

DOWNTOWN NEWS

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INSIDE



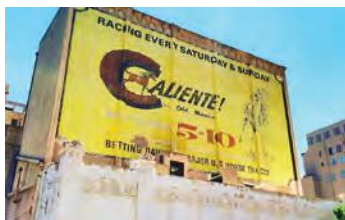
Urban Pickleball returns to Fifth Avenue downtown

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CityFest brings live music to Hillcrest

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Prebys buys derelict California Theatre

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Spider-Man sighted in Gaslamp



Spider-Man reads the latest copy of Daily Bugle with a 'Spider-Man Sighted' headline, and photos by Peter Parker, while visiting the Gaslamp Quarter during Comic-Con. Read more about it on page 14. (Photo by Adrian Childress/Times of San Diego)

COVER STORY

Investigators: Dealers sold over \$2 million worth of cocaine a month on Imperial Avenue

Last month, law enforcement shut down what they described as an open-air crack market at Imperial and 29th Street, charging 30 alleged gang members and associates with conspiracy to distribute cocaine and cocaine base, meaning crack cocaine. The coordinated operation, on July 15, with San Diego and Chula Vista police in partnership with the FBI Violent Crimes Task Force — Gang Group, included federal, state and local law enforcement who executed 21 search warrants on homes and vehicles to make the arrests. Investigators believe that thousands of customers purchased about 20 pounds of cocaine on the Grant Hill block weekly. **PAGE 7**

BUSINESS

Street vendors back out in force after court ruling

A ruling from the state's 4th District Court of Appeal found that key parts of San Diego's sidewalk vending ordinance conflict with the Safe Sidewalk Vending Act, the 2018 state law that decriminalized street vending statewide. **PAGE 6**



DINING

Health inspectors closing more restaurants for vermin violations

Twice as many eateries were closed last year compared to just four years ago, according to public records obtained by Times of San Diego. The increase has led to high-profile closures of everything from fancy restaurants in luxury hotels to San Diego's oldest bar, to its only lesbian bar, and even new venues. **PAGE 8**



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Closer look at Hillcrest's new Normal Street Promenade

By DREW SITTON
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

HILLCREST — The Hillcrest community may be thinking it's just getting a bike lane and park, but the Normal Street Promenade cannily hides a piece of vital, yet not very sexy, infrastructure.

"We've been calling it a bike lane project and a promenade project, but by far the most work has been the storm drains," said Brittany Bailey, government affairs and grant manager for the mayor's office.

When the project is done, "Lake Hillcrest" will be no more. Apparently, Hillcrest's 100-year-old storm drains were not connected to the rest of the system and the intersection near Normal Street and University Avenue flooded when it rained. In addition to linking Hillcrest to the rest of the stormwater system, builders expanded the diameter of those storm drains inlets to improve water flow.

And though for nearly two years, progress on the promenade project was hard to track, now it is visible on the future Pride Plaza.

Construction contractor Griffith Co. has planted 98 trees, installed structures for light and shade, and added concrete seating, in addition to the time-consuming underground work.

"It definitely takes a lot longer to do the underground than the surface improvements," said Brad Olson, an area manager for Griffith Co. "But it's important for the overall longevity of the project that water drains properly and everything is built correctly."

The city, SANDAG and Hillcrest Business Association (HBA) this week provided a tour of the worksite. They explained the final design elements needing completion before Hillcrest's first park opens to the public, possibly by the end of the year.

Here are the design details that stood out in the tour.

Rainbow bike lane

Despite being one of the most prominent talking points during the build, the rainbow bike lane is one of the last things to do. After all, it will become the first rainbow bike lane in North America and the second-longest rainbow bike lane in the entire world. The other one is in

Utrecht, Netherlands.

"Low bar," Bailey said. "But for now we'll take it."

Bailey pointed out a few thoughtful aspects of the bike lane. It is at grade, meaning it lies flat in the plaza and promenade it cuts through, so it is convertible for big events. A lowered bike lane could be a tripping hazard for pedestrians, a concern because the promenade will be a frequent gathering space, for everything from weekly farmers markets to large community gatherings.

But making the bike lane flush with walkways posed new problems — and forced the team to come up with innovative solutions.

Designers consulted with a school for the blind and visually impaired in Northern California on how to differentiate the texture of the ground between the promenade and lane. As a solution, a strip of textured metal borders the edge of the bike lane.

"There is no standard for this," Bailey said. "There are so many things that we had to invent for this project; there's a lot of thought that went into it."

Light poles and bollards

The custom light poles dotting the promenade contain many extra features. Those include stanchions to hold Hillcrest-themed banners, flower baskets so high up they will be a challenge to water, hooks to hold string lights, and also speakers so music and other audio can be pumped throughout the park.

The shorter "smart" bollards have special features of their own. In addition to lights, they have a feature that will improve the look of the park without most people noticing: outlets.

Chris Brown, a superintendent with the Griffith Co., explained that this will be especially helpful during farmers markets so vendors can plug in without using masses of extension cords or running generators. The addition, he said, will make the space "look a lot cleaner."

Restored trolley car

One of the the most logistically challenging aspects of the build occurred because of a cute idea to run a concession stand out of an historic trolley car. MTS donated the original 1940s car after a plan



The rainbow mosaic in the Pride Plaza is expected to become a popular event venue for everything from weddings to the annual Stonewall Rally. (Photo by Adrian Childress)

to use it in the Silver Line fell through.

At 38,000 pounds, the car required a specially-reinforced concrete pad as a base. That pad, which is ADA-accessible with ramps, will require a large crane to install.

Plus, the city made it safe to walk in and able to accommodate a kitchen. It will have a vintage look.

"It'll be restored to the original San Diego colors. Unfortunate to say, that is avocado green," Bailey said. "But it will look very historic."

Bathrooms — but only sometimes

Normal Street Promenade has an interesting funding structure. The city's contributions came from parking district funds and street meter revenues. SANDAG paid for a large portion of it due to the rainbow lane becoming part of the regional bike network.

But once done, it's on the Hillcrest Business Association (HBA) to maintain and run the space. HBA executive director Benjamin Nicholls estimates it will cost half a million dollars per year.

There was no funding to build public bathrooms, however. Portable restrooms in a trailer will frequently be available, but as a built-in cost for those hosting on-site events.

Shade

Some 15-year-old oaks survived construction, but the new trees won't provide shade until they are much more mature. In the meantime, planners made keeping the promenade from becoming a heat island a priority since so much of it is concrete and metal "hardscape."

Criss-crossing bars hung between poles

make up a few shade structures. Each of those structures offer space for slightly different purposes, such as a round area for seating or another that is perfect for games like cornhole. Rows of seating are available to face an outdoor movie screen.

Nicholls called the spaces "little places ... you can activate."

The best shade will be in the fenced-in children's playground. The canopy above the area does not have holes and Bailey said that lowers the temperature by 10 degrees for those beneath it.

Hillcrest post office to move to Normal Street

By DREW SITTON
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

HILLCREST — Hillcrest Post Office is moving from its location on Cleveland Avenue to the site of a former church overlooking Normal Street Promenade that the federal agency recently bought.

A spokesperson for the United States Postal Service could not provide a timeline on when the move will happen and how much remodeling will take place before then.

The church is on a smaller parcel than the current post office location and does not include parking.

However, graffiti, trash and encampments litter the current site. Hillcrest Business Association executive director Benjamin Nicholls explained that the Cleveland Avenue post office is outside Hillcrest’s Maintenance Assessment District (MAD) borders, so security teams that clear out unsheltered people near businesses that pay the MAD fees do not go there.

“The current building and the way it’s configured is a complete eyesore,”

“You have a post office and the DMV right next to each other, and a park.”

Benjamin Nicholls,
Hillcrest Business Association

Nicholls said. “I’m excited that it’s going to be redeveloped.”

A residential redevelopment effort on the Cleveland Avenue parcel prompted the post office’s move.

The city’s Development Services Department received several requests for review and permit applications since July 2025 related to a proposed residential building with up to 270 dwelling units. The proposal includes three stories of underground parking. Including those underground layers, the building is eight stories total.

Washington state-based Hillcrest Property LLC owns the Cleveland Avenue site. The city website does not identify the developer attached to the project.

After holding the lease for decades, USPS requested public comment on a replacement retail location back in December because of a lease non-renewal.

Newbreak Church, an Assemblies of God congregation with three sites in San Diego, sold the property in 2023 to William Pfeiffer who transferred the title to MRD Hillcrest LLC a few days later, according to county records. Newbreak Church bought the property in 2018.

While the church lay fallow, the construction of the Normal Street Promenade blocked its main entrance. SANDAG and the city fixed the stormwater system and add a bike lane, park and Pride Plaza to the neighborhood. The main entrance to the church-turned-post office will be directly onto the Normal Street Promenade grounds. It also sits next to the DMV. That park project is close to completion.

“You have a post office and the DMV right next to each other, and a park. It’s kind of like this nice civic hub with a bike lane going through it,” Nicholls said. “There’s an upside to it being moved, provided they get the community interface done well.”



A DMV sign lays on the ground next to the vacant church building which will soon hold a post office. (Photo by Adrian Childress/Times of San Diego)

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Hillcrest businesses on Fifth Avenue wait for parking to return

By DREW SITTON
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

HILLCREST — The green fences that blocked visual access to dozens of Hillcrest businesses are finally down.

It's a visible sign that things are improving along Fifth Avenue after months of construction caused consternation, confusion, and lost revenue at local shops and restaurants.

"As soon as we got rid of that fencing, we kind of sprung back," said Victoria Robertson, co-owner of Divo Diva. "So, they definitely hurt us directly for six months, which was really impactful."

Robertson believes that media pressure about the effects on businesses may have led to faster completion, at least involving the most intensive parts of the project. It was initially scheduled to finish in January 2027.

While the construction site disappeared a month ago, the affected businesses are waiting for the road to be repaved and striped. Access has improved but not parking.

No work is currently under way, but the sidewalks remain red with no parking zones available until a bike lane is added. After that there will be floating parking.

The waiting is just the latest frustration these businesses face. Many have spoken out about perceived communication issues with the city.

"It was definitely an inconvenience, but I think the issue was more that the city wasn't willing to discuss with the businesses how they can help us

get through that time. They just sort of said, 'Well, tough luck,'" Robertson said. "They have the right to do that... but it didn't feel very kind to the businesses."

Robertson estimated that she lost \$60,000 during the construction as tourists visiting Balboa Park found other places to get coffee. It was her local customer base that kept her afloat, despite the construction acting as a deterrent.

"We had to close our doors a lot, and the patio seating became unusable," she said. "People come here to relax, have coffee, maybe study, enjoy a lunch, and you had so much noise and drilling and hammering, and it was just chaos."

Beauty by Dolly, a sugaring and waxing spa down the road, had similar issues with a relaxing experience being disrupted.

The salon's doors stayed closed during the months of construction. Clients who already struggled to find parking found new providers entirely. Owner Natashah Abrishamchian fears they will never come back, even once some of the parking is added back.

"What was the most upsetting was that the city did nothing to try to make it better or easier for any of the businesses," said Abrishamchian, owner of Beauty by Dolly. "They could have absolutely taken the time to work things out in a way that



Beauty By Dolly owner Natashah Abrishamchian worries some customers permanently left while construction limited parking. (Photo by Adrian Childress/Times of San Diego)

did not put so much stress and negative impact on the business, however, they simply didn't."

Beauty by Dolly, Divo Diva Cafe, and several businesses filed tort claims with the city to recoup losses. However, the city rejected those claims. The city does not comment on individual litigation and claims.

The tort claims did not surprise Benjamin Nicholls, executive director of Hillcrest Business Association, who shared in March that the construction contractor and city communications were causing problems.

"The businesses are suffering through a hostile construction contractor who barely communicates," Nicholls said at the time. "(The) stormwater project is

sort of like the poster child for doing it wrong."

Public records requests show just how much the construction affected revenue in those filings. The tort claim for Hash House A Go Go claimed revenue was down over \$40,000 in February, a 17.8% loss over a three year rolling average.

May was less dire for the long-standing restaurant, with a 9.5% loss of \$28,000.

That was for a well-known institution, though. For fledgling enterprises, the situation was more dire. Curry Nation held its grand opening in December, two days after the project began, opening its doors

to a construction site.

Businesses must file a lawsuit if they want to fight to recoup the losses, something some of them are still weighing because of the high cost.

If any of those businesses go forward with a lawsuit, the \$7 million project, spurred by a court case, would spur a court case of its own. The city had to do the construction after a legal settlement over significant flooding on properties near Fifth Avenue and Brookes Avenue.

Now that the heaviest work is over, Robertson said she is trying to stay positive, especially while opening a second location in Little Italy.

"We're just really happy now that they're gone," Robertson said. "And we can't wait for parking to come back."

Man accused of taking backhoe on a joyride released with GPS monitoring device

By NEAL PUTNAM
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

A man accused of stealing a backhoe at 5 a.m. from a construction site and going on a destructive joyride down University Avenue in North Park appeared before a judge on July 29.

Liam Quigley, 28, was released on a supervised own recognizance condition in which the judge ordered him to wear a GPS monitoring device that was also requested by his attorney, Julie Gibson.

Quigley pleaded not guilty to theft of the backhoe, which was taken from a construction site near University Avenue and Utah Street, and two counts of destruction of public property. The theft occurred early on July 27.

The excavator was a bobcat-type backhoe. It ended its destruction at the broken North Park Observatory sign. Damages were estimated at \$25,000.

Five street signs and a streetlight were knocked over. A planter was overturned.

The

County seeks temporary location for Center’s exercise classes

By DREW SITTON
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

HILLCREST — One of The San Diego LGBT Community Center’s popular senior programs has shifted online after concerns about the safety of a floor inside the Hillcrest center.

Older adults in the Feeling Fit program are now meeting over Zoom while San Diego County officials search for an alternate location.

The pivot to virtual exercise classes came after participants, led by Mike Sloothaak, noticed the buckling auditorium floor inside The Center’s auditorium. Pictures show wood slats with raised edges that did not sit flush with each other.

In the aerobics setting, Sloothaak and others feared it could be a tripping hazard that risked broken hips and bones among the more frail seniors.

“While I don’t think the floor needs replacement, it would be helpful to address the many places where the raised areas present tripping hazards that could

seriously impact the elderly patrons in the exercise classes, many of whom are in their late 70s to 90s,” Stuart Duffy wrote to county officials.

He was among participants who emailed county Aging and Independent Services officials about the floor. After an inspection, the county decided to halt in-person classes.

“The health and safety of the older adults is our priority,” Tim McClain, spokesperson for Health and Human Services, said, adding that the county does not have a timeline for when in-person classes will resume.

The county funds the Feeling Fit program. The Center provides the building as part of its expanded offerings for LGBTQ+ seniors, a population with growing needs.

Gus Hernandez, the Center’s spokesperson, also said there is no timeline for the repairs and options are being evaluated for the “small section” of the auditorium floor that needs repairs.

As part of renovations to the lobby and front area of the building, the Center



Feeling Fit participants kickoff Pride weekend at Hillcrest Brewing Co.
(Photo courtesy Jim Corbett)

replaced the auditorium floor four years ago with “sleek and durable” materials. The Center is still using the auditorium for all other programs, just not the exercise classes.

In the meantime, county officials are searching for a temporary physical location. Several participants suggested local churches. The county has a long list of requirements in its hunt: it must be large enough to accommodate current class

sizes, accessible, free for participants, spacious enough to secure equipment and near public transportation.

Ideally the alternate location would be within walking distance of The Center, which is continuing its other senior programs like food banks and resource sharing.

The program did more than just address physical needs — it combatted isolation.

“Exercise to me is mindless repetition and extremely boring,” Sloothaak said. “It is the social aspect that keeps us — and most seniors — involved in the in-person classes.”

Many of the regular attendees formed a tight-knit community.

“They’ve kind of become their own village,” said Jason Cuneo, who leads senior services at The Center.

The move to Zoom reduced attendance and some of the community feeling, at least temporarily.

“The social aspect is by far more important than the physical exercise,” Sloothaak said. “Seniors should keep in shape.”

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UPTOWN NEWS



DOWNTOWN NEWS

Street vendors back out in force downtown after court ruling

By KAREN PEARLMAN

SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — Street vendors have returned en masse to areas of San Diego long designated as “no vending zones” — including the Gaslamp Quarter, Balboa Park, and local beaches — as a legal fight over the city’s vending rules plays out in court.

The shift follows a Jan. 22 ruling from the state’s 4th District Court of Appeal, which found that key parts of San Diego’s sidewalk vending ordinance conflict with the Safe Sidewalk Vending Act, the 2018 state law that decriminalized street vending statewide.

The ruling did not strike down the city’s ordinance outright. It reversed a lower court’s denial of a preliminary injunction and sent the case back to San Diego Superior Court, where for now it remains unresolved.

Mission Beach Town Council President Larry Webb, part of the local Coastal Coalition — the advocacy alliance of coastal and beach town councils — said while the ruling did not completely overturn the city’s vending ordinance, it does limit enforcement.

“The city can do enforcement in the beach areas, they just can’t confiscate carts and such,” Webb said. “It has to be done administratively, not criminally.”

San Diego City Councilmember Joe La Cava, the District 1 representative, said that “while (the recent) court decision did not overturn the City’s Sidewalk Vending Ordinance, it resulted in some limits on enforcement. The city can and will enforce in District 1, including our beaches and shoreline parks.”

La Cava said he would “take every available measure to ensure that our neighborhoods do not return to the ‘wild west’ days of an unregulated market.”

How court fight began

The legal fight traces back to Imhotep Mustaqeem, who has sold snacks outside Petco Park since 2009. After the city cited him and impounded his merchandise under the 2022 ordinance, Mustaqeem sued, arguing the city’s rules conflicted with Senate Bill 946.

A Superior Court judge denied his request for a preliminary injunction, but the 4th District agreed with him that state law

“The city continues to selectively enforce the rules.”

William Dorsett,
San Diego street artist

Investigators: Dealers sold over \$2 million worth of cocaine a month on Imperial Ave.

By ANDI RUIZ
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — Authorities dubbed it the “Imperial Avenue Crack Market.”

Law enforcement last month shut down what they described as an open-air crack market at Imperial and 29th Street, charging 30 alleged gang members and associates with conspiracy to distribute cocaine and cocaine base, meaning crack cocaine. The 28 suspects in custody, and two fugitives who are being sought, face a mandatory minimum of 10 years in prison.

All defendants have since been arraigned and entered into not-guilty pleas.

Investigators believe that thousands of customers purchased about 20 pounds of cocaine on the Grant Hill block weekly. That amount carries an estimated street value of \$550,000.

But the market’s influence stretched beyond the community, according to the U.S. Attorney’s Office, which said it fed a network of low-level dealers on both sides of Interstate 5, reaching nearby Logan Heights and Sherman Heights and across to parts of downtown, including East Village.

It also, at times, turned violent, authorities allege. On Jan. 9 someone drove up in a car to the market, exited the vehicle and opened fire, striking two people.

The coordinated operation, on July 15, with San Diego and Chula Vista police in partnership with the FBI Violent Crimes Task Force — Gang Group, included federal, state and local law enforcement who executed 21 search warrants on homes and vehicles to make the arrests.

Authorities confiscated more than 11 pounds of cocaine and more than \$14,000 in U.S. currency along with two handguns and a money-counting device while serving the warrants.

This crack market was a family affair as defendant Julio Rangel is Julio Rangel Jr.’s father. Julio Rangel also had a brother who was arrested, Felipe Benitez who is the uncle to Julio Rangel Jr.

The investigation began in 2024, focusing on alleged West Coast Crips gang members suspected of drug trafficking and acts of violence near the 2900 block of Imperial. The task force used surveillance and wiretaps to collect evidence.



Surveillance recording of hand-to-hand transactions on Imperial Avenue allegedly being conducted by defendants, including the man in the reflective vest, and the one in the white shirt beneath the ‘no parking’ sign. (Photo courtesy of U.S. Attorney’s Office)

“Gang activity has no place in our city,” San Diego Police Chief Scott Wahl said. “Disrupting large-scale operations like this is what will keep San Diego one of the safest big cities in the nation. I am incredibly proud of the work being done by the Violent Crime Task Force and the U.S. Attorney’s Office to dismantle this operation.”

Jason Burke and Cindy Cook, residents of East Village have been proactive in addressing and capturing the drug use and violence that is present in their community.

They contribute to the “East Village Doers” Instagram account where they post videos and photos of drug use and drug dealing in the neighborhood.

She has been documenting public drug sales and use for years and said the community is frustrated at the city of San Diego’s “absence or lack of effective response.”

Burke said he has driven down Imperial multiple times and witnessed drug activity. Ever since the July bust on Imperial, though, he has seen a resurgence of people moving up and down Park Boulevard and Market Street to continue drug sales. At times, he has seen drug activity right outside his window.

“There’ll also be drug dealers there in the corner, supplying them,” Burke said. “One of the things we’ve seen in the more frequent cases is more emergency calls going into overdoses.”

Burke uses the “Clean & Safe” app to document what he sees in the neighborhood and actively sends his findings to SDPD.

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Health inspectors closing more restaurants for vermin violations

By DREW SITTON
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — You aren't imagining it. There's been a dramatic spike in the number of San Diego County restaurants shut down by health inspectors.

Twice as many eateries were closed last year compared to just four years ago, according to public records obtained by Times of San Diego.

The increase has led to high-profile closures of everything from fancy restaurants in luxury hotels to San Diego's oldest bar, to its only lesbian bar, and even new venues like the Black Bear Diner in North County, which was closed for health code reasons less than a month after opening.

During annual health inspections, San Diego County inspectors temporarily shut down 524 restaurants in 2025. It was a slight increase, from 508 in 2024, but a much larger jump from 2023, when inspectors red-tagged 374 eateries.

The increase comes even though the county's inspection number and process did not change during that period, according to county spokesperson Donna Durckel.

Inspectors close establishments when they find major health code violations like vermin infestations, lack of potable hot water, sewage issues and other sanitation concerns. Some restaurants were closed multiple times in a year, but those instances were only counted once per year in this analysis that looked at the county's 30,000 annual inspections.

"Our role is to ensure facilities have a plan in place to maintain a vermin-free facility and take steps when they find an infestation in their facility," Durckel said.

The rise of vermin

What is driving the increase in restaurant closures? Vermin.

From 2022 to 2025, vermin-related closures doubled from 211 closures to 442.

Of the 285 restaurant closures in 2022, three-quarters were shut down due to vermin infestations. Vermin were the most common reason for closure every year, accounting for 78% of 374 closures in 2023. In 2024, the number of vermin-related closures jumped to 413, making up 81% of that year's 508 closures. Last year saw the highest number of

restaurant closures from infestations, with officials closing 442 food establishments out of 524, 84% of the total closures.

In those cases, health inspectors issued a "major" health code violation after finding active infestations of rodents, insects, birds, or other animals that pose an imminent threat to human health. Evidence of an infestation can include seeing live or dead rodents, live cockroaches, or even signs of their presence, like gnaw marks or droppings.

If an infestation is found, business owners must act before reopening. In some cases, this means sealing entry points where rodents or pests are entering, performing deep cleaning, or hiring a pest control service.

'We just don't know' | The holes in the data

The data provided to Times of San Diego does not indicate what type of infestation, whether rodent, insect, bird, or other animal, is present when closing a restaurant.

While the data does not specify the exact reason for the closure, one thing is certain: an increasing number of restaurants and eating establishments are infested with vermin. The two most likely culprits are cockroaches and rats, with the latter being the most likely unwanted kitchen guest.

"If there's more restaurants being closed because of rats, then it's not that big of a leap to assume that there may be more rats," said Niamh Quinn, the University of California Cooperative Extension (UCCE) Area Vertebrate Pest Advisor who is based at a research center in Irvine.

The problem, says Quinn, is that many counties, San Diego being one of them, do not track rodent populations.

"We're very bad at measuring how many rats are in our urban areas. So, when we do have outbreaks, like potentially what we have now — potentially — we just don't know, because we've nothing to compare it to," said Quinn.

One international scientific study, published in 2025 in the journal Science



Health inspectors are temporarily closing a growing number of San Diego restaurants, often over vermin violations. (Graphic by Drew Sitton/Times of San Diego)

Advances, found rat populations grew in many urban areas around the world. The researchers used health inspection data, public complaints and other indicators to show rat populations rose in 11 cities over seven years. While San Francisco and Oakland were part of the study, San Diego was not because it did not differentiate between rats and other vermin.

Without adequate tracking, experts can only go on reports of infestations. So, exactly what is driving the increase in rodents and insects inside San Diego County kitchens?

"While we don't have proof that instances of rats are going up and down, we do know that we have these changes in chemistries, and changes of climate," said Quinn.

The changes in "chemistries" that Quinn points out are a 2024 ban on an anticoagulant rodenticide, or blood thinner used on rats, which was outlawed due to its impact on predators eating rats and other environmental concerns.

Rodenticide ban

While changing climate patterns is a major contributing factor, recent laws aimed at outlawing the anticoagulant poison that harms the environment might have a more immediate impact.

On Jan. 1, 2024, a new rodenticide ban went into effect in California, collapsing the use of a popular rat poison.

That bill, AB 1322, banned a second-generation anticoagulant rodenticide over wildlife and environmental concerns.

Data from Southern California's agriculture commissioners show that the

chemical banned in 2024 was already being used less in 2023 in anticipation of the ban.

That year did see a growth in public

SAN DIEGO Reader

STAIRWAY TO AQUATIC HEAVEN

The man behind the stairs to Garbage Beach PAGE 2

Tiki Oasis, the sound of '90s West Coast hip hop and Chicano roots rock: Events to plan your August around

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"If you build it, they will surf."
(Photo by Shona Neufeld)



STAIRWAY TO AQUATIC HEAVEN

How San Diego's first and only surfing coordinator brought stairs to Garbage Beach

By Shona Neufeld
SAN DIEGO READER

"San Diego City built a staircase at Sunset Cliffs Boulevard and Ladera Street."

— from Kathy Blavatt's *San Diego's Sunset Cliffs Park: A History*, written for the Ocean Beach Historical Society

There are other entry points to the beach below Sunset Cliffs; but none of them are as easy to navigate as the Ladera Street

Stairs. Hundreds, maybe thousands of people use them every week. Families come to check out the tidepools, bringing young kids and old folks who might have trouble otherwise. And of course, there are the surfers, who use them to reach the break at Garbage Beach.

There is no mention of Doug Smith in Blavatt's account of those stairs. And even after Adam Bloomberg and the Garbage Beach Surf Club held an event on March 29th of this year to honor Smith's contribution to the stairs' creation, you could be

forgiven for never having heard of him. They intentionally kept publicity to a minimum, handing out only a few fliers to the regular Cliffs crew in order to reduce crowds and allow easy access for Smith and his friends. "If we had advertised, it really would have been out of control," said Bloomberg. (I learned about it from local surfer Richard Aguirre while I was out riding my bike.)

The sun had yet to break through the Sunday-morning marine layer as a group of thirty or so cheerful surf enthusiasts spanning three generations gathered by the stairs. Small, surfable waves could be heard crashing below while seagulls cawed above. A man named Smitty, 76 and a longtime friend of Smith's, told me that before the stairs went in, it was hard getting down the cliff. "You'd have to hand someone your board and hang onto a rope," he said. "We had big heavy boards back then."

The stairs were in place by the time event

organizer Bloomberg arrived from South Africa in the early '80s, but that doesn't mean things were easy.

"When I first got here, it was rough," he said. "You know — it was *really* local...so you kinda had to earn your way in. But Doug was nice to me when other people weren't. He invited me to his house to watch some fights with his kid and all the younger generations. And then, I surfed with him over the years and we got to know each other. Eventually, somebody told me along the way that he was responsible for the stairs at Garbage."

Recently, Smith pulled up at the bench above the stairs, and Bloomberg turned to some of the locals hanging out at the spot and asked if they knew who Smith was. They didn't. Bloomberg thought, "Man, while he's alive, he should get the recognition. That piece of history should be kept, for sure." When his kid heard the story, he said, "Hey dad, you just unlocked something! Nobody ever heard that before."



Doug Smith, San Diego's Surfing Coordinator. (Photo courtesy of Doug Smith)

The lifeguards back in the day. (Photo courtesy of Doug Smith)

"It was such a shame to think that we had all this great surf here and really no safe way to go down." (Photo courtesy of Shona Neufeld)

Doug Smith was born in Ocean Beach on St. Patrick's Day: March 17th, 1935. Already, his family had been in the neighborhood for three generations. His grandmother owned a horse stable where the 7-11 on Bacon and Voltaire sits today, just blocks from the beach. As for Smith, "We lived on Long Branch on the 4800 block, and then we got a one-bedroom beach bungalow on the 5000 block. There were seven of us living there. Cars couldn't get out into the sand; that was the beginning of the beach. But now it's homes and a parking lot."

A large tidepool would often form at the end of Long Branch, and young Doug would collect Pismo clams there. "I could look at the sand and tell the spots where they were. I got pretty good at it. Luckily, that helped us survive through the times, because a war [WW2] was going on then, and things were expensive. So we lived a lot on clam chowder." He remembers the Navy firing artillery from PB Point down the shoreline past Pacific Beach, Mission Beach, and Ocean Beach. "You could see tracers at night, and all the explosions in the sky. A plane would pull a sleeve that was about 15 or 18 feet long, and they would fire at the sleeve. I often thought, 'Gee, that's kind of risky for the pilot!'"

Down below, Doug took a risk of his own and started surfing. "I didn't get any assistance from anybody. I came from a big family, and I never owned a board. I always was using somebody else's surfboard...a lot of friends had boards, they were always willing to share, and so that was my opportunity." A self-described "beach nut," he happily recalls his years with OB lifeguard legend Mouse: "all the diving we did for abalone and lobster,

surfing. Yeah it was a good life. Just a clean, good, fun life."

He became an OB lifeguard himself, working from 1954 until 1975. "I worked with a really good crew, and a bunch of really great guys, good camaraderie. I loved the life, and if I were to start all over again, I would become a lifeguard again. I love the outdoors. It was very professional and really kind of a rewarding feeling to be a part of it all. I gave lectures in the local high schools on rip currents and ocean safety. They'd come down and surf as part of their PE class. I also developed the inter-high school surfing competition," which still takes place today, along with a surfing safety school for kids. But his biggest contribution to local surf culture remains the stairs.

At the ceremony, a few old friends told stories of the old days, and offered expressions of gratitude to the guest of honor. Then Doug Smith, 91 years old, adorned with a luau and a kukui-nut necklace, stepped confidently up onto the bench and delivered a brief speech.

"Well, I'll first say that San Diego has some of the finest surf in the whole coast of California," Smith began. "Some of the other cities have surf, but one thing that's unique about the surf here at Sunset Cliffs is that it's all reef break. Of course, reefs create the size of the surf, and also create the shape of the surf. And that's what makes the surf in San Diego so unique."

Back in the '60s, San Diego had good surf but poor access. "A lot of surfers cut their own trails, and they were really, truly very dangerous. I was a lifeguard, and a position came up known as the 'Surfing Coordinator.' I put my name in for that

and I got the position...I was sitting at my desk one day, and thought about the uniqueness of this area right here, where we have two breaks side by side — one for the goofy foot going left, and one for the other break, for surfers going to the right, known as a regular foot. Being a city Surfing Coordinator, I sat down, took a piece of paper and a pen, and I wrote up a requisition to request the city to put in a set of stairs. And it wasn't very long before I received a notice from one of the secretaries at the clerk's office that it was accepted, and I was very grateful for that. It was such a shame, again, to think that we had all this great surf here and really no safe way to go down."

Five years later, the position of Surfing Coordinator was dissolved due to lack of funding, and Smith went back to lifeguard work. But the position's first and only occupant had done what he set out to do. "They got going with the project, and they amazed me how fast they did that," especially given the site's tricky topography and composition. "Thanks to the city of San Diego."

The crowd, however, was there to thank the man who got it all started. They applauded and cheered for Smith, who was flabbergasted at the turnout. "So I...uh, gosh, I'm just, I'm overwhelmed, I'm just overwhelmed. I would like to thank the brothers of the Sunset Cliffs Surfing Association for making this possible. I feel like I don't deserve this. Thank you all for being here."

Before I left, I thanked Doug again for his efforts to get stairs put in at my favorite place to surf. We shook hands and he wrapped both his hands around mine. With a big, heartfelt smile, he looked me in the eyes and said, "Keep surfing."



Doug Smith
(Photo courtesy of Doug's son Kent Smith)

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Tiki Oasis, the sound of '90s West Coast hip hop and Chicano roots rock: Events to plan your August around

By Reader Staff
SAN DIEGO READER

TIKI OASIS

Tiki Oasis 2026 marks the 25th anniversary of the tiki festival. The five-night, four-day event includes a live main stage concert, tropical cocktails curated by top mixologists, a sunset luau dinner, pool lounging, fashion parades, swanky suites, disc jockeys, art exhibits and more. Learn about tiki and mid-century style, design, and lifestyle from experts, and enjoy a bustling marketplace with artists, makers and traders, wedding options and more. Performers scheduled to appear include Trabants and a reunion of the Strawberry Alarm Clock with original members alongside guitarist Steve Bartek of Oingo Boingo. Five of the players were on the classic

Incense and Peppermints album — Gene Gunnels, Mark Stephen Weitz, Randy Seol, George Bunnell, and Steve Bartek — while Howard Anderson has been with the group since 1986. Strawberry Alarm Clock will appear on Sunday, August 9, with an album release party for their new full-length “Where’s One?” out this month via Big Stir Records.

Where:

Town & Country San Diego,
500 Hotel Circle, San Diego

When:

August 7–9, 2026,
8:30 am – 12:00am

Ages:

All Ages

Cost:

\$189–\$699

TOO \$HORT AND WARREN G

Too \$hort and Warren G helped shape the sound of '90s rap. Too \$hort kicked off his music career in Oakland, California in the early 1980s by selling custom rap tapes from his car trunk. He became known for his unapologetic style and songs about flashpoint topics such as pimping, promiscuity, and explicit street tales that seemed to both glorify and provide cautionary commentary on sexual politics and drug culture. Funk-heavy tracks engineered specifically for car stereos with the bass turned all the way up include iconic hits like “Blow the Whistle” and “The Ghetto.” Rapper, producer, and DJ Warren G rose to fame when his debut solo album reached multiplatinum sales status. He’s known for smooth, G-funk-defining classics like his 1994 global hit single “Regulate” featuring Nate Dogg, which peaked at number

two on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100 and is celebrated for its legendary opening line, “Regulators, mount up!” Other tracks such as “This DJ.” fused melodic hip-hop with 1970s funk and soul samples, helping to shape the West Coast sound of the 1990s.

Where:

Sea World,
500 Sea World Drive, San Diego

When:

Saturday, August 8, 2026, at 6 pm

Ages:

All Ages

Cost:

Included with Sea World ticket, \$79.99 upgrades available

THE SLEEPWALKERS

The Sleepwalkers have been playing authentic Chicano roots rock since 1992. They specialize in original American music styles ranging from blues and country to Tex-Mex, Cumbia, and their own brand of roots rock. They’ve performed and recorded with Link Wray, Ronnie Dawson, Sleepy Labeef, Charlie Ryan, The Texas Tornados, The Blasters, The Fabulous Thunderbirds, Kid Ramos, Freddy Fender, The Rev. Horton Heat, The Supersuckers, Rosie Flores, Graham Parker, El Vez, The Royal Crown Revue, Harry Dean Statton and many others. They’ve been nominated for over a half dozen San Diego Music Awards, including for Best Americana/Roots band and Best Local Recording. They recently released a single for “Baila Maria,” which precedes their upcoming studio album “Almas Perdidas,” due in October via Blind Owl Records. The Noche de Cumbia bill in East Village includes Wachiwara and Las Sucias.

Where: The Quartyard, 1301 Market Street, San Diego

When: Saturday, August 15, 2026 at 5 pm

Ages: 21+ **Cost:** \$19.98

Reader

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Prebys buys derelict California Theatre to remove the development barrier

By CHRIS JENNEWAIN
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — The Prebys Foundation has acquired the vacant and dilapidated California Theater to remove a barrier to redevelopment of the Civic Center area in downtown San Diego.

The foundation has signed a \$6.3 million purchase and sale agreement, which was scheduled to close in July.

The immediate plan is to prepare the site for demolition while working with community, public and business partners to explore the “highest and best long-term use for the property.”

Located at 4th Avenue and C Street, the theater opened in 1927. It has been vacant since 1990 after an architectural survey found it vulnerable to earthquakes. In 2023, the City Attorney’s office sought to demolish it as a public nuisance.

“This is about creating possibilities,” said Grant Oliphant, president and CEO of the foundation. “The California Theatre has long represented one of the greatest barriers to realizing downtown San Diego’s full potential.”

“By removing that obstacle, we can begin creating space for new ideas, new investment and new opportunities that strengthen our civic core and help build a downtown that serves everyone,” Oliphant said. “Foundations are uniquely positioned to make patient, long-term investments like this — investments that may not make sense

on a traditional development timeline but can create lasting public value for generations.”

The foundation has spearheaded efforts to redevelop the Civic Center area, and acquired the nearby Wells Fargo Plaza tower at 401 B Street in 2025.



An Aqua Caliente horse racing advertisement from 1927 on the side of the California Theatre. (Photo by Thomas Melville/Times of San Diego)

City approves \$2.2M walkway renovation near Santa Fe Depot

By SEAN MONNEY
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — City Council members recently approved spending \$2.2 million to turn an alley at the end of B Street leading to the Santa Fe Depot into a pedestrian corridor.

The renovation project, which has been delayed for decades, is now a reality, with construction set to begin in September to create more pedestrian-friendly access from Kettner Boulevard to the trolley and train platforms.

Currently, the 100-foot alleyway at the north end of the Santa Fe Depot baggage building that commuters walk through to enter and exit the station allows vehicle traffic, has no sidewalk and is poorly lit.

The city promised “new paving, lighting and landscape walls” to increase

pedestrian safety and improve the corridor, and it estimates project completion by May 2027, according to a city staff report.

The \$2.2 million cost for this project will not come from the city’s general fund, but will instead be covered mainly by a property tax trust fund for city redevelopment.

This B Street Pedestrian Corridor is a project that dates back to 2002, when ownership of the Santa Fe Depot was transferred to the city, requiring the city’s redevelopment agency to install a public pathway.

After the building was sold to the Museum of Contemporary Art, the redevelopment agency was still responsible for building the pathway, with the museum obligated to contribute \$150,000 toward costs.

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Food & Drink Blotter.

BY FRANK SABATINI JR.



RESTAURANT REVIEW

Frank Sabatini Jr.

SAN DIEGO — Three locations of **Breakfast Republic** will close on Aug. 9, including the original location in North Park that opened in 2015. The other two closures are the restaurants that subsequently opened in Ocean Beach and Encinitas.

Breakfast Republic is a homegrown breakfast-lunch chain that operates under the Rise & Shine Hospitality Group. Its founder, Johan Engman, said the decision to shave off some of his locations “reflect lease expirations and strategic portfolio decisions as the company continues to position for long-term growth and invest in opportunities to support its future.”

He plans to expand the brand throughout California and into Texas.

Locally however, five Breakfast Republic kitchens will remain open. Those are located in the East Village, Liberty Station, Pacific Beach, Mission Valley and Scripps Ranch. www.breakfastrepublic.com.

For the love of cheesesteaks

A popup that specializes in quality cheesesteaks is gaining traction at the Aero Club Bar in Mission Hills, where it has come into biweekly rotation starting at 5 p.m., every other Monday.

The Philadelphia-inspired submarine sandwiches are made onsite by Jeff Sartain,

Breakfast chain shrinks, popup cheesesteaks, new IPA

who told us he sells between 80 and 90 of the cheesesteaks during each appearance.

Sartain is a San Diego native who started the popup in a Tierrasanta garage a year ago. He admits that he has never been to Philadelphia.

“I just love cheesesteaks,” he said while mincing a pile of freshly sliced rib eye with his spatula atop a flat griddle on the Aero Club’s roomy outdoor patio.

The cooked beef gets tucked into 10-inch rolls sourced from nearby **Solunto Ristorante & Bakery** in Little Italy. It is topped with hard-to-find Cooper Sharp American cheese, which Sartain sources from a local distributor. Grilled onions are optional. The price is \$17. His upcoming dates are Aug. 10 and 24. For more information, visit @thesignature.sd on Instagram. 3365 India St., 619-297-7211, www.aeroclubbar.com.

New cafe, wine bar coming to Mission Hills

Look for the arrival later this year of **Serifino**, a 3,100-square-foot culinary venture conceived by a small group of people with experience in both special education and hospitality.

At the helm of the wine-focused cafe are David Cross and his wife, Rebeca. He is the founder of **Civitas Living**, an organization that empowers adults with developmental disabilities, and she has enjoyed a career as a high school special-education teacher. They are joined by Amanda Sarich, who served as wine director for **We Olive** in La Jolla, and Michael di Carlo, who also hails from **We Olive** as well as **The Butchery** in Del Mar.

The culinary direction of the project is still under development while the team remains on the search for an executive chef. In addition, the operation will provide employment opportunities for



Jeff Sartain of The Signature at the Aero Club Bar. (Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr./Special for Times of San Diego)

individuals with developmental disabilities. 301 W. Washington St., www.serafinofinemarket.com.

Leveling playing field in North Park

Joining nearly two dozen independently operated women’s sport bars springing up across the country is **One of Us**, a North Park newcomer that took over the space previously occupied by **URBN Coal Fired Pizza**.

The venture was launched by a trio of local women who recognized the lack of commercial spaces that televise women’s sporting events. It opened on July 16 with wings, craft pizzas, wine, draft beers and signature cocktails—not to mention multiple flat screens angled to every seating area. 3085 University Ave., 619-431-1329, www.oneofusbar.com.

Beer haze

The eminent **Karl Strauss Brewery**, which was founded in 1989 in Downtown



The original Breakfast Republic on University Avenue in North Park. (Photo courtesy of Rise & Shine Hospitality)



Karl Strauss is in the news this season. (Photo by Frank Sabatini Jr./Special for Times of San Diego)

San Diego, has chosen National IPA Day on Aug. 6 to release its anticipated Field Trip Hazy IPA.

The citrusy brew flaunts hints of tropical fruit flavors and was made in collaboration with **Berkeley-based Fieldwork Brewing Co.** It rings in at 6.7% alcohol by volume.

It will be available at Karl Strauss brewpubs, which are located in downtown, 4S Ranch, Carlsbad and Sorrento Valley. Several retail outlets will carry it as well. They will be listed upon release under “find beer” on the website.

In addition, the brewery’s annual Marzen lager Oktoberfest beer made with German-imported hops will roll out in early August at Costco, and then the company’s brewpubs later in the month. www.karlstrauss.com.

Celebrate International Beer Day and discuss the State of the Neighborhood



LITTLE ITALY NEWS
Christopher Gomez

As summer slows down and pool days turn into school days, Little Italy is bringing the fun this August with special offerings for all-ages. Whether you're raising a glass for International Beer Day or squeezing in some family fun before school starts, these August offerings have something for everyone.

Salute!
International Beer Day Italian style
Explore the many Little Italy breweries located just steps from one another, making for the perfect beer crawl to celebrate International Beer Day on Aug. 7. Ballast Point Tasting Room & Kitchen serves award-winning brews that encapsulate the bayside ambiance of Little Italy, while Burgeon Beer Co, Bottlecraft, and 3 Punk Ales are just a few of the several

breweries serving up malty delights for beer-lovers to raise a glass.

Before back to school
Ready or not, school is getting ready to start. Before the bell rings on summer, soak in time with the kids at one of Little Italy's several family-friendly activities. Check out the brand-new kids' menu at Coco Maya, head to Burger Lounge where kids eat free on Tuesdays or explore the new Global Fork food hall in the Piazza della Famiglia! While you're there, grab a seat by the iconic fountain and enjoy live music under the string lights. Struggling to get the kids to eat their fruits and veggies? Take them to the Little Italy Mercato where they can interactively sort through and pick out fresh local produce. Let the aroma of nectarines and sweet smell of corn make your kids finally beg for vegetables. For another outdoor outing, try picnicking at Waterfront Park with fun water features, grassy areas, and playgrounds for



On Sept. 24, the State of the Neighborhood will be held on the rooftop of Kilroy's premier office building. (Photo courtesy of Little Italy Association)

the kids. After some fun in the sun, cool down with a special sweet treat. Pop Pops Paletas, Salt & Straw, Handel's Ice Cream, and Holy Paleta are all serving up creamy cold ice cream with flavors for every palette. Before you leave the neighborhood, check out Little Italy's newest addition, Divo Diva Café, and maybe discover your new favorite spot!

State of the Neighborhood
On Thursday, Sept. 24, from 5:30 to 9 p.m., the State of the Neighborhood will be held on the rooftop lanai of Kilroy's premier office building. Come together for a night of community where neighbors, business owners, residents and visitors wine and dine in the heart of Little Italy while learning about current happenings and future projects. Guests are encouraged to arrive early for happy hour to mix, mingle and make new connections.

"The State of the Neighborhood is an opportunity to celebrate all that makes Little Italy special while looking ahead to the future of our community," said Steve Galasso, board president of the Little Italy Association. "It brings together the people and businesses who help shape the neighborhood every day."

For more information, visit LittleItalySD.com or follow @LittleItalySD on X, Instagram, and Facebook.

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MEETINGS If you want to drink that's your business. If you want to stop drinking, we can help. The Downtown Discussion Group of Alcoholics Anonymous meets weekly at 1420 Third Avenue on Saturdays at 6:30 pm.

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SUDOKU

SD Pride shines on in an uncertain political environment

FROM STAFF REPORTS

SAN DIEGO — This year, the theme for the San Diego Pride parade and festival — “Pride Shines On” — resonated more than it has in recent memory.

“I think we can’t avoid the injustices that are going on, particularly under this administration, and what it’s doing to our community,” said Geneva Lake, a member of the event’s board of directors. “We just don’t feel safe. So it makes these types of environments that much more important to us, a safe place, and we can all come and be ourselves.”

In the face of a hostile political environment Lake still asserted, “Love always wins,” and continues to work alongside new executive director KishaLynn Elliott and their colleagues.

“I do it because I love my community so much,” she said. “I see this and all the joy, and it’s impossible not to smile in this environment.”

Once again thousands attended the event with more than 200 local groups walking or riding a float on the parade route through Hillcrest. Leading the way as grand marshals were members of several legal groups who have been fighting for LGBTQ+ liberties since President Donald Trump took office in 2025.

The parade and the accompanying weekend festival in Balboa Park are the culmination of a week’s worth of events celebrating LGBTQ+ communities, including the Dyke March and San Diego Black Pride last weekend.

“There’s so many people here, there’s so many identities, so many people just of all backgrounds,” said Karolina Decker, who returned to San Diego from Stockton for the celebration. “It’s like, you don’t expect everyone to come together but then something like this comes on, and for like the entire month, everyone’s like ‘OK, let’s put some rainbows on.’”

In the more than 50 years since the march originated as an unofficial event, Lake said Pride has become the city’s biggest social event outside of San Diego Comic-Con.

“We get about 250,000 people,” she said.

The political environment was front of mind for both newcomers to the celebration and people like Brad Blosee, who has



Volunteers carry a gigantic LGBTQ Pride flag down University Avenue in Hillcrest during the San Diego Pride parade on July 18, 2026. (Photo by Adrian Childress/Times of San Diego)

attended for more than 30 years.

“I’m sure every year we say the same thing, but this year — especially with what’s going on in politics — I think it’s really important that we’re all out here supporting one another,” he said. “I think we need to show everyone that this is all about just being our true selves, and we’re not hurting anyone and it’s all about loving one another.”

For his part Mike Thrasher, a retired veterinarian, was attending for only the second time after being open about his sexuality in recent years.

“I think it has to be celebratory,” he said of the festival. “I don’t think we can get negative. I think we’ve seen in our current administration the negativity. Where it’s getting us, and we have to stay strong and stay positive. You’ve got to take the high road.”

The day started with the now-traditional 5K Run + Walk — one of the biggest events of its kind in the world, according to Front Runners & Walkers San Diego head Gilbert Gaona, who said around 2,400 people took part this year including 50 members of his group.

Being the first event of the day, he said, gave his group the additional morale boost of having a built-in crowd cheering for them along the way.

“It’s just so fun to see the excitement, the smiling, the love, the joy that is brought to the race,” Gaona said. “It’s literally

a Pride parade before the Pride parade.”

While the run route was lined with people shouting encouragement or showering the runners with bubbles, other observers like Emely Villavicencio watched from afar; Villavicencio took in the day’s action from a seat at Better Buzz Coffee, to get a taste of “queer joy.”

Explaining what that meant to her, she said, “To be resilient, to have fun, to celebrate our community, to remember those that we have lost and keep on living the best life that we can.”

Educational leaders from various levels also showed their support during the parade; Geysil Arroyo, president of the board of trustees for the San Diego Community College District, emphasized to Times of San Diego that each of their member campuses included a “Pride center” with resources for LGBTQ+ students.

“We have a lot of students joining us from the LGBTQ+ community,” she said.

Both Arroyo and San Diego County Superintendent of Schools Gloria Ciriza, who also attended the event, focused on their educational spaces having open doors for LGBTQ+ students.

“It’s a joy to be here, to celebrate with the LGBTQ community,” Ciriza said, “To show our staff, our students and the community at large that we are here to celebrate with them.”

Beyond the public school sector Sarah



More than 2,000 people took part in the morning 5K Run/Walk event at the San Diego Pride Festival on July 18. (Photo by Adrian Childress/Times of San Diego)

Collamer, associate director of diversity for the private Bishop’s School in La Jolla, said that her school is planning an initiative to ensure “that students and families feel good about expressing the full spectrum of gender on campus.”

Her colleague Lara Korneychuck, who facilitates LGBTQ+ students group on campus, said that they are in particular need of support at this moment.

“Everything that’s happening in the world, like legislation, anti-trans stuff,” said Korneychuck, who teaches music and drama at the school. “Our students are emotionally impacted by it.”

The impact of the Trump’s administration’s attacks on LGBTQ+ Americans has been widespread — from education to healthcare to their personal information. For attendees like Skeeter Chapel, a San Diego artist, it can be hard to steer their gaze elsewhere. But overall they were there to enjoy their occasion, and see one another thriving.

Comic-Con announces 2027 dates, plans to increase programming

By LUIS MONTEAGUDO Jr.

SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — As San Diego Comic-Con ended Sunday, officials announced plans to do more programming at the Comic-Con Museum to entertain fans year-round.

The museum will launch Con-style panel programming that will take submissions from fans, said Eddie Ibrahim, senior director of programming. The goal is to have multiple panels in one day.

“Our hope is to get it started this year,” he said. No details on the submission process have been announced.

The museum, located in Balboa Park, introduced a new exhibit on Sunday — “Center Stage: The Art of Mel Marcelo,” showcasing the late San Diego artist’s work.

Marcelo, who passed away in 2022, specialized in original work created for historic concerts, sporting events, and cultural moments hosted at Pechanga Arena throughout the venue’s 60-year history.

The exhibition is up now and is running through March 2027. The arena is sponsoring the exhibition, which showcases about 20 of his pieces. Some of the pieces have been in storage and out of public view.

“This is crazy, that this has never been on display,” said Taylor Henderson, Pechanga’s director of marketing and public relations.

Sunday marked the end of the annual pop culture convention, capping a star-studded week.

Marvel Studios brought the big star power on Saturday night with a presentation featuring actors from the upcoming blockbuster “Avengers: Doomsday.” The event generated massive lines to get into Hall H for the presentation. Some fans complained that they were unable to get into the hall.

Fans crowded around downtown noticed that the giant Gaslamp sign on Fifth Avenue was covered over with a sign promoting the film, which comes out on Dec. 18.

Meanwhile, studios and companies tried to outdo each other with elaborate offsite displays, referred to as activations.

Cartoon Network’s “Adult Swim” programming block set up a carnival with



Cartoon Network’s ‘Adult Swim’ set up a carnival behind the convention center with a mechanical bull-type ride. (Photo by Thomas Melville/Times of San Diego)



A cosplayer from ‘The Haunted Mansion’ makes his way through the Gaslamp crowd on Saturday. (Photo by Thomas Melville/Times of San Diego)



The Joker and Harley Quinn on the Embarcadero on Saturday. (Photo by Thomas Melville/Times of San Diego)

a spinning bucket ride, a mechanical bull-type ride, and a small miniature golf course to promote its shows.

At the New Children’s Museum, Nickelodeon set up a slime station to douse fans with the ugly green slime



Three people cosplay as Doctor Doom, the villain in the upcoming ‘Avengers: Doomsday’ advertised behind them. (Photo by Adrian Childress/Times of San Diego)



The cast of ‘Super Troopers 3’ promotes the upcoming installment at an activation in the Gaslamp Quarter. (Photo by Adrian Childress/Times of San Diego)

the network is known for dumping on celebrities and guests on its shows.

As usual, there were surprises, including a pop-up concert at Gallagher Square at Petco Park by Billie Joe Armstrong, lead singer of Green Day.

As for next year, the dates have already been announced for Comic-Con. It will be held July 22–25, 2027, with a preview night on July 21. Registration for returning fans is scheduled for Oct. 17 and open registration is Nov. 14.

Alicia Keys Tony winning musical ‘Hell’s Kitchen’ to open in San Diego

By KAREN PEARLMAN
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — Loosely based on a short period of time in the life of singer-songwriter Alicia Keys, the Tony and Grammy-winning Broadway smash “Hell’s Kitchen” is tuning up for a run from Aug. 11 to 16 at the San Diego Civic Theatre downtown.

For 17-time Grammy winner and pianist Keys — who has a home in La Jolla — and the show’s creative team, this premiere isn’t just a tour stop. It’s a bit of a local homecoming.

“Hell’s Kitchen” is directed by five-time Tony Award nominee Michael Greif, with choreography by five-time Tony nominee Camille A. Brown. The musical is based on a book by Pulitzer Prize finalist Kristoffer Diaz and the music of Keys.

The coming-of-age musical tells the story of 17-year-old Ali, a fiery teen searching for her passion and purpose in a 1990s New York City neighborhood, guided by a musical mentor and a dynamic community.

Keys, now 45, wrote the music and lyrics for the show, which blends new music written specifically for the production with hit songs from her catalog, including “Fallin’,” “No One,” “Girl on Fire,” “If I Ain’t Got You” and “Empire State of Mind,” along with previously unreleased material.

“Hell’s Kitchen,” which began off-Broadway in 2023, won two 2025 Tony Awards and the 2025 Grammy Award for Best Musical Theater Album.

While the story is rooted in Manhattan, the visual heartbeat of the production was crafted by UC San Diego Professor of Scenic Design, four-time Tony Award nominee Robert Brill.

Brill has been nominated for scenic design for “Assassins” (2004), “Guys and Dolls” (2009) and “Ain’t Too Proud” (2019), as well as “Hell’s Kitchen” (2024).

Brill designed the gritty, kinetic set for the production with firsthand knowledge. “I actually lived in Hell’s Kitchen in the mid-’90s, just a few blocks north of Manhattan Plaza, where Alicia grew up and where the story takes place,” Brill



Maya Drake as Ali in the touring production of ‘Hell’s Kitchen,’ the musical with songs written by Alicia Keys. (Photo by Marc J. Franklin/Special for Times of San Diego)

That history, of course, shaped his design approach.

Brill said he and Greif — who also has local connections as a former artistic director of the La Jolla Playhouse — decided early on to put the show’s musicians inside the world of the story rather than off to the side, representing the artists who influenced Ali’s love of music.

As the design evolved alongside Keys’ desire to capture the energy and grit of New York, it became a layered mix of architecture, light and projections in constant motion.

“To me, that’s what living in New York feels like,” Brill said. “You’re always taking in new sights, sounds, people and energy. We wanted the set to capture that feeling — that sense that the city is constantly shifting around you — almost like looking through a kaleidoscope.”

Brill said working on the 11-time Tony-nominated production feeds directly back into his classroom at UCSD, where he’s been teaching since 2015. Brill is also a 1988 alumnus of UCSD’s undergraduate program in theater and dance.



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CityFest brings two stages of live entertainment to Hillcrest for festival's 42nd year

By MARK NERO
SPECIAL FOR TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

SAN DIEGO — One of the more anticipated annual events in Hillcrest is set to return Sunday, when the annual CityFest street party is back for its 42nd edition.

This year, according to the Hillcrest Business Association, the free, all-ages festival is expected to attract 70,000 attendees, more than four times the neighborhood's population of about 16,000 people.

CityFest, in its more than four decades of existence, has grown into one of San Diego's largest free, all-ages events.

"Hillcrest is San Diego's most eclectic urban neighborhood ... and CityFest is the ultimate celebration of that spirit," Hillcrest Business Association spokesperson Natalie Starr said in a statement.

This year's festival is set to take over seven city blocks, starting at University Avenue under the iconic Hillcrest sign, and stretching nearly half a mile down

Fifth Avenue to Pennsylvania Avenue. Hours are from noon to 11 p.m.

Attendees can expect two stages of live music and DJs, 100-plus local vendors, a 21-and-over beer garden, community booths and a kids zone. The kids zone, active from noon to 8 p.m., includes free all-ages arts and crafts, such as learning to make a suncatcher with a template and tissue paper.

More than 20 hours of performances are scheduled across the two stages, with performers from all over the San Diego region. Artists run the gamut, from singer-songwriters and electronic to indie/alt rock and hip-hop.

Musicians slated to appear on the main stage include DJ-producer Kurtyka, swing-jazz act Vintage Girl in a Modern World, indie glitter rock band Daddy,



CityFest will return Sunday for its 42nd year in Hillcrest. (Photo courtesy of the Hillcrest Business Association)

soul-funk act Jenny & the Tramps, high energy indie rock band The Dimes and three-piece indie-alternative group The Band Cope.

As the sun goes down, various DJs, including Kinky Loops, K-Swift and John Joseph, will spin on the main stage from

7–11 p.m.

Also planned for the event are drag queen story time for kids and a performance by former "RuPaul's Drag Race" competitor Lydia B. Kollins.

New to this year's event is a Mural Alley wine garden, from noon to 6 p.m. Although CityFest is free, tastings inside the garden require the purchase of tasting tickets, which cost \$10–\$40.

Each tasting ticket will be redeemable for one 2 ounce pour from any participating winery. Featured wineries include Cork & Stem, Negotiant Winery, and Pali Wine Co.

"It is amazing to see the neighborhood come alive with people dancing in the streets, connecting through music (and) art, supporting local businesses and celebrating what community pride looks like," Starr said.

Urban Pickleball returns to Fifth Avenue in Gaslamp Quarter

By NICOLE ABRAMS
TIMES OF SAN DIEGO

GASLAMP QUARTER — Gaslamp Urban Pickleball is back this summer.

Picklers of all skill levels can go to the Gaslamp Quarter to play on what organizers call San Diego's first-ever urban pickleball court every Thursday until Sept. 3.

Play starts at 4 p.m. and ends at sunset.

Eight courts will sit on Fifth Avenue between Island Avenue and K Street each Thursday in the heart of the Gaslamp Quarter. Participants are asked, though, to bring their own paddle (although limited rentals are available), athletic shoes, a water bottle and good vibes.

Players are separated based on their experience level, according to Michael Trimble, executive director of the Gaslamp Quarter Association. There are two sections: one for beginners and advanced beginners and the other for intermediate and advanced intermediate players. "We don't put beginners with advanced players," Trimble said. "So, everyone gets to play within their comfort level."

Trimble said that the players who win the most matches get a prize pack which could include a paddle or a pickleball bag.

Players also can win prizes at the "Wheel of Serves," a pickleball-themed prize wheel with exclusive giveaways from local businesses and event sponsors.

A DJ will spin as pickleball players' rally. Paddle Hour Specials will be offered at nearby bars and restaurants after matches.

Trimble said that the event is a great social experience and also good for business.

"It's a place-making activity that really drives people to do something different than what normally happens in the Gaslamp Quarter," Trimble said.

Pickleball sellouts

Urban pickleball began in the Gaslamp last year. Trimble, who came up with the idea to bring pickleball downtown, said that every event that they did last year was a sellout.

"We're looking to have a sellout again," Trimble said.



Picklers can hit the streets in the Gaslamp on Thursdays through Sept. 3 when part of Fifth Avenue will shut down for Gaslamp Urban Pickleball. (Photo by Adrian Childress/Times of San Diego)