwood City.

Other changes that may be coming to the park include pick-up ball courts, which Atherton residents strongly supported in a survey last year.

The survey for the playground will remain open until the end of January, after which the City Council will discuss the possibility of funding a new playground.

Candiates vying for Anna Eshoo’s seat will debate at Palo Alto City Hall on Jan. 31

By Palo Alto Weekly staff

Eleven candidates for U.S. Rep. Anna Eshoo’s seat are seeking to win voters’ approval in the March 5 primary election, the first hurdle to obtaining the 16th District represents Atherton, Portola Valley, and Woodside for over 50 years.

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Redwood City CFO halts legal fight over $889M school bond measures

Christopher Robell initially contested the 75-word ballot labels for two measures

By Michelle Iracheta

Christopher Robell, a retired CFO and resident of Redwood City, has retracted his lawsuit against San Mateo County Chief Elections Officer Mark Church. The case, which focused on transparency issues of ballot labels for two key school bond measures, was dismissed over concerns regarding potential financial liabilities and costs. Robell’s decision comes after a nearly year-long dispute centered on the Sequoia Union High School District’s Measure S, substantial school bonds totaling $889.5 million. He initially contested the 75-word ballot labels for these measures, deeming them misleading, particularly in their presentation of how the funds would be utilized.

Under the settlement agreement, Robell dismissed his appeal, which he filed in June 2023, with prejudice, meaning he cannot refile it regarding the November 2022 election or the issues raised in the original election contest. Robell filed his original case in March 2023, but the case on May 10 was dismissed by Superior Court Judge Nicole Healy, who said Robell’s allegations were “wholly unsubstantiated.” She said that Robell failed to present any evidence demonstrating that the purportedly flawed ballot labels had any impact on the election results.

Despite dropping the case, Robell said he is adamantly about the seriousness of his concerns. “This is not a frivolous case. It’s about honesty and transparency in elections,” he said. “It’s not realistic or logical for one individual to bear the cost of this fight, but the problem persists.”

He said he would continue expressing his First Amendment rights regarding these school bonds or future elections.

Measure S, a $298 million bond for the Redwood City Elementary School District, and Measure W, a $591.5 million bond for the Sequoia Union High School District, both passed with overwhelming voter support in November 2022. County Attorney John Nibbelin said the county was “pleased that this appeal has been dismissed and that the will of the voters in their approval of the school bonds authorized by Measures S and W will be implemented.”

“This outcome upholds the trial court’s well-reasoned decision concluding that Mr. Robell’s post-election challenge lacked merit on both the law and the facts and that Mr. Church complied with the law,” Nibbelin said.

Email Editor Michelle Iracheta at miracheta@rwcpulse.com.

Inmate dies in detox unit at Maguire Correctional Facility in Redwood City

By Michelle Iracheta

A man died in the Maguire Correctional Facility in Redwood City on Sunday, Jan. 14, according to the San Mateo County Sheriff’s Office. At 8:45 a.m., jail and medical staff were conducting routine medical evaluations in the 4 East Housing Detox Unit.

According to the Sheriff’s Office, a nurse noticed that a 23-year-old man was having difficulty breathing. Life-saving measures were taken and first responders were called in from the Redwood City Fire Department, but the man died. The Coroner’s Office, Sheriff Investigations Bureau and the District Attorney’s Office all responded to the scene. All three agencies have opened investigations into the man’s cause of death, according to the Sheriff’s Office. The Coroner’s Office will make the final determination once they have completed their investigation.

The Detox Unit of the jail began receiving enhanced medical care last year “to address the increase in the number of people arrested for a crime while under the influence of illegal narcotics,” according to a spokesperson for the Sheriff’s Office. The unit often houses people who are experiencing withdrawal symptoms from alcohol or drugs. The jail says it evaluates these inmates every 15 to 30 minutes with “constant” medication and medical evaluation, “because we are concerned about this population in custody,” the Sheriff’s Office said.

The name of the deceased man is being withheld at this time pending notification of his next of kin. The incident is the fifth reported incident in recent months. In October 2023, a 64-year-old man who was being held at the Maguire Correctional Facility in Redwood City died.

Just one day later, on Oct. 21, 2023, officers found a 34-year-old man who was housed alone, unresponsive in his cell. Authorities said officers began administering CPR until medical personnel arrived at the facility and pronounced the man dead. The inmate was housed in the jail’s behavioral health unit.

In January 2023, a 25-year-old woman, Maycarla Fernando Sulapas, suffered a medical emergency in the jail’s intake and booking section and died at a nearby hospital about three hours later.

In October 2022, correctional officers found Matthew Britton, 34, unresponsive in his cell during a safety check. The Sheriff’s Office said at the time that he likely died of natural causes.

Email Editor Michelle Iracheta at miracheta@rwcpulse.com.

REAL ESTATE Q&A

by Monica Corman

Termites in Condo Complexes

Dear Monica: I am buying a townhouse and the termite report shows termites and dry rot. What is the remedy for this? Peggy G.

Dear Peggy: Often but not always, the Homeowners Association (HOA) is responsible for termite and dry rot repairs but making these repairs presents issues. If the townhouse is attached to others, and fumigation is recommended, the entire block of townhouses must be fumigated as well. To do this the units must be vacated and food and plants removed. Confirm whether this work has been planned and paid for before buying.

Contact me at monica@monicacorman.com: Office: 650-465-5971, COMPASS. WSJ Nationally Ranked. Real Trends Bay Area Top 100 Agents

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Q&A with Portola Valley’s new mayor, Sarah Wernikoff

By Neil Gonzales

Sarah Wernikoff takes the reins as Portola Valley’s next mayor with big challenges to tackle from the get-go.

The most pressing is submitting the town’s latest draft housing plan to the state by the Jan. 31 deadline. The Town Council was set to do that last week, but the state wanted further revisions to what’s called the housing element before considering final certification.

Wernikoff and her council colleagues now hope the town can resolve the most-recent concerns expeditiously so they can address long-running deficiencies in financial operations such as being behind on annual audits and bank reconciliations.

Wernikoff was elected to the council in 2020 and served as vice mayor the last two years. Last month, the council unanimously chose her to be mayor this year. Her term on the council ends in December.

The Almanac asked Wernikoff about the concerns ahead and what else she envisions for her mayorship.

The Almanac: Does being vice mayor for two years make you even more prepared to lead the town?

Sarah Wernikoff: I’m honored to have been unanimously elected to the position of mayor by my colleagues on the council. This year is the start of my fourth on the council, and all the experience and learnings from the last three years have prepared me for the role.

Q: How confident do you feel the town can still make the state deadline for the latest draft housing element given the additional work requested?

A: I won’t sugarcoat it. I’m very frustrated with the process and in particular the last-minute and what seems to be entirely new feedback we received from HCD (the state Department of Housing and Community Development) last week.

Our staff met regularly with our HCD reviewer — a total of six times over the fall — on changes requested in their July 25 response letter, and throughout those meetings, we were led to believe we were in alignment and on the right track. To be given seemingly entirely new feedback just a few weeks before the deadline is confusing and discouraging.

We now find ourselves with very limited time to work with HCD to understand their new requests and make the necessary changes on time to meet the Jan. 31 deadline.

We’ve worked extremely hard on our housing element for nearly three years, starting in February 2021, with over 150 hours of public discussion and debate in over 50 public meetings, leveraging the input of hundreds of community members, our town committees and planning commissioners, and input from geologic and wildfire experts. It’s an effort that has overwhelmed our small town, our staff and town budget.

We are now one year into the sixth RHNA cycle (current 2023-31 period of the state Regional Housing Needs Allocation program) and have a critical need to move onto implementation of our plan if we are going to succeed in getting actual housing built.

Q: How will you help ensure that the Town Hall restructuring brings the stability and operational fixes sought?

A: The most important thing we can do as a council to ensure the operational turnaround of our Town Hall is hire the right leadership. I think I speak for all of my colleagues in our support of our new town manager, Sharif Etman, who has been a quick study on our challenges and has taken a pragmatic approach with his “PV Refresh” program to “reset, refocus and restructure” town operations and cultivate teamwork and efficiency at Town Hall.

After spending his initial few months doing a 360-degree assessment of our operations and finances, we are now in the restructuring phase and implementing plans to shore up our foundation. I look forward to working with Sharif and my colleagues on the council over the next few months to continue this positive momentum.

Q: It seems the town can get pretty divided over matters from housing and emergency preparedness to even the selection for mayor. Do you feel a need to help bring more unity?

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More state questions delay Portola Valley from submitting latest draft housing plan

By Neil Gonzales

Just as Portola Valley was set to submit its latest draft of a housing plan ahead of this month’s deadline, the state has brought up additional questions to the surprise and consternation of town leaders.

The state’s request for Portola Valley to make further edits to the oft-revised document called the housing element is “super disappointing and frustrating,” Mayor Sarah Wernikoff said during the Town Council meeting on Jan. 10.

“Given the size of our small town, the process has had an outsized impact on our overall operations, our staff and our budget,” she said. “And having worked on the housing element for literally almost three years, I know we’re a community that is working in good faith toward adoption and certification.”

The town Planning Commission reviewed the updated housing element and recommended its submission to the state for final certification.

But on Monday, Jan. 8, HCD emailed Portola Valley that more changes are needed, putting the town’s ability to make the state deadline in possible jeopardy.

“This (HCD) acknowledge at all that they put us in this pickle?” Wernikoff asked.

Vice Mayor Judith Hasko noted that the timing, in some ways, is “incredibly disappointing.”

“But I guess if we had approved it tonight and then gotten that feedback, we’d be no better,” she said.

Among the new feedback, HCD wants Portola Valley to strengthen land-use strategies for housing mobility, target additional community partnerships during the planning period and look to rezone areas throughout town to increase multifamily development opportunities.

Town staffers expected to meet with an HCD representative on Thursday, Jan. 11, to address all the issues that just came up.

“It’s a brand new set of changes that they’re requesting that we sort of felt like we had the rug pulled up from under us,” Jon Biggs, the town’s interim planning and building director, told the council.

But the changes could be manageable enough to do in time to make the deadline.

“We’re cautiously optimistic that these are not substantive changes,” Biggs said. “Hopefully, we can get that wrapped up.”

The town would then release the draft with the newest revisions for community members to go over and comment on, he said. It could still go back to the Planning Commission for another review if changes turn out to be more substantial than hoped before returning to the council.

The council is now scheduled to take up the matter again on Jan. 24, exactly a week before the deadline.

The state Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA) program requires Portola Valley to plan for 253 new units during the current 2023-31 cycle compared to just 64 in the last eight-year period.

On Dec. 1, the town released its fourth attempt to get its plan certified after HCD kept sending back previous drafts for further work.

That fourth draft sought to resolve concerns HCD raised in July, including providing a zoning-density range of 20-23 units per acre for multifamily housing and boosting efforts to encourage the production of accessory dwelling units, or ADUs, should numbers start dropping below projections.

If the plan continues to fall short in the eyes of HCD, Portola Valley would remain subject to adverse consequences such as financial penalties and a state provision dubbed “builder’s remedy” that allows developers to bypass local land-use rules to pursue their projects.

“Despite this week’s setback, it’s personally still my goal to try and get to adoption on January 31, so we can turn the page and focus our efforts and limited resources on actual implementation,” Wernikoff said. “We’re one year into our eight-year cycle at this point, and the clock is ticking.”

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Embarcadero Media Foundation to launch new websites

By Jocelyn Dong

Embarcadero Media Foundation is set to unveil brand-new websites for all seven of its newsrooms along the Peninsula and in the Tri-Valley on Wednesday, Jan. 24.

The dynamic and user-friendly platform is designed to provide news consumers with a better experience through a simple navigation bar, photo-rich layout and at-a-glance presentation of news, lifestyle articles, blogs, event listings and more.

Embarcadero Media Foundation is the nonprofit parent organization of The Almanac, the Mountain View Voice, Palo Alto Weekly, Redwood City Pulse, Danville/ San Ramon, Livermore Vite and Pleasanton Weekly.

The new websites’ modern design guides users through a wealth of news, information and resources. Key features include:

Enhanced navigation: A simplified menu structure and intuitive search functionality make it easier to find information, from reading the latest breaking news in your city to browsing the latest regional lifestyle coverage to contacting customer support.

Rich content: Embarcadero journalists’ award-winning reporting on everything from community and breaking news to in-depth investigations to arts, food and real estate is displayed with a clean design and eye-pleasing visuals.

Google announces sweeping layoffs to more than 400 tech and child care workers in Mountain View

By Emily Margareten

In another reduction to its global workforce, Google plans to lay off hundreds of workers in the Bay Area this year, with Mountain View experiencing the brunt of the job cuts. The layoffs will impact approximately 702 employees in Mountain View, San Francisco and Sunnyvale, according to state filings that were reported by the San Francisco Chronicle. More than half of the eliminated positions are planned for Mountain View.

On Jan. 10, Google sent a letter to the city announcing its intentions to lay off 364 workers on its product, design and engineering teams. The layoffs will occur between the months of March and October, impacting employees in offices on Charleston Road, Amphitheater Parkway, Crittenden Lane and Sterling Court.

Google also plans to close down all four of its Bay Area child care centers, two of which are located in Mountain View. The closure of one of the centers at 325 Gladys Ave. will result in the layoff of 73 workers, according to the state filing.

The layoffs will have a bearing on the city’s finances, although the extent of the impact is not yet known, said Brian Babcock, a city spokesperson. “It will decrease business license tax revenue to the City, which is based on employee headcount,” he said.

The tech giant described the layoffs as part of ongoing organizational and priority changes that have been happening since last year and will continue well into 2024.

“Some teams are continuing to make these kinds of organizational changes, which include some role eliminations globally,” a Google spokesperson said in a statement to this news agency.

Google made sweeping job cuts last year, eliminating 12,000 positions in January. Since then, periodic layoffs have been occurring in the company’s tech, recruiting and news divisions.
Newsom OK’d a minimum wage increase for health care workers. Now he wants to delay it

By Ana B. Ibarra/CalMatters

California health care workers banking on a state-ordered minimum wage increase later this year might have to wait a little longer. Because of the state’s $38 billion projected budget deficit, Gov. Gavin Newsom on Wednesday said he is seeking changes to a law signed just three months ago that set the health care industry on a path to a $25 minimum wage.

The first pay increases were expected to take effect in June. It’s unclear how long the proposed changes could push back that schedule. Newsom wants the wage increases to take place when the state’s fiscal outlook is healthy.

He said he signed the law, Senate Bill 25, in October because he “had a commitment on that trigger” from proponents of the law, meaning that the bill’s backers had agreed to tie the wage increase to the state’s budget outlook. His administration did not disclose that agreement when he signed the law.

Erin Melton, a spokesperson for the governor’s office, said the administration publicly discussed the possibility of a cap-up legislation soon after Newsom signed the law. She pointed to a Los Angeles Times article that published three weeks after Newsom signed the law in which another spokesperson said the administration was working on “accompanying legislation to account for state budget conditions and revenues.”

Newsom included his request for a delay in the state budget proposal he released Wednesday. He said he is working with legislators and the law’s proponents to craft changes that will be presented in the form of a new bill later this month. His budget proposal said he also wants the Legislature to clarify whether state health workers are exempt from the law.

California minimum wage increases

The law was one of two bills Newsom signed last fall raising the minimum wage for certain workers in specific industries. A separate law that raises the workers to $20 an hour starting in April is moving forward. The California minimum wage for other workers is $16 this year.

Close to 500,000 California health care workers are expected to see pay increases under the minimum wage law for their industry once it goes into effect. The bill came together late in the legislative year after SEIU, the law sponsor, and a group of health care employers, including the California Hospital Association, brokered a deal under which both sides supported the wage increase. Newsom signed it without a clear cost estimate.

Newsom’s Department of Finance released a price estimate in November, projecting it would cost the state approximately $4 billion in 2024-25, with $2 billion coming out of the state general fund.

SEIU declined an interview after Newsom’s budget remarks. It released a statement that said it would continue working with the administration and the Legislature.

Lawmakers anticipated budget deficit

Newsom’s signature on the bill surprised some lawmakers because they anticipated a steep deficit.

“While we didn’t know what the deficit was at the time, I, at least, was assuming that the news was going to be not good and I couldn’t understand why we would be so deliberately adding to our own overhead,” said Sen. Roger Niello, a Fair Oaks Republican who sits as vice chair of the Senate budget and fiscal review committee.

The world is a better place for having him but unfortunately a worse place in that we lost him so early,” Shiraishi said.

Nicole said she’s heard the word “light” a lot in the days following Christian’s death to describe her son.

Nicole has visited with some of Christian’s students since his death. One student, a fifth grader, gave her a Mason jar filled with water and oil and with LED lights surrounding it.

“She told me that Christian was light and now I can have light when I look at this,” Nicole said.

“All the love Christian loved and world I’m getting back; it’s overwhelming. It’s heartwarming, it’s like a gift from Christian. I’m very, very proud of my son. He came into many challenges in his life and he was always resilient. He always smiled through it.”

In an email to colleagues, Nicole said that Christian was not only her son but a “beacon of selflessness and service in our community.”

“His dedication to empowering communities of color, particularly the youth, was unwavering,” she said. “As a true leader, he worked tirelessly towards creating a more just society, leaving a lasting impact on everyone he encountered.”

Memorial fund and service

East Palo Alto Academy, Sbragia’s alma mater, is raising money to assist his family with funding for a memorial donation. To donate to a memorial fund for his family at tinyurl.com/ChristianSbragiafund.

As another way of honoring Christian and maintaining his programming, Nicole plans to still host CoolineKids’ annual summer camp for 100 children. Donate to his organization at coolinekids.org/give.

The Ravenswood City School District Board of Trustees planned to honor Christian during a Thursday, Jan. 18, meeting, after The Almanac’s Wednesday afternoon press deadline. You can share your favorite memories of Christian at tinyurl.com/Sbragiamemories.

Christian is survived by his mother Nicole, brother Coleton, 12, grandmother Christine and aunt Angie. Nicole said a memorial will likely be held in the spring.
Real or fake? Becker bill to require ‘watermarks’ for AI content

By Gennady Sheyner

Pope Francis decked out in a white puffer jacket. Mahatma Gandhi beaming in a selfie.

“The Mona Lisa” zoomed out, its bemused subject staged against a backdrop of wispy clouds and jagged rocks.

These viral images, all fake, have inspired awe, amusement and mockery over the past year as the field of generative artificial intelligence continued to surge in popularity. The rise of AI-generated images has also sparked debates among policymakers about the best way to protect people from fraud and deception.

U.S. President Joe Biden highlighted the challenges posed by AI in late October, when he signed an executive order that, among other things, required developers of powerful AI models to share information with the government; established an AI-focused cybersecurity program; and directed the Department of Commerce to develop guidance for watermarking so that AI-generated products are clearly labeled.

Biden also held meetings in the summer with seven leading AI companies — Amazon, Anthropic, Google, Inflection, Meta, Microsoft, and OpenAI — and secured their voluntary commitment to developing watermarking systems, mechanisms that add an invisible (but detectable) mark to photos or videos to identify them as AI-generated.

Now, state Sen. Josh Becker, D-Menlo Park, is preparing to tackle the challenge on the state level. Becker plans to introduce a bill that would require generative AI companies to watermark the images, videos and audio that are created from their models. These companies would also be required to provide a platform for consumers to ask about whether the content was created by them.

Becker said in a Jan. 12 statement that the bill is intended to “champion transparency and empower consumers.” “Artificial intelligence has become an integral part of our daily lives, influencing the products we use,” Becker said. “It is crucial that consumers have the right to know if a product has been generated by AI.”

For Becker, the new AI bill is the second piece of legislation that targets technological trickery and opaqueness. Last year, he authored the Delete Act, which establishes a system that will allow consumers to opt out of having their information collected by data brokers. Earlier this month, state Sen. Steve Padilla, D-Chula Vista, introduced a pair of bills to regulate AI with privacy and safety standards and to create an AI research hub to support universities.

Becker said in a statement that it became clear to him through conversations with experts that “the ability to distribute high-quality content made by generative AI creates concerns about its potential misuse.”

The introduction of what Becker is calling the California Artificial Intelligence Transparency Act “marks a significant step toward establishing clear guidelines for AI-generated products, setting a precedent for other states and jurisdictions to follow,” he said. “AI-generated images, audio and video could be used for spreading political misinformation and creating deepfakes,” Becker said. “My legislation will aim to advance provenance, transparency, accountability and empower individuals to make choices aligned with their values.”

Email Staff Writer
Gennady Sheyner at gsheyner@paweekly.com.
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Caution: Some other agents continue to push for high commissions despite a recent court case.
Contributions to the Holiday Fund go directly to programs that benefit Peninsula residents. Last year, Almanac readers and foundations contributed $310,000 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.

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San Mateo County to conduct annual count of unsheltered population, seeks volunteers

By Michelle Iraclheta

The San Mateo County Human Services Agency is recruiting volunteers for its yearly one-day homeless count, a day when, in past years, hundreds have undertaken the task of tallying those sheltered and unsheltered people living on the streets.

The event is a requirement and part of the point-in-time count and housing inventory count by the United States Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The one day homeless count takes place on Thursday, Jan. 25 and the county officials will administer a survey between Jan. 25 and Feb. 1. To volunteer for the count, register by signing up here. You will need to provide your contact information. The county will also provide a Zoom training to prepare you for the count.

In 2022, more than 300 volunteers gathered early in the morning on Feb. 24 at ten local deployment sites throughout San Mateo County. The count found a total of 1,808 people experiencing homelessness throughout the county. Compared with 2019, 1,512 people countywide experienced homelessness, a 21% increase since 2017.

Since 2011, East Palo Alto and Redwood City have had the highest population of unsheltered individuals, often swapping the top spot each year.

In October 2023, Redwood City released a report noting that it had been aggressively tackling its homelessness through several initiatives and that by doing so, homeless encampments had declined by more than 25%.

Email Editor Michelle Iraclheta at mira@rwupdate.com.

WERNIKOFF continued from page 8

to Portola Valley?

A: We have a very engaged community and had a pretty divisive election in 2022, primarily related to housing topics. I think the council and majority of community members have moved past that, embrace the spirit of our “PV Refresh,” and prefer to look forward to and emulate our staff’s new value statement, which is focused on teamwork, efficiency and respect.

Q: What are some of the other issues you see the town needs to address?

A: While I wish we could work on things like an overdue master plan for the Town Center or a town-wide effort to bury PG&E lines, for now we need to focus on fundamentals.

We need to continue to recruit great new staff members to help us rebuild our operational and fiscal foundation. Our town is not unlike a small business in that to be successful we need strong operations, fiscal stability and great customer service.

We need to pivot from the bureaucratic process of the housing element to the broader work of getting actual affordable housing developed — housing that enables a more diverse community while upholding the town’s rural character.

We need to lead by example by working hard with kindness and respect. The deterioration of civil discourse is well-documented at all levels of government, and our small town is no exception.

I have a sign on a wall that my kids pass by as they leave the house that says: “Work hard and be nice to people.” It’s a simple concept. There are many things that are unique and special about our town. Let’s add the ethos of working hard with kindness and respect to that distinction.

Q: Are there some things you like to highlight in which the town is going in the right direction and want to continue or build upon?

A: I feel a lot is going in the right direction! Much of it is stemming from our current rebuilding at Town Hall.

Anyone who follows the news in our community knows it’s been a rocky few years, but I feel we are better positioned now to make lasting progress than at any other time during my council term.

Sometimes you need to take a step back before you can move forward, and I feel we are well on our way to moving forward.

Portola Valley was incorporated in 1964, so this year marks our 60th anniversary as a town. I look forward to celebrating this milestone with our community. Stay tuned for details to come.

* Email Contributing Writer Neil Gonzales at ngonzalez92@yahoo.com.
As California evictions boom, whether tenants get lawyers depends on where they live

By Felicia Mello / CalMatters

A fter years of living on the streets and in single-room-occupancy hotels, the cozy studio apartment in San Francisco’s Japantown felt like a sanctuary to Corey Lafayette. He’d moved with no furniture, so friends found him a mattress off Craigslist and contributed a massive globe and a mirror framed in wrought-iron leaves. He bought pots and pans and dreamed of decorating.

As he cared for the plants on his sunny patio and walked through the building’s tree-lined courtyard, he could feel stress peeling away. No more stops by police. No more neighbors in his business or strict hotel rules. At the apartment, he was free.

But now, three years later, he had received an eviction notice. A building manager had raised concerns about the behavior of Lafayette’s guests. The notice said Lafayette had a right to legal counsel and gave a phone number. The streets were scary; he couldn’t go back there.

He picked up the phone.

Lafayette was lucky; San Francisco is the only city in California that guarantees tenants access to an attorney in eviction proceedings. The city is one of 17 nationwide, plus four states, that have launched right to counsel programs since New York City pioneered the idea in 2017.

While the Constitution grants all criminal defendants the right to counsel, that doesn’t extend to civil cases — even those with unusually high stakes, such as when a person risks losing their home. Nationwide, fewer than 5% of tenants in eviction cases are represented by an attorney, compared to more than 80% of landlords, the National Coalition for a Civil Right to Counsel estimates.

Evictions soar across California now that COVID-era moratoria have expired, tenant advocates are pushing for more cities and counties to follow San Francisco’s example. Los Angeles, San Diego and Contra Costa are among the first steps toward establishing a tenant right to counsel last year.

Having a lawyer, tenant advocates say, can make the difference between keeping their home — or having the time and money to find a new one — and being put out on the street.

But access to this legal help varies widely depending on where you live, even among cities that are just a few miles apart.

Floods, then an eviction notice

Across the Bay in suburban Oakley, Nancy Wiles was also facing eviction. She’d lived in her cozy townhome, a sprawling low-income housing complex, since 2014. At first, she liked the ample grounds stewed with oak trees and the fact that her kids could play safely nearby.

But then the 63-year-old hairdresser, say, her building suffered a series of floods, starting with a pipe bursting just outside her ground-floor apartment. Ankle-deep water filled the hallway, with tenants trying to block their doorways with trash bags. Another time, she said, water from a third-floor leak cascaded down the stairs like a river.

Apartment managers relocated Wiles to a hotel while they fixed the leaks, but she said the problem never seemed addressed. A mold spout that, she said, spouted on her bathroom ceiling, said Wiles, who suffers from asthma and began using her breathing machine three times a day.

The costs also added up; she said. While she paid her normal rent during weeks-long hotel stays, she had to buy takeout food and, eventually, a slow-cooker to make meals. When her apartment management failed to make minor repairs, like fixing a sink that wouldn’t drain, Wiles would pay a family member to take care of it. Already working less due to the pandemic and a chronic illness, Wiles started falling behind on rent.

By September Wiles had had enough. She and her 23-year-old son were packing their bags to move to a new apartment when there was a knock on the door: Wiles had been served with eviction papers. “My heart went boom,” she said.

Then she remembered she was moving out anyway. The paperwork, she figured, could wait. She stuffed it in her purse and kept packing — a decision that would cost her later.

Navigating the system

Evictions can happen fast and are often confusing for tenants. After unpacking their bags to move to a new apartment when there was a knock on the door: Wiles had been served with eviction papers. “My heart went boom,” she says.

When she remembered she was moving out anyway. The paperwork, she figured, could wait. She stuffed it in her purse and kept packing — a decision that would cost her later.

Choosing to fight

Back in San Francisco, the city’s taxpayer-supported Eviction Defense Collaborative matched Corey Lafayette with Jacqueline Patton, a tenant attorney with six years’ experience. The couple, they gathered in Lafayette’s apartment along with a social worker for the collaborative to talk strategy.

Unemployed and relying ondisability benefits, Lafayette had fallen behind on rent during the pandemic. But when he tried to cover the debt, he said, the apartment manager wouldn’t accept his money.

Lafayette, who is Black and gay, said he thought discrimination was at play. He recalled a conversation he’d had with the apartment manager two years ago.

“A week after he took over, he told me, ‘This is a farming facility and I don’t fit in here and he’s going to get me kicked out however he can.’”

The manager denied making that statement when questioned by a reporter. “I would never say anything like that,” he said, declining to comment further.

Lafayette’s eviction notice contained a laundry list of complaints, from keeping the unit in an “unsanitary condition,” to allowing guests to visit at night, to causing a fire hazard by “putting aluminum foil under the burners of your stove.” Patton and the social worker, Brandon Williams, looked around at Lafayette’s neatly arranged sneaker collection and sparsely red dinnette chairs. They’d seen hoarder apartments; this wasn’t one.

Video evidence Patton requested from Lafayette’s landlord showed people loitering near the apartment building, Patton said, but no proof of any of them were his guests. Lafayette, who walks with difficulty due to an old gunshot wound, said he sometimes relied on a friend to open the gate for him when a delivery arrived, or to help with chores like laundry. He admitted that one of his guests had taken packages belonging to another tenant, an incident mentioned in the complaint, but said he was “debatable” when he found out and told the person to return them.

Williams empathized with Lafayette’s complaint of discrimination. “You have to realize you’re in San Francisco in 2023 being told by a white man that you don’t belong. It’s a shame but it’s the reality of this city,” said Williams, who also is Black.

Eviction disproportionately affects Black people. In a large nationwide study, Princeton University’s Eviction Lab found fewer than one in five renters nationwide are Black, but more than half of eviction filings are against Black renters.

Patton had considered proposing a compromise to Lafayette’s landlord, the nonprofit Chinatown Community Development Center. They could transfer him to another of their buildings. But at the meeting, the three decide that they will push for Lafayette to stay in his home.

“1 want to fight this,” Lafayette said.

A lawyer shortage

They’d have to fight quickly. While San Francisco provides all tenants with representation, only about 75% get the so-called “gold standard” of legal defense an attorney to carry the case from start to finish. The rest, like Lafayette, get a lawyer for just one mandatory settlement conference; if the case isn’t resolved then, the tenant has to go it alone.

It’s one of the most-often-cited problems with right to counsel programs. There simply aren’t enough experienced tenant attorneys to go around.

That mismatch has become more obvious this year as eviction moratoria have expired across California, leaving courts clogged with cases in some areas.

In counties like Alameda and Los Angeles, which don’t have right to counsel ordinances but have networks of tenant attorneys offering free legal help, it can be difficult to hire for a job that, while potentially rewarding, pays less than the private sector.

Ora Prochovnick, litigation director for San Francisco’s Eviction Defense Collaborative, said she needs 50 experienced attorneys to handle the roughly 2,500 eviction cases the city sees each year. She has 45 lawyers now, though some are brand new to the field. The city spends $17 million a year providing free lawyer representation for tenants and has set up a fellowship program to lure more law school graduates into the work.

The collaborative triages cases, handing them off to a network of attorneys at eight nonprofit groups and deciding who will get full-scope representation based on factors like whether tenants are elderly or have children, a disability or a language barrier.

The effort, which launched in 2019, is paying off, says the Mayor’s Office of Housing: About 70% of San Francisco tenants receive full-scope legal representation and end up staying in their homes.

“We are correcting a power imbalance that has existed for way too long,” said Prochovnick. “We are preventing displacement to the streets and outside the Bay Area.”

An unwelcome surprise

Weeks after getting her eviction notice in Oakland, Nancy Wiles still wasn’t sure what to do. She showed it to a friend who is a tenant advocate on
Evictions

In December the Los Angeles City Council asked its city attorney to draft an ordinance guaranteeing legal counsel to tenants who face eviction and earn 80% or less of the area’s median income. Funded by a $10 million real estate sales of $5 million or more, the program would phase in as money becomes available. LA County supervisors passed a similar measure in July.

“We’re facing at this moment a city that is completely crippled by its housing costs and as a result tenants are facing incredible challenges,” said Nithya Raza, the Rent Control Board’s director.

Community groups in Fresno and Bakersfield have unsuccessfully pushed to establish a tenant right to counsel. Both cities, however, have set up eviction protection programs to offer education, mediation, and in Fresno’s case, legal help to tenants when the city attorney says their landlords have acted illegally.

The right to counsel is “having a moment” partly because the pandemic has lightened on tenant housing precarity and the widespread nature of evictions,” said Wirth.

Landlord groups have opposed so-called right-to-counsel programs. “Providing a taxpayer-funded attorney to a tenant who did not pay their rent does not stop the eviction,” said Joshua Howard, an executive vice president of the California Apartment Association. “Those funds would be better used to provide rental assistance to prevent the eviction process from ever starting.”

Heading to court

On a November Monday, Lafayette walked into the San Francisco Superior Court building, his hands trembling.

“I’m nervous. I just want this to be over,” he said.

In a courtroom packed with tenants, landlords and attorneys, Patton and the lawyer for Lafayette’s landlord told Judge Ronald Quidachay they were close to reaching a deal. He sent them into a hallway to negotiate. Patton haddrafted a settlement agreement in which Lafayette agreed to pay $2,700 in overdue rent, with help from a city program, and ensure his guests do not disturb other tenants. For him to be in violation, the landlord would have to prove that any “guests” were actually there to visit Lafayette. And Lafayette would get two things he’d been requesting for years: access to a park and space for his name to be added to the apartment’s call box.

“One of my goals is to not just stabilize the housing but to make it better for someone,” said Patton. If tenants feel they are being evicted from an agreement, she said, they’ll be more likely to keep it, avoiding another eviction.

Down the hall, Dylan Tong, the landlord’s lawyer, said that as a low-income housing provider, his client was most concerned that Lafayette’s guests respect the rules of the complex.

“There has to be a balance between enforcing the rules of a lease and also keeping people housed, giving them a second chance,” he said. “So my client doesn’t want to evict him but really wants him to know that he has to behave moving forward.”

After a tense few minutes, Lafayette learned the landlord had accepted the settlement terms. His shoulders sank with relief. He glanced down the hall at the apartment manager who he’d said previously that I have people behind me,” he said. “I’m not here by myself.”

Nancy Wiles’ story also had a happy ending. At a legal clinic at Pittsburg Superior Court she met Gough, the Centro Legal de la Raza attorney. Gough wrote a letter to Wiles’ landlord, who agreed to dismiss the eviction case against her.

“It’s still unclear if the short-lived eviction will show up on Wiles’ credit report, her attorney said. Added William Goodwin, the friend who helped her, “It burns me a little, because Nancy was fortunate, but how many others are out there being victimized?”

This story, from Bay City News Service, was originally published by CalMatters.

Obituaries

Local residents who died recently include:

Isabel Walker, 95, a Palo Alto resident who was a member of the counseling team and a support group facilitator for Stanford University Medical Center, who supported disaster response efforts up and down the East Coast, who later worked for the Kennedy family in Massachusetts and Washington, D.C. who was a beach lover and active volunteer with the Palo Alto schools and local church groups, whose publications supported cancer patients and their families, who continued to see patients into her 80s, and who was a loving wife, mother and grandmother, on Dec. 17, 2023.

Gordon Russell, 90, a Portola Valley resident who dedicated his life to healthcare and biotech divisions of Sequoia Capital, who was a philanthropist focused on causes that reflected his dedication to community needs, including health care, education and environment, who was the former chairman of the board for both the Peninsula Community Foundation and the Palo Alto Medical Foundation, who was a former member of the Air Force and who was described as a classical music lover, beloved patriarch and humanist, on Nov. 25, 2023.

Sandra Couch, 74, who was raised in Palo Alto, who worked her way up at Silicon Valley tech firms and retired to enjoy her cherished friendships, who was a firecracker befitting of her signature red hair and who was the heart-beat of her family: a loving mother, grandmother and aunt, on Jan. 9, 2024.

Lee Newman McMillion, 89, a former Palo Alto resident who during the 60s and 70s helped start the girls softball league South Palo Alto Bohemian League, in an era before Title IX, when sports for girls were hard to find, and girls softball in the U.S. was still quite rare, and who was a lover of history, music and reading, on Nov. 30, 2023. To read full obituaries, leave remembrances and post photos, go to Lasting Memories at AlmanacNews.com/obituaries.

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School commute option, said Treadway.

The district said the Safe Routes to School commute is tied to their recommendation because the new boundaries would potentially create a safer route for students to walk and bike due to proximity to their schools.

“We will not ask any currently enrolled students or siblings to change their enrollment, so the change should be minimally impactful for MPCSD families, current and new,” said Treadway.

Plans were initially presented to the board during a Dec. 14 meeting.

The changes, if approved, would occur in time for priority new student registration for fall 2024, which begins on Feb. 1. Until the registration process is complete, it is unclear how many families would be affected by these changes, according to Treadway.

Email Contributing Writer Joshua Picozo at joshuapicozo@gmail.com.
California’s proposed water conservation rules too stringent and costly, analysts say

By Rachel Becker / CalMatters

California’s legislative advisors Thursday, Jan. 1, lambasted the state’s ambitious proposal to regulate urban water conservation, calling the measures costly and difficult to achieve, “in many cases without compelling justifications.”

The proposed rules, unveiled in August, call for more than 400 cities and other water suppliers serving about 95% of Californians to meet conservation targets beginning in 2025.

The state Legislative Analyst’s Office suggested significant changes to the State Water Resources Control Board’s proposal, warning that the regulations would set “such stringent standards for outdoor use that suppliers will not have much ‘wiggle room’ in complying.” They also warn that the added costs will ultimately be borne by customers.

‘Although there is good room for further conservation, this additional state effort seems like it is probably not needed, or at least, need not be as stringent and complicated as it seems. It has been asked, ‘Is this juice worth the squeeze?’

JAY LUND, VICE DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR WATERSHED SCIENCES AT UC DAVIS

‘Whether the benefits of the new rules ultimately will outweigh the costs is unclear,’ the report says. ‘These doubts are particularly worrisome given we find that suppliers will face notable challenges complying with these requirements.’

The report recommended that lawmakers direct state regulators to “make several of the proposed requirements less stringent (such as the residential outdoor standard),” but it how to target state funding to assist lower-income customers, and extend some of the deadlines for suppliers to ensure they can actually achieve the framework proposed.

Water board officials didn’t comment on the criticism or recommendations, but spokesperson Edward Ortiz said the report, along with other feedback received from industry and the public, will be considered. He said a new draft of the rules will be released this spring.

“We are facing climate change threats that reduce the state’s water supply by 10% by 2040, California is advancing an all-of-the-above strategy to bolster water supplies throughout the state, including conservation,” Ortiz said.

Heather Cooley, director of research at the Pacific Institute, a global water think tank, said conservation and efficiency are the cheapest, fastest ways to meet California’s water needs as climate change renders supplies more variable and uncertain.

“We have to take real action to ensure we can provide safe, reliable water for California communities,” she said. “Retrofitting and taking out old devices, transforming our landscapes, all of those things have a cost. But it’s far less than developing new sources of supply.”

Mandated by a package of 2018 laws, the intent of the rules is to make conservation “a way of life” in California. The rules, which are two years behind schedule, are expected to be adopted by the water board this summer before taking effect in October.

The rules don’t target individuals or businesses, instead setting individualized conservation targets for urban water agencies across the state based on goals for indoor and outdoor water use, leaks and other factors.

By 2035, water providers will collectively need to reduce water use by 14%. The savings would be enough to supply about 1.2 million homes every year, or about 1% of the state’s total water use.

The report called this amount “modest,” noting that “the agricultural sector uses about four times as much water as the urban sector.”

Water agencies and city officials warned state regulators last fall that complying would be costly — roughly $13.5 billion from 2025 to 2040 for rebates and other efforts to cut residential use. The benefits are anticipated to reach about $15.6 billion, in large part because suppliers and customers will buy less water.

The Legislative Analyst’s report noted that an assessment by a consulting firm commissioned by a water supplier raised questions about those calculations. They noted that customers — particularly low-income households — would likely bear the brunt of rates increased to cover the costs.

“Even if benefits outweigh costs in the long run, whether they merit the amount of work and costs to implement the requirements as currently proposed is uncertain,” the report said.

Jay Lund, vice director of the Center for Watershed Sciences at the University of California at Davis, called the report “an unusually frank assessment.”

“Although there is good room for further conservation, this additional state effort seems like it is probably not needed, or at least, need not be as stringent and complicated as it seems. It has been asked, ‘Is this juice worth the squeeze?’” he told CalMatters in an email.

During the last three-year severe drought, which ended last year, the Newsom administration set voluntary conservation goals that were largely ineffective. Californians used only about 6% less water from July 2021 through the end of last year compared to 2020, far less than Gov. Gavin Newsom’s 15% goal.

Some areas, especially in hot, inland areas of the state, will require more stringent conservation than others under the proposed rules. Inland and eastern California will be required to cut back the most, with the biggest cuts, up to 34%, needed in desert areas, followed by the Tulare Lake region.

Quinlin Green, chief plant operator of a treatment facility in Menlo Park, samples the wastewater in the process of becoming irrigation water.

Even in the North Coast area, which as a whole is not expected to need to cut back at all to meet the 2035 targets, two large suppliers serving more than 1.6 million customers will nevertheless need to reduce their water use by a quarter.

But increasing conservation in the places that need it most will seem a bargain when inevitable longer and drier droughts occur, said Felicia Marcus, former chair of the water board and now a visiting fellow at Stanford University’s Water in the West Program.

“The goal is both to make each locality more resilient to the nightmare curveballs climate change is throwing at us, and to do it in a way that integrates efficiency first and foremost as the most cost and carbon effective measure in the long run,” Marcus said.

Sonja Petek, the principal fiscal and policy analyst who authored the report, said the office isn’t saying to abandon the conservation regulations, it’s just recommending changes to make them more feasible.

“Water conservation is one of the important components of the state’s overall water management strategy,” she said, citing more severe and prolonged droughts and the need to reduce reliance on overdrafted groundwater basins. “Our concern is that if these regulations were adopted as written, it could lead to a scenario where compliance is not feasible for some water suppliers, so the state might not achieve its ultimate goals.”

Assemblymember Laura Friedman, a Democrat from Burbank and an author of the original legislation, said the report “raises some valid concerns with the rulemaking process thus far, however, I have faith in the water board to do its due diligence in implementing the standards that were passed.”

This story, from Bay City News Service, was originally published by CalMatters.

CHILD CARE

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that the school district shared with this news organization.

The contracts provide that Google can terminate its leases without a fee by giving the school district two years written notice. Lamont declined to say whether Google planned to give this notice.

For its part, the school district said that it was aware of the closures. When asked whether the district plans to seek another tenant, recoup the money in some other way or institute budget cuts, Superintendent Ayinde Rudolph said that those scenarios were possibilities, but declined to provide additional information.

The school board was scheduled to discuss negotiations with Google about the Slater site in closed session at a Jan. 11 meeting. Rudolph told the Voice that it is too early to discuss the meeting. The closed door discussion pertained to an unrelated request from Google about facility updates.

According to the leases, Google began renting space at Slater for its child care operations in 2006 and at Theuerkauf in 2004. The current contracts run through June 30, 2028, unless terminated early.

The Slater site is about 31,000 square feet, including four classrooms buildings, a multi-use room, administrative building, three portables and yard space, the lease states. Google rents a smaller space at Theuerkauf, with three portables and outdoor space, totaling roughly 6,300 square feet, according to the lease.

Email Staff Writer Zoe Morgan at zmorgan@nv-voice.com.
As an essential component of human life, it is not surprising that food, in its many shapes and forms, has been the subject matter of art dating back to the Egyptians, who carved pictographs of crops and bread on the walls of the pyramids.

During the Dutch Baroque era, still-life paintings of lusciously ripe fruit were a symbol of wealth and taste. Poverty and despair were effectively portrayed by Van Gogh in his iconic “The Potato Eaters” and Cezanne used food as geometric objects in order to push traditional ideas about representation towards abstraction. Fast forward to the 1960’s Pop Era, when Warhol and Oldenburg had great fun presenting comestibles in serial form and grandiose size.

It seems there will always be something to say about food, and our relationship to it, a topic engagingly explored in the current show at the Palo Alto Art Center. Entitled “In Feast or Famine,” the multimedia group exhibition is on view Jan. 20 to April 6.

The exhibition is the first of a year-long series that will, according to Palo Alto Art Center Director Karen Kienzle, “showcase the power of food to connect us to identity, culture and each other. Artists have always found creative inspiration in all things edible.”

Independent curator Marianne McGrath was hired to organize the show, which was inspired by her own interest in food and food history. In the midst of the pandemic, she realized that one of the things she missed most was gathering with others over a meal.

“I felt that the topic of food is globally relevant and something that everyone can relate to,” she said. “Food might be our first introduction to ‘making’ something with a process, specific materials, and intended outcome, like art. A recipe, menu or meal can be a medium along with art to open the door to self-expression, shared community and new cultures.”

McGrath explained that she has followed some of the 24 artists in the exhibition, who others came from networking over a several-year period. There are artists of many ethnic backgrounds represented and an impressive array of media, including photography, painting, sculpture, printmaking and video art.

At first glance, the exhibition seems bright, colorful, even cheerful, with lots of charming representations of foods we all know and love. (Entering with a full stomach might be advisable.) But looking more carefully, and reading the labels, will clue you in to the fact that each of these artists has a thoughtful, or thought-provoking, statement to make about the subject.

Painter Chelsea Wong explores how gathering around the table achieves more than sustenance in “A Modern Feast.” The perspective might be flat, but the highly patterned background and brightly hued clothing of the five smiling diners exude a feeling of goodwill and enjoyment. Wong noted that, “In a culture where openly expressing feelings doesn’t always come naturally, feeding one another is how we show love.”

In contrast, Narsiso Martinez, a native of Oaxaca, Mexico, would like us to think about what it takes to get food onto our tables. In his multimedia work, “Hollywood and Vine” we are confronted with the knowledge that farm workers, like the woman portrayed, undertake hard work and long hours in the fields of this state and others. The artist explained that he positioned her, standing on a black star, in order to resemble the celebrity heroes from the walk of fame in Los Angeles.

Look closely and you will note that discarded produce boxes form the background of this piece.

Tackling the notion that “we are what we eat” and just how beneficial or detrimental that can be, photographer Gregg Segal traveled around the world taking portraits of children. For his “Daily Bread” series, he had a specific request for each child: keep a journal of what you eat in one week. Examples from this inventory were then placed around each child for the portrait. The results, shown in these large, detailed pictures are fascinating. Yes, we would expect to see foods central to the child’s ethnic group (he visited Malaysia, Dubai, Sicily, France, Brazil and Los Angeles) in each one, as well as a lot of cross-over dishes (pizza and spaghetti), but it is apparent that soft drinks and processed foods have also become the norm.

Concerned about the epidemic of childhood obesity and chronic health problems related to diet, Segal hopes the series will be “a catalyst for change and a call to action.”

In “Daily Bread,” Segal photographed Altaf Rabbal D’Love Bin Roni, 6, from Gombak, Malaysia, in 2017 for his Daily Bread series. Segal documented what children in a various countries eat during a week to highlight issues surrounding diet and health.

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Jazz pianist and composer Joey Alexander performs Jan. 19 at Stanford Live.

**Joey Alexander**

Three-time Grammy Award-nominated jazz pianist and composer Joey Alexander’s latest album, “Continuance,” was released on Mack Avenue Records in November 2023 and this month he’ll be performing it live at Stanford. According to Stanford Live, Alexander is known for his “mind-blowing” technique and ability to communicate joy, and his music also takes inspiration from outside the jazz world. “Continuance” includes a version of “I Can’t Make You Love Me,” best known as a Bonnie Raitt song, and the hymn “Great Is Thy Faithfulness,” in addition to original compositions.

Jan. 19, 7:30 p.m., Bing Concert Hall, 327 Lasuen St., Stanford. $32. live.stanford.edu.

‘How I Learned What I Learned’

Former TheatreWorks Silicon Valley Artistic Director Tim Bond returns to TheatreWorks to direct August Wilson’s “How I Learned What I Learned” (co-conceived by Todd Kreidler), a solo memoir show about the life of the Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Wilson, starring Steven Anthony Jones. Bond, now the artistic director of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, was also a close friend of Wilson’s and is an acclaimed interpreter of his works, according to a press release from TheatreWorks. This production was originally staged at Oregon Shakespeare Festival. TheatreWorks will bring the production on a weeklong tour of Bay Area communities following its run in downtown Mountain View.

Through Feb. 3 at the Mountain View Center for the Performing Arts, 500 Castro St., Mountain View. Check individual performance ticket prices online. theatreworks.org.

**Dan Ashley and Jay Middleton**

Plenty of famous faces have performed at Club Fox, but followers of Bay Area news might find the frontman for the Dan Ashley Band to be particularly familiar. That’s because Ashley, a journalist, has anchored the weeknight news for San Francisco’s ABC7 for over three decades. As a singer and guitarist, Ashley’s sound blends country, Americana and rock ‘n’ roll. His 2021 solo album, “Out There,” a collaboration with producer and writing partner Bill Bentley, draws on classic rock with a bluesy edge, with earthy vocals and gritty, rock-driven guitar. Ashley performs with singer-songwriter Jay Middleton, who is himself a familiar face to Bay Area listeners, having most recently fronted the local party band All Star Jukebox for two decades. Though he’s penned plenty of songs for others that have charted, Middleton turned his songwriting skills inward during the early days of the pandemic, writing the songs that would become “Forward,” his first solo album. Released in 2022, “Forward” features an uplifting blend of wailing rock guitar, a full-bodied funk-influenced horn section, gentle vocal harmonies, even a light country twang.

Jan. 19, 8 p.m. at Club Fox, 2209 Broadway Redwood City. Tickets are $20-$25. eventbrite.com.

**Kyla Zhao**

Local writer Kyla Zhao (the author of “Fraud Squad”) will be at Linden Tree Books in downtown Los Altos to celebrate the launch of her new novel “Valley Verified,” about a young New York City fashion writer who moves cross country and leaps into the intense tech world of Silicon Valley when she accepts a job at a new startup. According to Linden Tree’s website, Zhao and store co-owner Flo Grosskurth will discuss “ambitious young women, the Zillennial experience, Silicon Valley startup culture and Patagonia vests” at the event. Zhao graduated from Stanford University in 2021 and has worked in tech marketing and journalism.

Jan. 20, 1 p.m., Linden Tree Books, 265 State St., Los Altos. lindentreebooks.com.

‘Misery’

When a snowy car crash badly injures novelist Paul Sheldon, he learns there’s something much more rigid and inescapable than deadlines: his “Number One Fan.” Sequestered in a remote cabin by said fan, Annie Wilkes, Paul finds his convalescence transformed quickly into captivity when Annie becomes displeased with his plans for her favorite character. Palo Alto Players gets the year off to a thrilling start with this stage adaptation of Stephen King’s novel that hammers home some truths about the dark sides of fame and fandom.


In the multimedia piece “Hollywood & Vine,” Narisso Martinez brings a playful element to her depiction of food with textile pieces such as “Recipe Quilt (Leche Flan).”

**FOOD**

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link to a growing, grassroots community that is moving the needle on diets.

Several of the artists are interested in the various ways we obtain food. Suhas Bhujbal’s painting, “Market #25” shows a throng of people interacting over food purchases, an act that looks as similar in the streets of India as it does on California Avenue. Kim Cogan’s Hopper-esque oil painting of a neighborhood liquor store “Friday Evening,” is both familiar and haunting in its quiet stillness. Our penchant for packaged foods is treated with almost surrealistic detail by Stefanie Herr in her photographic sculptures. You might be tempted to touch the bisected rabbit in “Happy Hunting Grounds:...
Carrot Cascade” to see if you can, indeed, feel the fur.
On a lighter note, Jeanne F. Jalandoni’s “Recipe Quilt (Beef Empanadas)” and “Recipe Quilt (Leche Flan)” are fun and playful. Ingredients for the foodstuffs (created with iron-on prints) surround the center of a square, where soft and fluffy empanadas or a dish of flan burst out in three dimensions. Leslie Lewis Sigler’s exquisitely painted portraits of cutlery anthropomorphize everyday objects we use but rarely consider. Sigler explained that she was drawn to these silver family heirlooms because “they seem to have an eternal life.” With names like “The Disruptor,” “The Honorable” and “The Tiger and the Dragon,” it is clear that the artist sees more than just a functional object. Instead, she said, they have “the power to reflect our own life stories and family histories.”

McGrath included an historical note to the show with three vintage ration posters from the collection of the Hoover Institution at Stanford University. Their World War I-era propaganda messages reinforce the notion that wartime often brings food scarcity and the need to conserve. They might be dated, but the suggestions in “Food ... don’t waste it” from 1917 (“buy with thought, cook it with care, buy local foods”) are just as relevant today.
For a final dessert, stand in front of Wayne Thiebaud’s “Neapolitan Pie.” Thiebaud, a well-known purveyor of sumptuous treats (in painted form) is at his best here. The dreamy soft layers of chocolate, vanilla and strawberry ice cream, capped with a coating of whipped cream will have you raiding the freezer when you get home.
There is much to take in here, and definitely something for everybody. McGrath hopes that the viewer will appreciate the skills and talents of the artists represented as well as the bigger message. “I hope visitors will think about the amazing people who grow, harvest, transport and prepare our food, appreciate them, their lives and labor.”

Email Contributing Writer Sheryl Nonnenberg at nonnenberg@aol.com.

“In Feast or Famine” is on view Jan. 20 through April 7 at the Palo Alto Art Center, 1313 Newell Road, Palo Alto. An opening reception with artmaking activities takes place Jan. 26, 6 p.m. Admission is free. For more information, go to cityofpaloalto.org.
Cheesecake lovers rejoice — Basuku Cheesecakes has returned. The popular Basque cheesecake pop-up halted Bay Area operations from March to December of last year while owner Charles Chen embarked on a “lifelong dream project,” helping his friend open a restaurant in Kyoto, Japan. Chen hoped to land a permanent partnership with a restaurant group in San Francisco before leaving for Asia in March, but the deal ultimately fell through. Now, the Oakland resident returns to the kitchens of Vina Enoteca in Palo Alto to continue baking cheesecakes — and hopes the Italian restaurant will take over his one-man production before he returns to Asia in the spring. Since 2020, Chen has single-handedly churned out nearly 10,000 cheesecakes, experimenting with limited-edition flavors like cookies and cream, chestnut mont blanc, salted caramel and orange creamsicle. Carefully pouring exactly 790 grams of batter into each silver tin, Chen now spends two 12-hour days producing cheesecakes for the weekly pop-up. Before leaving for Asia, Vina Enoteca allowed Chen to bake on weekdays so he could hold pop-ups on weekends. But since returning from Asia, limited availability of Vina Enoteca’s kitchen space has resulted in Tuesday pop-ups — located both at Vina Enoteca and either San Francisco or Oakland. His hungry customers eagerly await details via Basuku’s Instagram, and presales generally open Saturdays at noon. But not all 21,600 Instagram followers can snag a cheesecake each week — Chen only makes 100. And that’s not because he’s trying to be exclusive or deny his customers of cake. It’s because he’s the only one baking them. “It’s all just me,” he said with a laugh.

So it may come as a surprise that the man who’s responsible for making all of Basuku’s cheesecakes had never even baked a cheesecake until about three years ago. “I had never really cooked or baked, and so I’d never really thought I would be doing anything remotely close to what I’m doing right now,” Chen said. A career in restaurant consulting meant being around food but not necessarily cooking it. That was, until the pandemic. Scrolling online, he found a recipe for Basque cheesecake. “The initial appeal about the recipe was that it was very easy to make,” he said with a smile. While the first cheesecake didn’t turn out so well, he was determined to create the perfect recipe, he recalled. “I’d never really thought I would be doing anything remotely close to what I’m doing right now.”

Charles Chen

“Back then, all kinds of people were doing these garage-style pop-ups or making food at their home, and I said, ‘Why can’t I do this too?’” Chen said. “So I basically just started the Instagram page, and that was as far as starting a business as I thought I was gonna do ... it just turned into this thing that I really had no idea it would ever become.”

Ten thousand cheesecakes later, he’s hoping to eventually open up a shop in Taiwan and possibly Japan, a decision influenced by his recent visit. In March, Chen went to Kyoto to help a friend open a restaurant, and the tasting menu featured Chen’s cheesecake as the final dessert. “Doing the cheesecake in Japan was something I was very intimidated by because the quality of things over there is so high, as well as it’s a Japanese-style cheesecake, so I wasn’t sure how it would be received,” Chen said. “I was fortunate to get a really good response.”

Then during the summer, Chen’s other friend, a well-known Taipei chef, invited Chen to his restaurant.
Basuku Cheesecakes owner Charles Chen weighs Basque cheesecake batter into a cake tin.

Basque cheesecakes bake in a hot oven in Vina Enoteca's kitchen in Palo Alto.

to do a pop-up. Chen sold 1,000 cakes in one month — two to three times the volume he sold in the Bay Area. Now he has a licensing deal that keeps his cheesecakes selling in Taiwan, even when he’s not there.

“It was a great experience to not only be a part of the opening and be a part of doing something in Japan, but just the combination of all those things, embracing a bit more of my heritage, as well as just enjoying the fact that I was actually making the cheesecakes that I’m proud of.”

Chen plans on staying in the Bay Area until spring and just announced a new menu item — mini Basque cheesecakes 40% of the size of his original recipe. He hopes a licensing deal with a Bay Area operator, likely Vina Enoteca, will allow him to not only continue selling cheesecakes when he’s out of town, but also amp up production to meet demand.

“If I can nail down this deal with the operator that I’m talking to, then there’s a very good chance that by the spring or the summer, the cakes will be a lot more available throughout the whole Bay Area,” Chen said.

For details on Basuku’s next pop-up, follow @basukucheescakes on Instagram.

Email Food Editor Adrienne Mitchel at amitchel@almanacnews.com.
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4 bedrooms and 2.5 baths
Approximately 3,825 total square feet
  - Main residence: 3,015 sq. ft.
  - 2-car garage: 540 sq. ft.
  - Unfinished storage: 270 sq. ft.
Main rooms: foyer; powder room; living room with fireplace; formal dining room; kitchen; casual dining area; family room; laundry room

Personal accommodations: upstairs primary suite; landing area with deck access; three upstairs bedrooms, one customized for an office; bathroom
2-car garage with outside access plus two convenient guest parking spaces
Spacious front and rear decks, plus garage-top patio, in a serene private setting dotted with mature heritage oaks
Almost one-half acre (approximately 20,480 sq. ft.)
Community amenities include a recreation center with 2 pools, 3 tennis courts, clubhouse, fitness center, vineyard, and dog park
Excellent Portola Valley schools

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