

LA MESA COURIER

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Foothillers ground Warhawks



Grossmont cheerleaders celebrate the Foothillers' season-opening 34-7 win at Madison on Aug. 21. Grossmont football's home opener against La Jolla will take place at 7 p.m. on Friday, Aug. 28. (Photo by Izabella Allen/GHS Yearbook staff)

CITY COUNCIL

La Mesa votes to raise cannabis tax levy to 5%

Like many jurisdictions, La Mesa's sales tax revenues have decreased in recent years as people purchase less amid an affordability crisis. A motion from La Mesa vice mayor Lauren Cazares kickstarted the process to raise the tax from 4 to 5%. She said it was a necessary step to stabilize the city's revenue while demand for services has remained constant. Cazares estimates raising the cannabis tax would bring in over \$750,000. **PAGE 8**



EDUCATION

Doug Martin becomes the 16th principal to lead Grossmont High

Doug Martin began his career in education in 2002, and after 15 years in the classroom as an English teacher — including two as a Foothiller — he transitioned to administration as an assistant principal at El Cajon Valley High. "It is my honor and privilege to take the helm from Dan Barnes as principal of Grossmont High School. Having grown up in La Mesa, I have truly found my home in the heart of Fletcher Hills at the flagship school of the Grossmont Union High School District," Martin wrote. **PAGE 14**



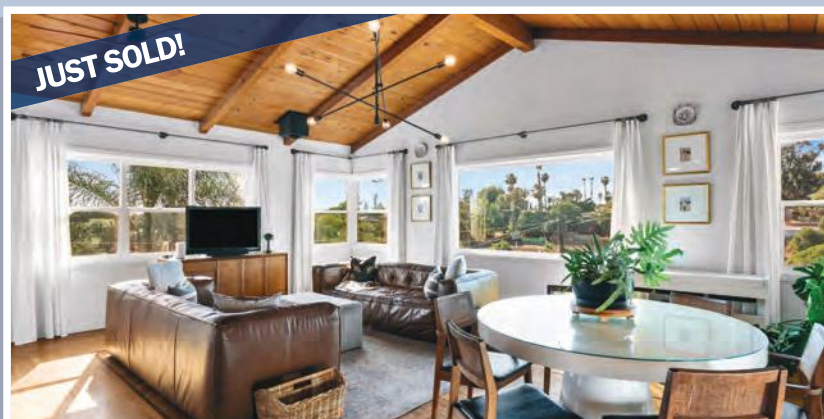
COVER STORY

La Mesa prepares for El Niño, urges residents to clean out storm drains

City officials are now examining stormwater and drain channels and are busy identifying flood-prone areas and have even created a working group to help with the efforts. City crews are also reviewing locations and parcels with a history of flooding and coming up with plans to prevent future flooding. Scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) say this year's El Niño will be very strong. "The city is focusing on stormwater and drainage maintenance, tree inspection and pruning, infrastructure inspections, and emergency response readiness," La Mesa spokesperson Grecia Aguilar told Times of San Diego. **PAGE 5**

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La Mesa approves five-story, 114-unit mixed-use building for village

By Drew Sitton
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

LA MESA — The La Mesa City Council, hands tied by state law, has approved a mixed-use building that will bring 114 residential units to the village.

CityMark Palm will transform a 0.87 acre parcel on Palm and Allison avenues that currently operates as a private paid parking lot surrounded by mature trees.

Developer CityMark would take out trees and pavement to make way

for a five-story building with a parking garage, retail space and a range of studio, lofts, one- and two-bedroom units.

The council wasn't voting on Tuesday to approve the building itself, but just whether the design conformed with the Urban Design Program and Downtown Village Specific Plan. The Design Review Board already had voted that it did. While the council unanimously agreed, some city council members expressed displeasure with certain design aspects and the lack of parking.

"There's been times where we have not ratified the (Design Review Board), and we were immediately contacted by the state," explained Mayor Mark Arapostathis.

The proposal includes five income-restricted affordable units and is close enough to transit to be exempt from many local density laws, including ones that prohibit developments over 46 feet tall and require that third stories be 10 feet set back from the street.

"Because of the state law and because of density bonus, people are able to forego what we have in our municipal code regarding building," Aparapostathis said. "It's a frustrating thing."

Due to the development's proximity to a bus stop, for MTS Route 852, and the La Mesa Boulevard trolley station, which is across the street, state law sets no minimum on parking spaces, Vice Mayor



A rendering of CityMark Palm, a proposed 114-unit, mixed-use development coming to Allison and Palm avenues in La Mesa village. (Rendering courtesy city of La Mesa)

Lauren Cazares noted. She praised the project though for bringing retail to the vibrant area.

"While this is certainly a change for the village, I think that mixed use makes a whole lot more sense than it just being housing," Cazares said. "I look forward to welcoming the businesses that will take over the base of that building."

That proximity to the retail district is one of the reasons the council members worried about parking. An influx of residents, they said, might take up spots that would normally have high turnover from visitors to village shops.

The proposed parking garage has 72 spots for the 158 bedrooms set to be part of CityMark's project. Street parking on both streets around the building is already metered.

Councilmember Laura Lothian and Cazares recently reviewed all the streets in the village of La Mesa, looking for every possible red or white curb, underutilized corner or small space that might have a parking spot eked out of it.

"It's an urgent problem, and we need to get ahead of it," Lothian said.

In addition to parking, Lothian had reservations about the orange and black, boxy design that she said does not fit in with the village aesthetic.

"These apartment buildings look like they belong in Mission Valley or Mira Mesa," Lothian said.

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Road safety improvements coming to La Mesa as school starts

By Drew Sitton
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

LA MESA — The La Mesa City Council has unanimously voted to install a “no turn on red” sign at the intersection of El Paso and Lake Murray Boulevard, to make the intersection safe for pedestrians, including children walking to school.

A parent, Megan Webb, began a change.org petition in November 2025. She sought to improve the intersection’s safety because a car nearly hit her child while walking to Murray Manor Elementary.

“It’s a moment that has shaken me to the core and urged me to advocate for immediate changes to protect our community’s children,” Webb wrote. “Walking our children to school should be safe and stress-free.”

The incident occurred a month after 11-year-old Andrew Olsen was killed walking home from school on Jackson Drive.

“I think the traffic concerns have only escalated over the more recent years,” Webb said in a phone interview. “After... Andrew died on Jackson, it became

apparent that, unfortunately, people who are driving are not paying enough attention to children, and they’re not as aware that it is school hours.”

“That was kind of the final straw for me, that something needs to be done because children in our community are unfortunately being hurt,” Webb added.

The online petition gained over 200 signatures — and drew attention from a council member. Lauren Cazares met with Webb in December to tour the intersection and hear her experience.

“No parent should have to experience the fear of watching their child or themselves nearly be struck while walking to school,” Cazares told the council.

Cazares directed the city manager to look into ways to improve safety, resulting in the motion passed on Tuesday.

“I know firsthand how many students and families rely on this crossing every day,” said Cazares, who grew up on El Paso and attended Murray Manor Elementary.



The intersection at Baltimore Avenue and Lake Shore Way in La Mesa. (Photo by Aimee Westcott/Special for Times of San Diego)

Murray Manor begins the 2026–2027 school year in the coming week, now with a safer route to school.

The La Mesa Police Department did not comment on how officers will enforce the rule change as school begins.

The intersection was not the only road safety improvement that Cazares pushed for during the meeting.

During her council member report, she praised public works for installing a long-awaited replacement for the broken street light on Baltimore Drive and Lake Park Way. The stoplight had been out since a car struck and killed a 61-year-old woman there last year. The city also pledged to

study whether the intersection needs a crosswalk.

In addition, Cazares noted that Dugan Avenue received temporary speed bumps as part of a pilot project.

Road safety was top of mind for residents, too. Two neighbors on Laird Street shared their own experience on the hilly road with a blind turn.

They explained that GPS apps frequently say taking the quiet neighborhood street will save one minute over the main road, Jackson Drive.

The neighbors fear that as GPS adjusts to the new slowdown on Dugan Avenue, even more speedsters will use Laird as a shortcut.

“If people start taking Laird instead of Dugan, it’s going get our problem even worse,” Eric Scraby said.

The neighbors want temporary speed bumps added to Laird as soon as possible.

“Those speed bumps will make all the difference in how our families can be safe,” Allan Sands said.

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La Mesa prepares for El Niño, urges residents to clean out storm drains

FROM STAFF REPORTS

SAN DIEGO — Scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) say this year’s El Niño is strengthening, and there’s a 90% chance the weather phenomenon will be a “very strong,” possibly historic weather pattern.

Warmer waters in the equatorial Pacific Ocean that are consistent with El Niño mean wet weather is likely coming to the Western U.S. and San Diego County.

Cities along Southern California are now doing what they can to prepare for large amounts of rain and possibility for flooding.

In La Mesa, city officials are now examining stormwater and drain channels and are busy identifying flood-prone areas, and have even created a working group to help with the efforts.

“The city is focusing on stormwater and drainage maintenance, tree inspection and pruning, infrastructure inspections, and emergency response readiness,” La Mesa spokesperson Grecia Aguilar told Times of San Diego. “This includes inspecting and clearing storm drains, culverts and other drainage facilities.

“The working group will help coordinate city response and recovery efforts across departments. The city will continue to

monitor weather forecasts and increase preparedness activities as needed in response to storm activity. The goal is to reduce preventable impacts before storms arrive and provide a coordinated response when significant rainfall occurs.”

That is not all, Aguilar said. City crews are also reviewing locations and parcels with a history of flooding and coming up with plans to prevent future flooding.

The city, says Aguilar, is also calling on residents for help.

“The city encourages residents to begin preparing now for heavy rainfall by keeping private drainage systems clear, removing leaves and debris from storm drains, maintaining roofs and gutters, protecting below-grade openings and inspecting retaining walls and slopes,” said Aguilar.

The city also made a video series to help prepare for severe weather.

La Mesa urges residents to monitor city communications for updates during emergencies.

Residents can find those updates on La Mesa’s Emergency Information Center webpage. Residents can also receive notifications on the city’s Nixle app or on Instagram and Facebook.

Added Aguilar: “Residents should also be aware of where sandbags are available and make arrangements to pick them up before a storm, if needed. Incorporated La

Mesa residents can obtain sandbags at the City’s Public Works Operations Center, located at 8152 Commercial St. Sandbags are not yet available, but the city will notify the public when they are.

During heavy rainfall, residents should never attempt to drive through a flooded roadway. Residents are also encouraged to register for the Genasys Protect app in case emergency evacuations become necessary. Residents are encouraged to contact the La Mesa Police Department to report non-emergency concerns or problems at 619-667-1400 (option 6).”



La Mesa residents fill sandbags in preparation for coming storms. (File photo by Chris Stone/Times of San Diego)

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'Super' El Niño — what scientists know now and what to learn

By Thomas Murphy
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — As San Diego city workers prepare for a potentially historic “super” El Niño, some scientists say it’s still too early to tell if San Diego and Southern California are in for historic rainfall and flooding.

Scientists at UC San Diego’s Scripps Institution of Oceanography have been studying the formation of this El Niño. Researchers published a new, multi-part FAQ guide explaining what El Niño is, why this year’s event could be unusually strong and how scientists are tracking it.

For San Diegans, El Niño can mean more rain, bigger surf, coastal flooding and warmer ocean temperatures. But scientists say it’s still too early to know exactly what this year’s event will mean, particularly when predicting rainfall and flooding.

Historically, El Niño has increased the odds of wetter weather across Southern California, but the strength of an El Niño and actual rainfall in San Diego are not always intertwined.

One thing researchers do agree on is that forecast models reveal a moderate-to-large El Niño this year, with some suggesting it could be the largest in the 150-year historical record.

So, what exactly should San Diegans expect this year?

What is the El Niño-Southern Oscillation?

El Niño is a natural climate pattern that begins thousands of miles away in the tropical Pacific Ocean. When water near the equator becomes unusually warm, it can alter weather patterns around the world.

El Niño is one of two dominant weather patterns in the Pacific. While El Niño occurs when warm water builds up, the opposite pattern, La Niña, occurs when cooler water gathers in the region.

Southern California typically experiences drier conditions during La Niña. The two patterns are part of a larger climate cycle known as the El Niño-Southern Oscillation.

In the case of El Niños, rising temperatures weaken the east-to-west trade winds that normally push warm surface water westward across the Pacific. As those winds weaken, warmer waters

remain and build up in the east. Higher ocean surface temperatures affect the air above, creating more intense storms.

“The tropics are like the engine room of the Pacific,” Shang-Ping Xie, a Scripps professor of climate science, wrote. “Heat in the tropics drives global atmospheric circulation. In that sense, variations in the tropical Pacific like El Niño can have huge impacts on global weather patterns.”

One key measure is whether sea-surface temperatures in specific areas of the Pacific on the equator remain at least 0.9 degrees Fahrenheit above average. Those sea-surface temperatures are now what federal agencies are monitoring.

Sea-surface temperatures in the region are 3.6 degrees Fahrenheit above average, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, putting the odds of a very strong El Niño during fall and winter at greater than 90%.

While the presence of an El Niño is a certainty, its impact on Southern California and beyond is not as certain.

“It does not necessarily mean that the event will have a huge impact on our own weather in the U.S. during the upcoming fall and winter,” said Scripps researcher Art Miller. “Calling this a Super El Niño simply refers to the magnitude of the event in the tropical Pacific.”

More often than not, El Niños have resulted in stronger and more frequent winter storms for San Diego County.

“We’re keenly interested in this 2026-27 strongly developing El Niño because some previous strong cases, like the massive events in 1982-83 and 1997-98, were among the wettest years on record in California,” Scripps climate researcher Dan Cayan wrote.

“While we might partially attribute elements of individual storms to El Niño, we are left with statistical odds, rather than precise yes or no characterizations,” Cayan continued.

For residents along Chollas Creek in Southcrest — a neighborhood that suffered severe flooding during the January 2024 storms — another strong El Niño raises concerns that San Diego could see similar flooding again.

Preparations are already underway.

The Office of Emergency Services has formed an El Niño working group with representatives from city departments



Graduate students in Scripps Institution of Oceanography retrieve a mooring off the coast of Del Mar, which measures the temperature and salinity of the ocean. (Photo by Erik Jepsen/UC San Diego)

and public safety agencies to coordinate how the city prepares for storms, responds to emergencies and communicates with the public.

What should San Diegans do now?

City officials recommend that residents make an emergency plan, prepare an emergency kit, sign up for emergency alerts and check whether their homes are in or near flood-prone areas.

These areas include Chollas Valley, Sorrento Valley, Mission Valley and the Tijuana River Valley, according to city maps.

The city says 15,000 acres and more than 6,900 structures are located in FEMA-designated flood-hazard areas. Officials also warn that flooding can occur outside those designated zones.

Residents should also know their evacuation routes and never attempt to drive or walk through floodwater.

The Office of Emergency Services has launched an El Niño HYPERLINK “https://www.sandiego.gov/elnino” preparedness webpage with information about flood risks, emergency preparation and alerts.

But it does mean there is enough uncertainty — and enough potential for extreme weather — that officials will continue preparing before the first major storm arrives.

El Niño could bring coastal flooding without more rainfall

Potential heavy rainfall is not the only danger of the oncoming El Niño. Changes in ocean temperatures, waves and storm patterns can increase coastal flooding and accelerate erosion, particularly during high tides.

Fixing La Mesa Boulevard trolley crossing could cost half a billion

By Drew Sitton
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

LA MESA — After months of study, SANDAG presented possible ways to untangle a traffic snarl at one of the La Mesa's busiest intersections — Spring Street and La Mesa Boulevard — but without a path to implement those expensive solutions.

The proposed solutions, which include elevating trolley tracks or moving them underground, are three to four times La Mesa's annual budget. The city council won't implement those ideas any time soon. "We'll let our great-grandchildren know about this," said Mayor Mark Arapostathis, to chuckles from those on the dias and in the crowd.

The city council initially requested SANDAG's help years ago to study options to alleviate traffic and improve safety where the trolley crosses streets while running parallel to Spring Street.

At some point, SANDAG will increase Orange Line service frequency. Although there is no current plan for service changes, trolleys coming every seven-and-a-half minutes would worsen traffic, SANDAG senior regional planner Cecily Taylor said.

City staff partnered with SANDAG to explore solutions using a \$500,000 Caltrans grant. Taylor presented the study results at a city council meeting on Tuesday, July 28.

In general, the three main solutions so trolleys and vehicles no longer clash would be to elevate the trolley, lower the street below the trolley, or entrench the trolley.

SANDAG did not study lowering the street due to its impact on the village shops in the retail district. Lowering the trolley was not much better, as it cost the most at \$740,900,000, and had the longest and most complex construction process.

Business owners and residents reacted most positively to the elevated trolley.

It wasn't universally lauded, with council member Laura Lothian concerned about the industrial look of the tracks.

"I don't care if you draw flowers on it. It's never going to look village-y," Lothian said.

"There's no doubt this is a visually prominent structure," Taylor said.

Taylor offered that plazas, cafes, small businesses, landscaping and art could sit



Crossing gates open for cars at La Mesa Boulevard trolley stop. (Photo by Calista Stocker/Times of San Diego)

below the tracks.

It had other drawbacks, like wheel sounds carrying farther in the village, even if gate arms and trolley horns would no longer cause noise pollution.

Plus, it's still over half a billion dollars to build. Then it would require upkeep costs for elevators and security.

But it could be the most practical build since La Mesa sits over a spring that would complicate underground efforts.

"There's a lot more detailed cost-benefit analysis that I think should be done," Taylor said. "A lot more work to be done to move any of these ideas forward."

In addition to the favored elevated trolley, SANDAG proposed a shortened version of an aerial guideway where instead of the trolley passing over all five streets along Spring Street, an arching bridge would just pass over Lemon Avenue and La Mesa Boulevard, so the busiest intersection would have relief.

That intermediate solution did not save significant money though, with estimated costs at \$428,700,000.

SANDAG also looked at some near-term improvements, not full solutions, that would be cheaper and faster to implement, like coordinating signals, building better sidewalks, or even a pedestrian and bike bridge across Spring Street. \$13,000,000 could slightly improve the roadway.

Despite initially requesting the study, the city council was in no rush to implement the solutions the study found. However, Vice Mayor Lauren Cazares noted the study meant the city could move quickly if grants ever do emerge.

"It's great that we're looking into options," she said. "That being said, with that price tag, obviously, it's not something we're going to be moving on right this second."

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La Mesa, with lowest cannabis tax in county, votes to raise levy to 5%

By Drew Sitton
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

LA MESA — The La Mesa City Council has pushed forward a plan to raise its cannabis taxes from the lowest in the county to one equal to the rates in Lemon Grove and Oceanside.

A motion from vice mayor Lauren Cazares on Tuesday kickstarted the process to raise the tax from 4 to 5%. She said it was a necessary step to stabilize the city's revenue while demand for services has remained constant.

Mayor Mark Arapostathis, who initially helped bring legal cannabis sales to La Mesa, seconded her motion. The rest of the council also voted yes.

"Sales tax revenues have not kept (up) with expectations, while the cost of providing essential public services continues to rise," Cazares said.

Like many jurisdictions, La Mesa's sales tax revenues have decreased in recent years as people purchase less amid an affordability crisis. Cazares estimates raising the cannabis tax would bring in over \$750,000. Current cannabis taxes bring in a projected \$2.5 million per year.

Rather than raising the general sales tax or property taxes, Cazares views raising the cannabis tax as a way to improve the city's finances without adding a financial burden to La Mesa residents.

"This approach, I believe, will also allow the cost of local government to be supported by a regional customer base that chooses to shop at La Mesa rather than placing the burden solely on our residents," Cazares said.

While some of La Mesa's residents



The Grove opened in July 2018 as La Mesa's first legal medical cannabis dispensary. (Photo by Adrian Childress/Times of San Diego)

certainly purchase at local dispensaries, the city is also a cannabis destination for people to the east and west. La Mesa's low tax rate spurred some of that cannabis "tourism."

Dispensaries like The Grove celebrate La Mesa's tax rate in its advertising.

"We definitely hype the tax, because it's real," said Sean McDermott, owner of The Grove.

Even in La Mesa, with its low tax rate, taxes spur constant complaints from customers, who pay local and state sales taxes in addition to the state excise taxes and local cannabis taxes.

"Everyone's mad about the tax. You hear it multiple times a day at the register," McDermott said. "They'd be super bitter."

Although the tax hike would make La Mesa equivalent to neighboring city Lemon Grove, Cazares believes La Mesa would still remain competitive in the market because it is still half the cost of



The EMBR dispensary is part of a growing retail district along Center Street. (Photo by Adrian Childress/Times of San Diego)

purchasing in the city of San Diego. Plus, another neighboring city, El Cajon, does not have any dispensaries at all.

"Even with the increase, La Mesa will remain one of the lowest and most competitively taxed cities in the region," she said. "Our cannabis prices remain significantly lower than neighboring jurisdictions and I believe that competitive advantage will continue."

However, cannabis taxes are not an automatic cash cow. Legal sales in California have dropped year over year since 2021, despite it being the biggest cultivator state in the nation.

The state walked back a 4% tax hike last summer because industry professionals were concerned that a 19% excise tax would drive customers to illegal cannabis purchases while the legal industry faced slim margins.

San Diego encountered a similar issue when increasing its tax from 8 to 10%. In 2025, the city raised its cannabis tax

amid a budget shortfall, which brought the total combined tax rate to above 30% of the base retail cost of cannabis.

While this provided a small boost, the city's tax revenue fell millions short of expectations as San Diego residents turned to suburban cities like La Mesa or the illegal market instead.

Meanwhile, California's Department of Cannabis Control estimates that only 40% of cannabis consumed in 2024 was purchased legally.

La Mesa's cannabis taxes go into the general fund and Cazares said the proceeds have boosted emergency services and law enforcement staffing.

The sole public commenter on the tax bump pushed for law enforcement and youth substance abuse prevention programs to receive the bulk of the funds.

"These funds can support law enforcement efforts to combat the illegal cannabis market, which we know is a continuing concern," Becky Rapp told the council. "Illegal sales do not pay their fair taxes."

Even with La Mesa's tax increase, the total tax on each purchase would remain far below the cost to cannabis consumers in San Diego. But with competition from illegal sellers and additional dispensaries in the market as cities like Santee bring them online, The Grove owner McDermott fears what a tax hike might do in the fledgling industry.

"Increasing the tax could be catastrophic," he said.

The council members voted to direct city staff to prepare an ordinance raising the cannabis business tax rate. The council did not decide when the hike will go into effect.



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Matt Strabone: ‘La Mesa does not need an elected treasurer’

By Drew Sitton
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

LA MESA — La Mesa City Treasurer Matt Strabone resigned from office effective Aug. 12 to take an overseas job with NATO. After he left office, and his decade of work in law, politics and media in San Diego, we checked in with Strabone to reflect on the state of the city, the region as a whole and whether La Mesa needs an elected treasurer in the first place.

The city council voted to appoint a city treasurer through an apolitical process to avoid the cost of a special election. The seat is up for grabs in November’s election.

What were your top takeaways after serving as La Mesa treasurer? Did you have any favorite parts?

I am pleased to say that I delivered on every single one of my campaign promises, and I have left La Mesa’s investments and finances in better shape than I found them.

My job as city treasurer was to manage

the city of La Mesa’s investments. Our investment options are limited by state and local statute to things like bonds issued by the federal government and its agencies, bank CDs, corporate bonds, and certain public accounts akin to money market accounts that are operated by the state and the county. These are significant limitations, but I was nonetheless able to ensure that, in each full year that I served as city treasurer, investments under my management earned La Mesa the most money it had ever earned from its investments in a single year across its entire 114-year history. These record-breaking results brought millions of extra dollars to La Mesa without needing to raise taxes or cut services, which is exactly what I promised voters I would do when I ran for



Former treasurer Matt Strabone took an overseas job with NATO. (Courtesy of Matt Strabone)

this office four years ago. Additionally, as a practical matter and as a matter of principle, I did not believe that La Mesa should use its public money to buy corporate bonds, and over the course of my tenure as city treasurer, I removed all corporate bond holdings from La Mesa’s portfolio. Practically speaking, corporate bond rates were not superior to federal agency bonds or bank CDs, and corporate bonds carried the extra risk of loss if the corporations issuing them missed a bond payment, or worse, went out of business. It therefore did not seem reasonable to invest La Mesa’s money that way. But it also seemed wrong in principle — corporate bonds are essentially a loan made by the bondholder back to the corporation issuing the bond,

and I do not think that the people of La Mesa elected me to loan their taxpayer dollars to huge multinational corporations like JPMorgan Chase or Apple. The responsibility of managing an investment portfolio that can be as large as \$90 million, depending on the time of the year and the bills the city must pay, was my favorite part of the job. To have been endowed with that responsibility by my community is something that I will always cherish. I also enjoyed presenting my quarterly investment reports at city council meetings; those reports gave me an opportunity to demystify the work I was doing and let my fellow La Mesans know how their tax dollars were working to create even more money for our city.

Most cities don’t have an elected city treasurer. After serving in the position, what value do you think it brings? Should more cities have elected treasurers, or should it go the

Continued on Page 10



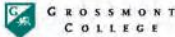
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MATT STRABONE

Continued from Page 9

other way, with La Mesa and other cities moving to an apolitical treasurer process?

Having served as the elected city treasurer, I can now say that I do not believe La Mesa should have an elected city treasurer. It is asking a lot of our city of 61,000 to identify someone from our ranks every four years who (1) understands public fixed income markets well enough to make informed investment decisions, (2) is willing to make important decisions affecting tens of millions of dollars while earning \$13,200 per year, and (3) is crazy enough to be willing to run for public office, but also (4) will not attempt to use the platform and authority granted by the office to pursue ideological pet projects that have nothing to do with the scope of the job. The potential for subpar outcomes, or even mischief, is troubling.

Instead, La Mesa should, first, abolish the office and assign its duties to the city's finance department, and second, establish a new Investment Committee to oversee the finance department's investment

decisions, comprised of two city councilmembers, the city manager, the finance director, and an appointed member of the public. Letting the finance department manage the city's investments will make it easier for staff to coordinate the timing of the investments against any unexpected costs or expenditures that arise for the city, while meaningful oversight from the city council and the public will ensure that there is accountability for the investment choices that are made.

Lest anyone believe that I waited until I was out of office to advocate for the abolition of my office, in February I publicly asked the city council to consider eliminating the elected office of city treasurer, though my plea appears to have fallen on deaf ears.

Where do you think San Diego is in terms of being a low- versus high-trust society? You were involved in politics for years. Is our region moving in a good direction?

Unfortunately, our nation as a whole has been sliding in the low-trust direction for some years now, and I don't think our region can overcome that on its own.

But even putting that aside, in the 11 years that I have been involved in the politics of the San Diego region, I'm not sure I would be able to point to much in particular that has greatly increased interpersonal trust or trust in authority, or fostered a broad consensus on an important civic matter. If anything, I get the sense from people I speak with in everyday situations that they have less confidence in their local government than ever.

Of all the work you did, what do you think contributed the most to building a trustful society?

I don't know. I hope that my quarterly reports gave some people a new understanding of the often-opaque workings of a city's investment management. I hope that my campaign four years ago helped some folks understand what the city treasurer actually does. I hope that my occasional op-ed or media appearance helped clarify a confusing issue for someone.

What will you miss most after moving overseas?

My friends.

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A taste of Europe at Lemon Grove Bistro with Mediterranean flavors

By Robin Dohrn-Simpson
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

LEMON GROVE — Nestled in the heart of San Diego County, Lemon Grove Bistro brings vibrant European and Mediterranean flavors to the table.

Blending French, Spanish, Italian, and Mediterranean influences, the bistro offers a diverse culinary experience where traditions meet fresh, locally sourced ingredients.

With its inviting atmosphere and thoughtfully prepared dishes, Lemon Grove Bistro is a destination for diners looking to savor the rich flavors and timeless appeal of European cuisine close to home.

Executive chef and owner Rashi Wahidi recognized an opportunity to bring Lemon Grove a dining experience that was both upscale and approachable, leading him to open Lemon Grove Bistro with a simple philosophy: guests should arrive feeling welcome and leave feeling satisfied and happy.

With culinary training in England and experience working alongside French chefs, Wahidi has drawn on his diverse background to create menus that celebrate the distinctive flavors and traditions of France, Spain, Italy, and the Mediterranean.

Early September will bring the unveiling of Lemon Grove Bistro's new fall menu, continuing Chef Wahidi's tradition of refreshing the offerings with each season.

“Right now, I’m creating our next menu, which will feature root vegetables and seasonal squashes, lobster ravioli and whatever other delights local farmers harvest,” Wahidi said. His menus are guided by what is freshest and most readily available from Southern California farms within a 100-mile radius, allowing the seasons and local harvests to inspire each dish.

Vegetarians can enjoy menu items such as Red Bell Pepper and Zucchini Flatbread, or a Zucchini and Yellow Squash Croquette with lemon aioli, Grilled Zucchini Panini with red bell pepper, goat cheese, and pesto, or a Tomato Basil Soup.

Chef de Cuisine Bryan Hopper showcases his culinary creativity with dishes such as Scottish Salmon, prepared either pan-seared or stuffed with crab and

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**Info: 619-373-8650,
for current menu, visit
<https://grovebistro.com>.**



Lemon Grove Bistro, at 3308 Main St., Lemon Grove, is open daily, serving lunch and dinner. (Photo by Robin Dohrn-Simpson/Special for Times of San Diego)

shrimp, then served with raisin pearl couscous and chimichurri sauce. For a taste of Mediterranean-inspired comfort, Hopper recommends the Mediterranean Chicken Breast, featuring tender chicken paired with artichokes, olives, and red wine prunes, all brought together with a flavorful Mediterranean sauce.

For dessert, save room for a Brown Butter Cake with Caramel Sauce and Vanilla Gelato or a Chocolate Lava Cake with Vanilla Gelato.

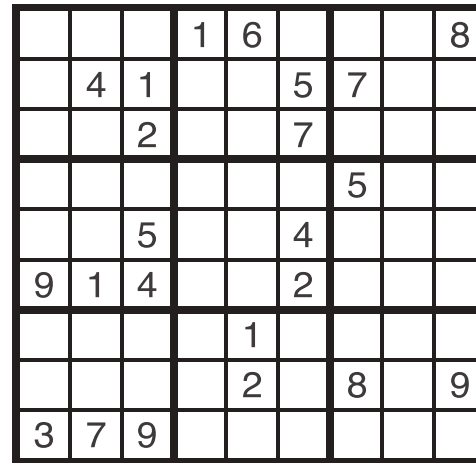
Think of Lemon Grove Bistro when you need catering. Grove Catering will cater for any occasion, either on-site or off-site. They specialize in weddings, birthdays, family events, corporate luncheons, and receptions, from as little as 10 people to as many as 500 people.

Find more details at <https://grovebistro.com/eastcountycateringservices>.

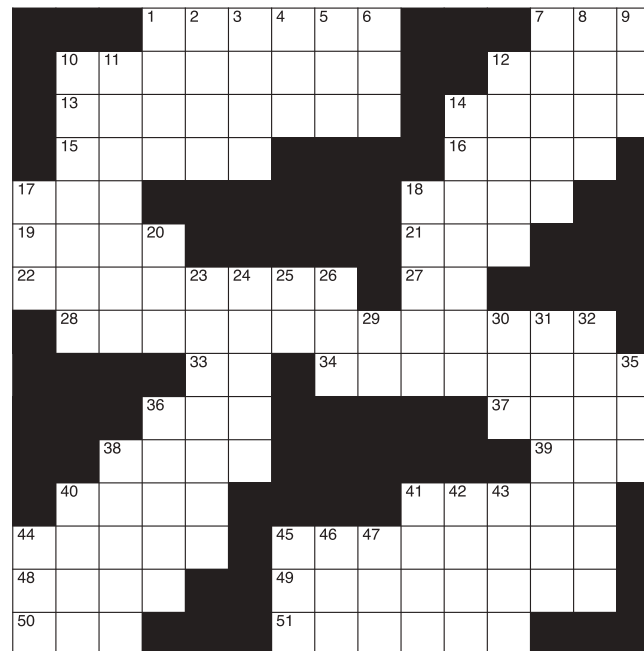
When you visit the historic Mission-style building, be sure to go to the south side to see the murals; they really are spectacular.

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7. Reciprocal of a sine
10. Type of phone
12. Biblical figure
13. One who renounces a religious belief
14. Warren and Monroe are two
15. Wild ox
16. Dismounted a horse
17. Cave dweller
18. Where infants sleep
19. Popular type of shoe
21. Clumsy large person
22. Evil-like
27. Integrated circuit
28. Austin-based athlete
33. Postscript
34. Follows 18
36. People of Gambia
37. Popular actor Nicolas
38. Platform for a lecturer
39. Taxi
40. American songwriter Sammy
41. Iranian city

44. Heavy clubs

45. One who is expelled
48. In bed
49. Lifelessness
50. Former CIA
51. Most slick
- CLUES DOWN**
1. Slovenly person
2. In addition
3. Hovels
4. Pie ____ mode
5. Subway rodent
6. They ____
7. Indigenous S. American people
8. Fine sand
9. Central nervous system
10. Nightclub entertainment
11. The perfect example of something
12. Supreme Islamic leader
14. Pain
17. Binary-coded decimal
18. Projecting corner of an angle
20. "Succession" actor Brian
23. Dinner table decor



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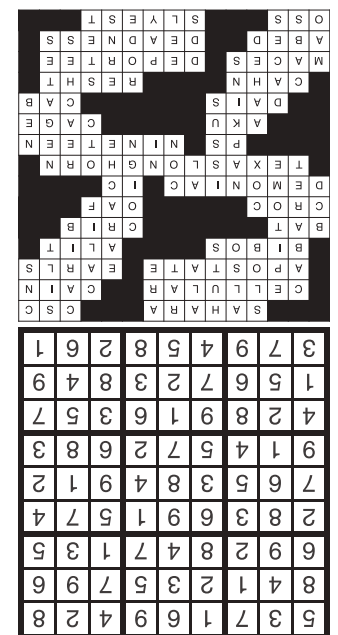
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ANSWERS



Best beach bites – Satisfy your coastal cravings for National Beach Day

By Frank Sabatini Jr.

SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — With nearly 20 miles of public shoreline within the city of San Diego, we hardly need a cue for plopping down a towel or chair on our beaches with a cooler of food.

But since National Beach Day is looming on the near horizon, the unofficial Aug. 30 “holiday” got us thinking about best and easiest sustenance for toting

onto the sands.

Below are some favorite beach bites from nearby eateries that are worth defending from observant seagulls.

Breakfast burritos and fruit cups from Kono's Café, 704 Garnet Ave., Pacific Beach. Morning beach goers will find five different types of neatly wrapped breakfast burritos at this long-established cafe, which sits a stone's throw from the water. Fillings include sausage with avocado; bacon with potatoes and cheese; and

vegetarian-friendly green chilies with cheese. Handy fruit cups containing melon, pineapple and banana are also available as perfect sustenance after a swim.

Roast beef sandies from Big Jim's Roast Beef, 4508 Cass St., Pacific Beach. Yes, roast beef is doable for sand-side dining. Leave it to Big Jim's to send customers to the beach with a variety of sandwich choices that require a few extra napkins. The “super duper beef” sandwich is a doozy that boasts 16 ounces of meat, barbecue sauce, and white American cheese on a grilled onion bun. The menu offers a five-ounce version to keep the kids sated. Also, the steak-and-cheese sandwich using top round comes on a manageable hoagie roll and beckons to a Philly cheesesteak.

Smoothies and acai bowls from Blue Palm Mission Beach, 2912 Mission Blvd., Mission Beach. Some of the tastiest and healthiest takeaways from this humble coffeehouse are the fresh-fruit smoothies made with berries and tropical fruits. The acai bowls are also beach-worthy. They're extra hearty if opting for additions such as



A noteworthy chicken fajita taco at Don Tommy's. (Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr./Special for Times of San Diego)

cocoa nibs, bee pollen and almond butter.

Chicken fajita tacos at Don Tommy's Mexican Food, 4145 Voltaire St., Ocean Beach. Who says you can only enjoy fajitas when they're served from hot plates at full-service restaurants? At Don Tommy's, where the flour tortillas are made to order, a fajita medley of grilled chicken, onions and peppers are tucked into the fresh tortillas with cilantro-based salsa for extra zip. The wrapped tacos travel intact to the spirited shores of Ocean Beach, located five minutes away by car or bike. A paper plate and a plastic fork to catch the droppings are the only tools you'll need.

No-mess, no-fuss smashburgers: Jeff's Beach Burgers and Hodad's, 2134 Avenida De La Playa, La Jolla (Jeff's); and 5010 Newport Ave., Ocean Beach (Hodad's). Located a short block from La Jolla Shores beach, Jeff's quarter-pound beef burgers (and their veggie counterparts) are adorned with a secret sauce that is used judiciously along with lettuce, tomato, grilled onions and pickles. Despite multiple garnishments, the burgers behave kindly when eaten at the beach.

The third-pounders at Hodad's are stacked more heavily because the lettuce, tomatoes and pickles crowning the patties are thickly cut. But the staff mindfully wraps burgers destined for the beach in heavy-duty parchment paper, forming it into what they call a “burger diaper.”

Artisan sandwiches and pastries from Sourdough & Moore, 4853 Newport Ave., Ocean Beach. The “Paris classic” sandwich with dry-cured ham, Emmental cheese and butter on sourdough baguette stays deliciously obedient with a gentle grip of a hand.




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Here are some of the best comics



LA MESA READS

Jake Sexton

Although it will seem long ago by the time you read this, I only recently returned from Comic Con. The yearly festival of pop culture, creativity, long lines and corporate marketing opportunities is a great time to reflect on the origin of the event: comics.

Here are some of the best I've read this year:

"The Department of Truth" — by James Tynion and Martin Simmonds

Every year, Comic Con gives out the Eisner Awards, the comic world's equivalent of an Oscar. One of this year's winners was "The Department of Truth" by James Tynion and Martin Simmonds.

This mind-bending work follows a mild-mannered FBI agent who discovers a secret government agency determined to stamp out conspiracy theories. Why? Because it knows that if enough people believe that something is real, it can reshape reality itself. The thought-provoking series links up the paranoia of the Cold War, the Satanic Panic of the 1980s, and modern political battles to control the narrative in the online world.

"Persepolis" — Marjane Satrapi

Although decades old, Marjane Satrapi's classic "Persepolis" showed the world that comics aren't just about lasagna-loving cats and superheroes punching each other. "Persepolis" is a hand-drawn memoir about Satrapi's childhood in Iran during the Islamic Revolution. It's a very personal tale about her life, family, teenage rebellion, and the frightening day-to-day experience of living in a theocracy. Sadly, Satrapi passed away earlier this year, but her tale showed millions

that a country many were told to fear was filled with real people like themselves.

"Absolute Martian Manhunter" — Deniz Camp and Javier Rodriguez

Big-time comic publisher DC Comics has recently introduced the Absolute Universe, re-imaginings of popular characters like Wonder Woman and Batman in new contexts. My favorite has been "Absolute Martian Manhunter" by Deniz Camp and Javier Rodriguez. The lesser-known character Martian Manhunter, a shape-changing alien with psychic powers, is recast as a human FBI agent discovering that a psychic alien consciousness is now living in his brain. The artwork and dialogue of this comic wonderfully depict a normal man seeing the world through completely foreign senses while conversing with a secret presence struggling to learn human culture.

"Big Jim and the White Boy" — David F. Walker and Marcus Kwame Anderson

I was also very impressed with "Big Jim and the White Boy," by David F. Walker and Marcus Kwame Anderson. This graphic novel looks at the American classic "The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn" through many new lenses.

Primarily, it retells it from the point of view of Jim, a resilient and intelligent man fighting to reclaim his family from slavery. It also shares the perspectives of elderly Jim and Huck talking to their grandchildren, a college literature professor teaching a course on the original novel, and the possible future journeys of the original Huck and Jim. It's well worth the read.

All these titles and many more incredible graphic novels are available through the La Mesa Library. In addition to great reads, the library is also offering a series of free Tech Classes for Beginners on Tuesdays, starting Sept. 8 at 2 p.m. Join us to learn the basics of your smartphone and how to navigate the internet from experts at Cyber-Seniors. Learn more at sdcl.org/lamesa.



(Book covers courtesy of La Mesa Library)

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Doug Martin becomes the 16th principal to lead Grossmont High



FOOTHILLER FOOTSTEPS

Lynn and Connie Baer

In April of last year, Dan Barnes, Grossmont's principal from 2011–2026, accepted a position in the district office as director of college and career readiness. As our 106th school year begins, Doug Martin is now the 16th principal to lead Grossmont. We asked Martin to introduce himself to our readers.

"It is my honor and privilege to take the helm from Dan Barnes as principal of Grossmont High School. Having grown up in La Mesa, and currently residing in El Cajon, I have truly found my home in the heart of Fletcher Hills at the flagship school of the Grossmont Union High School District," Martin wrote in his introduction letter.



New principal Doug Martin. (Photo courtesy of GHS)

Martin began his career in education in 2002, and after 15 years in the classroom as an English teacher — including two as a Foothiller — he transitioned to administration as an assistant principal at El Cajon Valley High School for the past nine years.

"My goal as principal is to build on the accomplishments of those who went



Grossmont High staff for 2026–2027. (Photo by Carolyn Jungman/photography teacher at GHS)

before me," wrote Martin, who started his tenure as principal of Grossmont High School in April.

"I am truly grateful to lead such an amazing group of teachers, staff, and coaches who work diligently to provide world class educational, athletic, and artistic opportunities for our students," Martin wrote. "The ability for every student to find their niche at Grossmont is truly remarkable. From our competitive sports teams to our spectacular visual and performing arts programs to our Navy Junior ROTC classes, various clubs, and community service organizations, every student who attends our school can find their home away from home on our campus like I have."

Martin adds that Grossmont students are making strides in English, math, and science scores, and many are earning college credits while in high school by

completing dual enrollment courses or passing Advanced Placement exams.

Additionally, Martin boasts about Grossmont as being the only public high school in the world to have sent three of its graduates into space. Also, current Padres pitcher Joe "No-No" Musgrove is a Foothiller grad.

"Grossmont graduates go on to accomplish great things in life, and it all starts at our beautiful campus next to the Castle on the Hill — the old Grossmont High School and now the GUHSD District office," Martin wrote.

"I look forward to seeing you cheering on our students as they represent us in the community. As my predecessors often say, 'It's great to be young and a Foothiller.'"

To learn about the 15 principals who preceded Martin, visit the history page on our website at foothillermuseum.com.

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‘Dead Dolly Lane:’ San Diego County’s creepiest roadside attraction

By Debbie L. Sklar
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

(Part two of our series: San Diego’s roadside relics — dinosaurs, doll heads, and other highway oddities.)

Tucked into the backcountry of Alpine along Japatul Road, one of San Diego County’s strangest unofficial roadside attractions has become both unsettling and oddly fascinating.

Known by locals as “Dead Dolly Lane,” the site is a private driveway transformed into an evolving folk-art installation lined with hundreds of dolls, doll heads, and broken toy figures attached to fences and posts.

What looks at first like a scene from a horror film is actually a long-running folk-art installation created by local artist Toni Fusco. According to various roadside documentation and published accounts, the display began as a way to discourage trespassers from entering the rural property.

Over time, it evolved into something far

more elaborate — and far more widely known.

Today, dolls hang from barbed-wire fencing and wooden posts in various stages of decay. Some remain intact, while others are missing limbs or heads, contributing to the nickname “the doll graveyard.”

The effect is heightened by the surrounding landscape of rolling hills, dry brush and an otherwise quiet stretch of road where the installation appears without warning.

One of the installation’s most unusual aspects is its collaborative nature. Over the years, visitors have added dolls of their own, expanding the collection and turning it into an informal community art project. According to published accounts, people regularly leave boxes of dolls, ensuring that the display is constantly changing.

Despite (or because of) its eerie appearance, Dead Dolly Lane has become a popular stop for photographers, road-trippers

and fans of unusual roadside attractions throughout Southern California. Although it is often described as a “selfie stop,” the installation remains on private property, and visitors are expected to observe it respectfully from the roadside.

The site is located off Japatul Road in Alpine, roughly 10 miles southeast of the town center. Exact addresses vary across online listings, but it is commonly listed near the 21700–21800 block of Japatul Road.

Rows of dolls suspended along fences create the installation’s most striking visual element. Some have been weathered by years of sun and rain, while others appear to have been added recently. In places, signs and found objects are incorporated into the display, adding to its surreal atmosphere.

While speculation continues about the meaning behind the display, most published accounts describe Dead Dolly Lane as an evolving folk-art installation rather than a traditional tourist attraction.



Some more of the dead dollies at the entrance of the site. (Photos courtesy and permission of The Pulse San Diego)

Existing somewhere between personal expression, community participation and roadside curiosity, it has become one of San Diego County’s most memorable hidden landmarks — an unforgettable roadside stop for those drawn to the unusual.

Read more history stories here, and do you have a story to tell? Send an email to DebbieSklar@cox.net.

Sources: Roadside America

The Pulse SD

FotoSpot Roadtrippers

Roadside attractions: The UFO landmark hiding in El Cajon

By Debbie L. Sklar
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

(Part three of our series: San Diego’s roadside relics — dinosaurs, doll heads, and other highway oddities)

Bright murals, flying saucers and cosmic artwork aren’t what most drivers expect to see along a busy El Cajon street. But for more than 50 years, one of San Diego County’s most unusual landmarks has quietly welcomed curious visitors through its doors.

Located at 145 South Magnolia Avenue in El Cajon, the Unarius Academy of Science is impossible to miss. Brilliantly painted murals inside and outside, colorful sculptures and futuristic artwork transform the building into something that looks more like the set of a vintage science-fiction movie than the headquarters of a non-profit educational organization.

Founded in 1954 by Ernest and Ruth Norman, Unarius — short for Universal Articulate Interdimensional Understanding of Science — describes itself as a non-profit educational organization dedicated to teaching what it calls an “interdimensional science of life.” Its teachings focus on spiritual evolution, reincarnation, higher consciousness and communication with advanced extraterrestrial civilizations.

Whether visitors embrace those ideas or simply stop out of curiosity, the academy has become one of Southern California’s most unusual roadside attractions.

After Ernest Norman’s death in 1971, co-founder Ruth Norman — known to followers as “Uriel” — became the public face of the organization, often appearing in elaborate space-inspired costumes during lectures, public events and television appearances. The organization opened its headquarters in 1975, and it has remained there ever since.

Despite the futuristic imagery, Ruth Norman frequently said the organization’s central message was one of compassion, once declaring, “There is no greater power in this or any other world than Love!”

During the 1980s and 1990s, Unarius attracted international attention for its colorful ceremonies and its belief that highly evolved beings from distant planets would someday make peaceful contact with humanity.

The purpose of the Normans in establishing Unarius was to provide a higher spiritual understanding of life for the betterment of humankind.

This was accomplished through the channeled teachings of the Unarius Science of Life and classes that the academy

offers. Unarius pioneered the self-healing science of past-life therapy that is taught in the classes.

For many locals, however, the biggest attraction is the building itself. Its vivid colors, eye-catching murals and cosmic artwork inside and outside have turned heads for decades, making it one of those places people can’t help but point out to first-time visitors.

Unlike many roadside oddities created solely for entertainment, the Unarius Academy wasn’t built as a tourist attraction. It remains an active organization with members around the world. Yet its colorful architecture, unusual artwork and fascinating history have earned it a place among San Diego County’s quirkiest roadside landmarks.

So the next time you’re driving through El Cajon and spot a brightly painted building that looks ready to welcome visitors from another galaxy, don’t be surprised. You might not meet Uriel, as she passed away in 1993, but know you’ve just discovered one of San Diego County’s most unforgettable roadside attractions.

Where to go The Unarius Academy of Science, 145 S. Magnolia Ave., El Cajon.

The academy is open for drop-in visitors and guided tours on Saturdays, 12 to



Once inside the academy, you will be in this area and greeted with letters spelling out the acronym UNARIUS that are painted on the wall seen on the upper left. (Photo courtesy of the Unarius Academy of Science)

4 p.m. and by appointment only Tuesday–Friday, 10:30 to 4 p.m. Call (800) 475-7062 or (619) 444-7062, or email uriel@unarius.org to make an appointment.

Readers who want to learn more about Unarius and its teachings can visit the Unarius website and its Vimeo channel where there are more than 50 videos uploaded to watch for free.

Read more history stories here. Do you have a story to tell? Send an email to DebbieSklar@cox.net

Sources: Unarius Academy of Science

Unarius Visitor Information

Unarius Classes and Events

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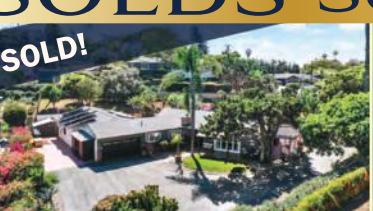
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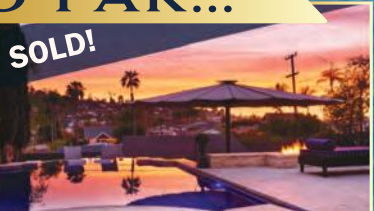
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