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Pocket News

VOL 32 • ISSUE 24

Bringing You Community News For Over 30 Years

DECEMBER 22, 2023

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Fuji Comes Home

Hearty Japanese Food for All Generations



Kevin Oto, left, and Russell Okubo pose in front of the restaurant's Samurai mural.



An inviting banner outside Fuji Restaurant.

Story and photos by
Kristina Rogers

SACRAMENTO, CA (MPG) - When a new restaurant opens, it normally requires heavy marketing to get the word out, but

the buzz on social media was swift when it was announced Fuji is coming back to 1235 Broadway. Owners Russell Okubo and Kevin Oto have been deluged with congratulations. In fact, within the hour of

posting the announcement on Instagram, Oto received over 50 messages, and his DMs were still blowing up during the interview. On the other hand, Okubo has no social media, but his robust following has

people spreading the word, too. Between uncle and nephew, they've covered several generations.

When you step in, it's apparent the décor will reflect the blending of
Continued on Page 2



A Heartfelt Holiday Message from Your Councilmember

As the proud representative of this vibrant and diverse community, it is both an honor and a privilege to extend warm wishes to each and every one of you during this joyous season. On behalf of the entire team at the Sacramento City Council District 7 office, I want to express our heartfelt gratitude for allowing us the opportunity to serve and support you throughout the year.

As we approach the festive season, I am filled with pride to be part of a community that embodies the spirit of unity, compassion, and resilience. Our district is a tapestry of cultures, backgrounds, and stories that come together to create a unique and thriving community. Together, we have faced challenges, celebrated triumphs, and worked towards building a better future for all.

This Christmas, I extend my warmest wishes for a holiday season filled with love, laughter, and cherished moments with family and friends. May the spirit of joy and generosity be present in every home, and may the New Year bring opportunities for growth, prosperity, and community enrichment.

As we look ahead to the coming year, let us continue working together to build a community that thrives on collaboration, understanding, and inclusivity. Your insights and contributions are invaluable, and I am excited about the opportunities that lie ahead for our district.

Once again, Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year to you and your loved ones. May the holiday season bring you joy, peace, and a renewed sense of hope.

With warm regards,
**Councilmember
Rick Jennings**
Sacramento City Council
District 7

Warm Smiles and Great Conversations at Cops & Coffee



From left, Officer Amanda Pearlman, Jim Randlett (with Chocolate Turkey) and Sgt. Dani Longanecker/POP Team

Story and photo by
Kristina Rogers

SACRAMENTO, CA (MPG) - On a drizzly December

morning, conversations were brewing at the Chocolate Fish Coffee Roasters in Land Park. Sacramento PD hosted

a Cops & Coffee, a friendly meet-and-greet event allowing officers and neighbors to casually chat (and snack on

the best avocado toast around).

The Coffee with a Cop program was established
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Fuji Comes Home

Hearty Japanese Food for All Generations

Continued from Page 1
generations, as well. A new mural of a fierce samurai greets patrons while family artifacts grace the walls. And although Russell Okubo is establishing the new Fuji, his nephew Kevin Oto will be in charge. Okubo's legendary background as a Sacramento restaurateur make him the perfect foundation for this new venture. He owns Sumo Sushi (Elk Grove), Tokyo Fros (Arden), and Aji Japanese Bistro in El Dorado Hills. Okubo was also corporate chef for the well-known Fats family. It's an impressive resume, even for a European-trained chef.

Although many restaurants lament about the struggle to find qualified employees, it won't be an issue here. Staff tend to follow Okubo wherever he goes. Steven Dacong has worked with him for over twenty-five years. Dacong is an energetic, affable man excited about his new role as Fuji's manager. He noted, "Even when staff leave, they always come back. Once you work for Russell, you don't want to work for anyone else."

And once the community tries the food, they'll keep coming back.

The new menu will incorporate a few old Fuji favorites like sesame chicken, udon, and tempura. Sushi will be in the nigiri style, like Okubo's mother and grandmother taught him: where flavor and substance come from quality ingredients. "We don't do rolls with sauces; that's more of a California thing," said Okubo. "And plenty of local restaurants



Kevin Dacong next to a vintage Little League trophy, wearing a shirt with the kanji characters for "Fuji."

do that already." He also said, "Our focus isn't to be a 'sushi restaurant,' but more about great Japanese food with sushi."

Along with locally-sourced produce and fish, Fuji will receive overnight deliveries from Japan's world-famous Tsukiji market. Whatever fish arrives that week will provide surprising, unique dishes. The site will offer happy hour with a robust bar stocked with local craft beers. Sake enthusiasts should appreciate the drinking flights and tasting events, too. And finally, the Sunday Asian brunch will be a weekend treat for guests.

Fuji is one of the only restaurants in the area with a professional events space attached. The December 18th opening was barely announced when eight parties booked the 100-seat

banquet room. The upstairs space offers a large projector screen and high-tech surround sound with a disco ball. Since Fuji is joining Selland's and The Kitchen in the new evolution of the Broadway corridor, the owners understand change is still coming. A security plan is in place to ensure guests can walk safely to and from their cars while visiting.

Kevin Oto, Steven Dacong, and the staff are eager to make Fuji a success. Russell Okubo is ready to let them take over as he looks towards retirement. Fuji is his final love letter to a city he has served for decades. Okubo's vision is clear: "Our food isn't going to be flashy or pretentious. It will be simple and clean with good flavors. A welcoming family place to get good food, drink and relax." The new Fuji is about to raise the bar on what that means. ★

Nation's Biggest Lifelike Dinosaur Event Roars into Sacramento

Jurassic Quest News Release

SACRAMENTO, CA (MPG) - North America's most popular interactive dinosaur experience is BACK, BIGGER and BETTER than EVER! Sacramento-area families can walk among the nation's biggest herd of photorealistic dinosaurs when Jurassic Quest® opens at Cal Expo Center for one weekend only Jan. 12-14.

Loved by millions, only Jurassic Quest can bring families memories this BIG! Walk through 165 million years of the Triassic, Jurassic and Cretaceous periods to learn about the creatures that ruled the Earth! In addition to life-like dinosaurs, Jurassic Quest's classic experiences for the whole family include some of the largest rideable dinosaurs in North America, live dinosaur shows, interactive science and art activities including a fossil dig and real fossils like T-Rex teeth, a triceratops horn and life-size dino skull, a "Triceratots" soft play area for our littlest explorers, bounce houses and inflatable attractions, photo opportunities, and more.

New this year! Jurassic Quest is bringing more hands-on activities, education and fun. This evolution, Jurassic Quest includes an expanded Excavation Station and more Jurassic-themed rides and inflatables. Even our animatronic herd has expanded to include fan favorites, the Utahraptor and Giganotosaurus. In addition to "The Quest," a self-guided scavenger hunt style activity where budding paleontologists can become Jr. Dinosaur Trainers, Jurassic Quest has launched a new video tour that's already getting "roaring good" reviews from families



Tyranno Tony makes sure Tyson the T-Rex gets whatever keeps the baby happy. Photo courtesy of Jurassic Quest

and features our star dino trainers: Safari Sarah, Dino Dustin, Prehistoric Nick and Park Ranger Marty (available onsite and on your phone via QR code)! All expanded activities are included with general admission. New attractions launching in winter include kids facing off with the notoriously fast Jurassic Quest Utahraptors for "Raptor Run" races, and "Rope-a-Raptor," where experienced "BrontoBusters" help kids lasso stray dinos to get them back to their pens.

The Jurassic Quest herd of animatronic dinos – from the largest predators to playful baby dinos – are displayed in realistic scenes with some that move and roar, allowing guests to experience them as they were when they roamed Earth millions of years ago. Jurassic Quest works in collaboration with leading paleontologists to ensure each dinosaur is painstakingly replicated in every detail, from coloration to teeth size, to textured skin, fur or feathers, drawing on the latest research about how we understand dinosaurs looked and moved. Families also have the unique opportunity to meet the babies, hatched only at Jurassic Quest: Cammie the Camarasaurus, Tyson the T-Rex and Trixie the Triceratops.

Advance purchase online recommended to ensure desired date and availability at www.jurassicquest.com, or tickets are available on-site, and include a 100% ticket guarantee that in the event of a show cancellation or postponement for any reason, ticket purchases will be automatically refunded for the full purchase amount.

General admission tickets include access to the dinosaur exhibits, arts and crafts activities, and dinosaur shows. There are rides and activities that require activity tickets available on site, or guests can upgrade to the Kids Unlimited Ticket (the best value for children ages 2-10). Entry is free for children under age 2. Guests can walk through the dinosaur experience at their own pace, and strollers are permitted. Socks required for inflatable attractions. Some venues may have wheelchairs for use, but please contact the venue in advance to make arrangements.

Admission: Tickets available online (Standard, Senior and Kids pricing available)

General admission includes live shows, arts and crafts activities, and dinosaur exhibits. Tickets for individual activities available on-site. Free entry for children under 2. KIDS UNLIMITED TICKETS: Includes admission, plus unlimited access to stationery and walking dinosaur rides, fossil dig, and dinosaur themed inflatable attractions (Note: maximum weight for rides is 140lbs.). Location: Cal Expo Center (1600 Exposition Blvd., Sacramento, CA) Hours: Friday, Jan. 12: 9am-8pm / Saturday, Jan. 13: 9am-8pm / Sunday, Jan. 14: 9am-7pm

For more information and tickets visit www.jurassicquest.com. ★

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Warm Smiles and Great Conversations at Cops & Coffee

Sac Diocese to Seek Bankruptcy Protection, Facing Over 250 Sexual-Abuse Cases

Continued from Page 1

in 2011 and designed to create positive relationships between law enforcement and the communities they serve. Today, the program is in all fifty states, and abroad in countries like Australia, Africa, Canada, and Europe. Sacramento’s police and sheriff’s departments came on board quickly and hosted neighborhood coffee talks all around the area. Unfortunately, when the pandemic hit, people couldn’t socialize in person, and the program was put on a shelf. The good news is that law enforcement revived Cops & Coffee this year, and plans to improve it in 2024.

“Previously, we’d host Land Park Cops & Coffee at different coffee shops. The inconsistency made it difficult for the community to rely on when they could meet us,” explained Sergeant Dani Longanecker, “We want to change that in the coming year. We plan to have it at one spot (possibly Chocolate Fish) and host around every other month.” They are still working out the details but hope this upgrade will encourage more neighbors to stop by.

“We want to reach the community in more ways than just when people call 911,” said Officer Amanda Pearlman. “At a coffee shop, people aren’t meeting us in a moment of crisis. They can relax and get to know us.” And officers get the opportunity to better understand the people they serve.

Officer Pearlman shared that discussions normally focus on homelessness, trespassing, home invasion, auto break-ins, and mail theft. These are not exclusive to any particular area, but Cops & Coffee creates connections to help share information and solve problems at a neighborhood level. The stories and photos residents share during these conversations can help law enforcement with current crime issues.

And Land Park residents also gain bits of helpful knowledge. For instance, Sergeant Longanecker pointed out that auto thefts increase in the winter months. “Criminals who normally steal bikes in warm weather turn to steal cars about now. Like the rest of us, they don’t like to travel in the cold weather either.” That’s a good reminder it’s just as important to keep our cars

locked up and secure in the winter months. Also, police bring informational handouts such as Neighborhood Watch sheets and crime prevention tips for residents to take home.

Some Land Park neighbors like showing appreciation for SacPD and don’t come empty-handed. Long-time neighbor Jim Randlett walked in with a giant chocolate turkey. He presented it to Sergeant Longanecker as thanks for their service. It certainly put a smile on everyone’s face, and inspired a few jokes, too. And that’s what Cops & Coffee is all about; humanizing officers in a relaxed atmosphere and allowing neighbors to be themselves and make a connection.

Officer Pearlman said, “We want the community to keep coming, we want to hear from everyone and to put a friendly face to SacPD. We are not only here to fight crime, but also to say hello.”

The community is encouraged to stay in touch for updates on the 2024 Cops & Coffee events. Events will be posted on Instagram, Facebook, Next Door, and the Land Park Community Association website. ★

By Matthew Malone
Staff Writer

SACRAMENTO, CA (MPG) - The Roman Catholic Diocese of Sacramento will seek Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection next year, Bishop Jaime Soto announced on Dec. 9, as it faces hundreds of lawsuits alleging child sexual abuse by clergy. The diocese oversees Catholic parishes in much of Northern California, including Sacramento County.

In a letter published online and distributed to parishioners at local churches, Soto said he expects to file for bankruptcy protection in March 2024.

“It is now clear to me that the only respectful, transparent, and fair way to address the substantial number of claims by those who have been abused by clergy and other members of the Church is to seek a court-supervised reorganization. This process will also allow me to sustain the sanctifying, teaching, and charitable work of the Catholic community in Northern California,” the letter read.

Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection generally allows an organization to continue operating while negotiating with creditors to restructure its debts. The letter noted as much and said parishes and schools in the diocese “would continue their operations uninterrupted.”

Soto said more than 250 lawsuits alleging abuse have been filed against the diocese. Without reorganization, “it is likely that not all the abuse victim-survivors would receive a fair



The Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, the seat of the Diocese of Sacramento, is seen in 2011. Bishop Jaime Soto has announced his intention to seek Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection on behalf of the diocese, in response to hundreds of lawsuits claiming clergy sexual abuse. ‘Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament - Sacramento, California’ by TravelingOtter used under CC BY-SA 2.0.

consideration of their claim,” he said, with available funds being “depleted” in the first cases brought forward.

“Bankruptcy is a costly and lengthy process, but it also provides supervision and transparency for all the parties involved so that a fair resolution is offered to the victim-survivors of abuse,” Soto continued. He expressed hope that the diocese would “emerge from this necessary, penitential exercise with greater resolve to be a humble sanctuary of holiness and healing for all the sons and daughters of God in Northern California.”

Law Group Decries Plan

A law firm that represents people alleging clerical abuse, including cases in the Sacramento diocese, criticized the decision.

“On behalf of the many survivors who were gravely hurt, we react with deep disappointment in the choice made by the Bishop of Sacramento to seek bankruptcy protection from accountability,” Jeff Anderson and Associates said in a press release. “We know from all the work we have done with survivors across the country that bishops and dioceses have continuously utilized Chapter 11 to shamefully protect themselves.”

The release said other dioceses have used bankruptcy filings to delay court cases and prevent “full disclosure.”

“The Diocese might change, but their motivations for filing bankruptcy remain the same — the desire to protect their reputation and their assets, no matter the moral expense,” attorney Jeff Anderson said in a statement.

The Sacramento diocese is the fourth in California to seek bankruptcy protection after a wave of sexual-abuse claims under state Assembly Bill 218. The legislation took effect in 2020 and extended the statute of limitations on childhood sexual abuse, allowing much more time for accusers to come forward after reaching adulthood.

The other dioceses filing for Chapter 11 protection are Santa Rosa, San Francisco and Oakland. ★



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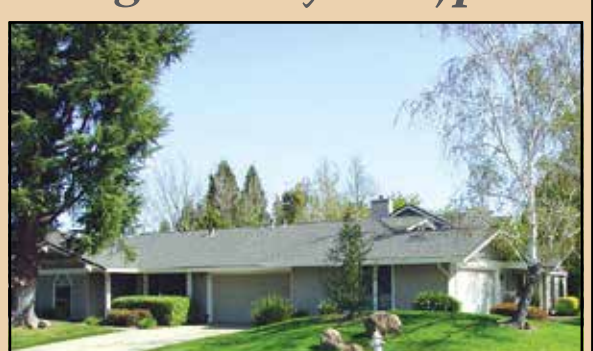
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A Big Change at EDD

EDD changes unemployment contractor after scams

BY LYNN LA,
calmatters.org

SACRAMENTO COUNTY CA (MPG) - California has a new unemployment and disability payment contractor after the state’s multi-billion-dollar pandemic fraud panic. The Employment Development Department hopes it will be the end of an era of brazen scams, which wreaked havoc for laid-off workers and fueled police busts involving stacks of ill-gotten debit cards issued at the department’s direction by then-contractor Bank of America.

EDD tells CalMatters that on Monday it plans to begin notifying 850,000 benefit recipients of the new payment provider: Money Network, an electronic payment company owned by finance tech company Fiserv. Money Network may sound familiar; it was also tapped by the federal government and Gov. Gavin Newsom to pay out COVID-era stimulus funds, which attracted its own waves of debit card scams.

Money Network won the EDD contract after a competitive bidding process. It comes as the agency embarks on a five-year, \$1.2 billion tech overhaul known as EDDNext.

The contract will primarily be paid for through a debit card revenue-sharing agreement, similar to the EDD’s previous deal with Bank of America. The agency will also pay \$32 million over five years for Money Network to offer a long-discussed direct deposit option to workers’ bank accounts, which the



The offices of the Employment Development Department in Sacramento where it all went wrong. Photo by Miguel Gutierrez Jr., CalMatters

EDD says will launch in spring 2024.

In mid-January, people receiving unemployment, disability and paid leave benefits from the EDD will be mailed new Money Network debit cards. Payments will officially begin on these cards on Feb. 15. Anyone who still has a Bank of America EDD debit card will have until April 15, 2024, to spend the money.

In the meantime, fraud analysts tracking an uptick in attacks on government benefit debit cards — not just California’s unemployment program, but also food assistance and others — will be watching to see what lessons have (or haven’t) been learned from the pandemic. The new EDD cards will include both security chips and tap-to-pay options common in consumer credit cards.

Still, the EDD is advising cardholders to be vigilant: “Beware of scammers. We will never request your personal information by text message, e-mail or on social media.”

Tens of thousands of Californians are still

awaiting aid from the COVID-19 rent relief program. But as CalMatters housing reporter Ben Christopher explains, the program may run out of money before it can help the remaining eligible applicants.

The \$5.2 billion program launched in 2021 to help Californians pay down rental debt they accumulated during the pandemic. Though it stopped taking new applications in 2022, more than 70,000 households still have applications pending. The program has enough funding to cover a little more than 14,000 people — meaning the remaining 80% of the total applicant pool is out of luck.

That’s devastating news for tenants and landlords alike who may ultimately wait in vain for relief to come. As one graphic designer and single mother told Ben: “I’m trying to find a way to freelance or do whatever I can do to get the money to just pay it myself... I can’t sit and depend on it and wait because it’s been two years.” ★

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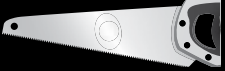
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Sacramento Public Library Puts out Call for Artists



Folsom Lake State Recreation Area, one of the potential sites for a Parks and Tranquility Project art installation. Photo courtesy of California Department of Parks and Recreation

By Tamara Warta

SACRAMENTO, CA (MPG) - The Sacramento Public Library (SPL), which has 29 locations spanning from Orangevale to Isleton, recently announced its new Parks and Tranquility project. With the intention of bringing visual and performing arts to a selection of the region’s many outdoor spaces, artists are invited to apply for grant awards that range from \$5000 - \$10,000.

“We will engage and collaborate with community members, community-based organizations, and arts and justice collectives,” states the official website, “to create site-specific art and educational experiences at multiple California State Park sites around Sacramento County.”

A schedule of the public events developed through the Parks and Tranquility program are expected to be announced in early 2024.

The idea to bring the arts into parks and other outdoor spaces was inspired by the California State Library’s statewide Parks Pass program. This program allows any California resident with a library card to borrow free passes to approximately 200 state parks. SPL specifically was granted funds to identify and create art installations to complement these passes. While any artist may apply, selected projects should carry one of the specific themes being prioritized by the library.

According to Ricardo M. Ramirez, the system

supervisor of SPL, these themes include a project goal to “generate positive measurable impacts in the areas of health, natural resource stewardship, and historical and cultural connections with an equity lens.”

“SPL will engage and collaborate alongside our Sacramento community members, community-based organizations, and arts and culture collectives on arts and recreational equity experiences that include community events and field trips,” Ramirez also stated.

Selected artists will work with a special project team that consists of both library staff and community members. The original visual artwork will be featured at pre-selected California state parks, while other artists will prepare and execute community workshops featuring their art discipline.

“All types of art mediums are eligible,” said Ramirez. “We encourage a wide range of artists and all levels of experiences to apply for these grants. We are fortunate to be in a dynamic and lively arts community, and are continually inspired by what we see, hear, and experience. We plan to curate a number of public programs that will incorporate the work of the selected artists that reflect our communities and the joy of being in natural spaces.”

While any type of artist is welcome to apply, it is with the understanding that their art form may be converted to accommodate a

realistic outdoor art installation. A watercolor or acrylic painter, for example, may complete their piece and see it converted into a more durable digital print. Dancers should expect to accommodate an outdoor learning or performance space in lieu of a traditional indoor studio.

In order to be eligible for the Parks and Tranquility grant, applicants must be a resident of the Sacramento region and aged 16 or older. Applicants cannot be currently employed by SPL, and should be eligible to receive taxable income. The selected artist(s) must also be available for public events and installations related to the finalized artwork at the select location(s).

The grant application and selection process is a quick turnaround — applications are due by December 30th, and artists will be notified by the end of January. Time is of the essence for those artists wishing to be considered. With all levels of experience welcome to apply, SPL understands there will be questions. Applicants may call (916) 264-2920 or email parksandtranquility@saclibrary.org with any inquiries.

Potential artists may visit saclibrary.org/Parks-and-Tranquility for more information and to apply, as well as for the opportunity to view artists’ inspirations behind the project for a better view of what SPL is seeking out for this unique new opportunity. ★



Honestly, it seems a bit odd that Advent sermons often begin with a lesson from John the Baptist. I mean, I’m uncomfortable that I share the Baptist name with my predecessor.

While J-the-B was Jesus’ second cousin, they shared no resemblance in their preaching style. The “Babble-ist” was one wild-eyed, deranged preacher dude. If he were alive today, his caustic style might recommend him for presidential candidacy.

The man didn’t make any friends when he referred to the local clergy as “a group of vipers” and dead wood fit to be burned. Of course, he really lost his head when he called King Herod an adulterer – literally head on a platter.

But today in the US, we’re a little more tolerant of these crazy preacher types. I often see them during visits to San Francisco where scathing prophets wave signs announcing the end of the world.

But during one particular Christmas-shopping visit to Union Square in San Francisco, I saw a man holding a sign with a much kinder, gentler Baptist message. “Jesus Christ Loves You.”

He must have noticed me curiously inching toward him, and he motioned for me to approach. Jose Rodriguez kept a neat beard and held his sign above his short stature on most weekends and holidays:

Jose’s sign was to the point. Simple. Not preachy. I expected Jose to hand me an advert promoting the time

Signs Point to God’s Love for Us All

and location of his services.

“No,” he said, “I’m not a preacher. I don’t really know much about the Bible.”

Nevertheless, Jose found the Bible’s most important message, so I asked him what kind of reaction the sign was generating.

“Most people show their agreement in some way,” he said. “They smile or nod and say, ‘That’s right.’” But no matter what their response, Jose held his sign in the same unflinching way he had begun in 2000.

I admire Jose’s courage, but I also appreciated what his sign did not say.

In a time when fundamentalist fanatics picket the funerals of war veterans and thrust placards of dead babies in the faces of confused mothers, I could fill several columns with what Jose’s sign DID NOT say.

It didn’t name conditions such as, “Jesus loves you if . . .”

It didn’t say “Jesus only loves you when . . .” It didn’t say, “My god hates your god.”

The cynic might have scolded Jose saying that it’s easier to hold a placard about Jesus’ love than to actually put love into practice. It’s the warning James, (Jesus’ half-brother) gave against simply telling the hungry, “Be warm and filled,” without offering them a cup of soup.

While I doubt Jose would argue that point, I do think he was on track to offer love.

After all, I don’t think it’s possible to remind each other too often about God’s love for us. For instance, can you tell a child you love him too much? Can you tell your spouse too many times that you cherish her above all?

Maybe Jose’s message, however many times you see it at football games or on the streets of a major city, is that God’s love will always be too big to define or imagine. This was the love that John the Baptist saw in Jesus when he said in Mark 1:7 that he wasn’t “worthy to stoop down and untie his (Jesus’) sandals.”

Maybe it comes down to a variation of what our mothers taught us: If you can’t say something nice about God, don’t say anything at all.

After I got my fill of sourdough and cable cars that day, I entered the subway to take the last train home when I spied a woman holding a hymnal and singing “Silent Night, Holy Night.”

I paused, recalling my experience with Jose. His example inspired me to put down my train schedule and join in song. And for a moment our voices managed to flood the station with an echoing chorus that told a busy world of God’s never-ending love.

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Sacramento Grocery Indicted for Conspiracy, Immigration Fraud

As Well As Obstruction of Justice, and Pandemic Relief Fraud

U.S. Attorney’s Office News Release

SACRAMENTO, CA (MPG) - A federal grand jury returned a 25-count indictment Thursday against Shahrir “Sean” Loloee, 53, of Granite Bay, and Karla Montoya, 42, of Sacramento, charging them both with conspiracy, obstruction of agency proceedings, and possession and use of false immigration documents, U.S. Attorney Phillip A. Talbert announced on Friday, December 15, 2023. Loloee is additionally charged with falsification of records and a pandemic relief fraud scheme.

According to court documents, Loloee is the owner of the Viva Supermarkets chain of grocery stores, and Montoya is the general manager. Since 2008, Loloee and Montoya engaged in a conspiracy to employ a labor force at the stores that consisted of a significant number of workers who lacked employment authorization in the United States. Loloee and Montoya did so for the purpose of reducing Loloee’s labor force costs through unlawful means, including by failing to pay required overtime wages.

The indictment alleges that, in 2020, the U.S. Department of Labor began two investigations at Viva Supermarkets. Loloee and Montoya obstructed these investigations in a variety of ways, including by making false statements to agency investigators, listening in on an employee interview with an investigator for the purpose of influencing the employee to make false statements, instructing an employee to lie to an investigator about her hire date, and directing certain workers to hide to prevent them from being questioned by agency investigators. Loloee is also charged with three instances of providing false documents to obstruct the Department of Labor’s investigations.

The indictment further alleges that Loloee committed wire fraud when he applied to receive COVID-19 relief from the Restaurant Revitalization Fund program (RRF). Established as part of the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, the RRF was designed to support the restaurant industry by providing funding to those that had suffered significant pandemic-related revenue loss. To be eligible for an RRF award,

a restaurant must have had a loss in gross receipts in 2020, as compared to 2019. In May 2021, Loloee submitted applications to the Small Business Administration (SBA) requesting RRF funds for two of his grocery stores. In the applications, Loloee substantially underreported each of his store’s 2020 gross receipts to make them appear entitled to an award, when they were not. Loloee requested over \$2.2 million, and based on his fraudulent representations, the SBA awarded Loloee approximately \$1.2 million.

This case is the product of an investigation by the Internal Revenue Service-Criminal Investigation and Homeland Security Investigations. Assistant U.S. Attorneys Audrey B. Hemesath, Matthew Thuesen, and Kevin Khasigian are prosecuting the case.

This case was investigated with the assistance of the Tax Recovery in the Underground Economy (TRUE) Task Force includes the California Department of Justice, the California Employment Development Department, the California Department of Tax and Fee Administration, the Franchise Tax Board, the IRS-CI and HSI. The TRUE Task Force was created to ensure multi-agency collaboration and to combat wage theft, tax evasion, and other crimes in the underground economy.

If convicted, Loloee and Montoya face a maximum statutory penalty of five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine for each count of conspiracy to defraud the Department of Labor, to commit immigration document fraud, and to obstruct justice; up to 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine for each count of possession of false immigration documents or use of a false immigration document; and up to five years in prison and a \$250,000 fine for each count of obstruction of agency proceedings. If convicted of the counts of falsification of records or wire fraud, Loloee faces a maximum statutory penalty of up to 20 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine for each count. Any sentence, however, would be determined at the discretion of the court after consideration of any applicable statutory factors and the Federal Sentencing Guidelines, which take into account a number of variables. The charges are only allegations; the defendants are presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt. ★



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A Budget Rollercoaster

BY ALEXEI KOSEFF,
calmatters.org

With tax revenues in a free fall comparable to the Great Recession and the dot-com bust, California faces a projected \$68 billion budget deficit next year that will require spending cuts and reserve funds to close, state finance officials said today.

The new estimate from the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office, released as Gov. Gavin Newsom finalizes his January budget proposal, reflects a substantially delayed tax-filing period this fall where collections came in far below what lawmakers expected when they adopted a spending plan over the summer.

This projected deficit would be a record for California. But officials noted that it is partly because the budget has grown so much in recent years — the most recent was more than \$300 billion — and that the state has closed similar or worse spending gaps, by percentage, in the past.

Legislative analyst Gabriel Petek cautioned that California is better prepared to respond to the situation than during the economic recession 15 years ago, because it has since built several

multibillion-dollar rainy-day funds, though the state is also looking at a structural deficit of about \$30 billion annually going forward.

"I go with the word 'serious.' A serious budget problem," Petek said during a briefing with journalists. "I would stop short of calling it a crisis."

H.D. Palmer, a spokesperson for Newsom's Department of Finance, said the administration will have different numbers when the governor presents his 2024-25 spending plan next month, but Newsom is preparing to address a significant deficit.

"Both the Governor and the Legislature have a substantial challenge before them in closing a very large revenue gap in this budget," Palmer told CalMatters. "The IRS, with the best of intentions, created a situation this year that is entirely new territory."

Severe winter storms prompted the federal government to delay the income tax filing deadline for most Californians from April until November, and the state followed suit, giving an incomplete picture when legislators and the governor crafted the budget this summer.

It already accounted for a \$30 billion deficit, after two

years of record surpluses driven by economic recovery and federal aid related to the coronavirus pandemic. But those collections were ultimately another \$26 billion below estimates — a drop of 25% from the prior year — digging a financial hole based on money the state committed in its spending plan.

This year looks weak as well, according to finance officials. California has been hit particularly hard by inflation, which pinched the housing market; a stock market downturn, affecting capital gains; and a drop in investments in the tech industry, which has pulled back on initial public offerings. Overall tax revenues are projected to be \$58 billion below assumptions in the multi-year budget window.

Though the Legislative Analyst's Office estimates that tax revenues will begin growing again next year, the recovery is likely to be slow, opening up long-term funding shortfalls that could affect essential programs in future years.

"There are enough options available to address this immediate problem," Petek said. "Our high-level suggestion to the Legislature is just to be judicious about reserves because there's a lot

of uncertainty ahead, so preserving some of that resilience would be helpful."

His office recommended that Newsom declare a fiscal emergency, allowing the state to dip into as much as \$24 billion of its rainy-day funds, and that legislators pull back on one-time spending allocations that have not yet been distributed, potentially saving \$10 billion or more that had previously been set aside for transportation, environmental and education programs.

Petek also suggested that California could cut the deficit by nearly \$17 billion over the next three years by recalculating its constitutionally-mandated funding obligation to schools and community colleges, known as Proposition 98, based on the lower revenues. Though this

would decrease the state's base education funding over the long term, Petek said the immediate effects could be offset with reserves.

That option, in particular, could encounter stiff resistance in the Legislature. Assembly Speaker Robert Rivas, a Hollister Democrat, released a statement last week, when it became clear that tax revenues would be substantially below estimates, committing to a budget that "protects classroom funding."

Newsom and lawmakers are also likely to confront months of tremendous pressure from advocates arguing that their priorities should be protected in any budget solutions. Statements started rolling out mere minutes after the Legislative Analyst's Office published its report.

"California leaders have stepped up before to prioritize Californians who are struggling to get by and they must continue this in 2024," said Pete Manzo, president & CEO of United Ways of California.

Republican legislators chastised their Democratic colleagues for continuing to make new spending commitments in recent budget cycles even as it became clear that the economy was increasingly shaky.

"Hopefully, the supermajority will see it is time for a more realistic budget strategy," Senate Republican Leader Brian Jones of San Diego said in a statement, "instead of throwing money at a laundry list of projects that sounds nice on the national television debate stage." ★



A California Analyst predicts a \$68 billion deficit. Gov. Gavin Newsom unveils his revised budget proposal for 2023-24 during a press briefing at the state Natural Resources Agency in Sacramento on May 12, 2023. Photo by Rahul Lal, CalMatters



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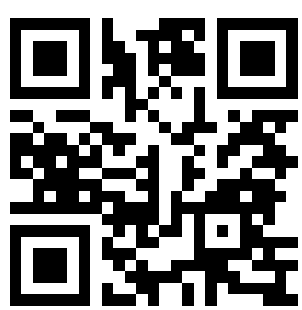
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for Unhoused Pets Launches

Sacramento County News Release

SACRAMENTO COUNTY, CA (MPG) - PAWS, or Pet Aid and Wellness Services, rolled into action at the Safe Stay community on Florin Rd on Wednesday, December 6, 2023, and began seeing its first four-legged patients, marking a pivotal moment for accessible pet healthcare in Sacramento County. PAWS is the first mobile spay/neuter outreach clinic for pets of unhoused pet owners in the area and was approved by the Board of Supervisors in July 2022.

Spaying and Neutering at the Forefront:
The primary mission of PAWS is to address pet overpopulation and reduce unwanted litters. The mobile clinic is fully equipped to provide spay and neuter services, ensuring that pets of unhoused owners have access to this vital and preventive care. By focusing on these procedures, PAWS aims to contribute significantly to controlling the pet population.

Comprehensive Veterinary Care on Wheels:
PAWS goes beyond spay/neuter services; it will also offer vaccinations, medical care, and diagnostic services for ill and injured pets. PAWS offers comparable services to care provided by a traditional veterinary office. This comprehensive approach aims to promote the overall health and well-being of all pets in the community and reduce preventable diseases.

Removing Barriers to Care:
By removing barriers such as transportation and cost, PAWS bridges the gap in access to veterinary services and represents a significant stride towards a more inclusive approach to pet healthcare. All services are provided by the County at no cost to pet owners.

Strategic Operation Schedule:
The mobile clinic will operate four days per week, with two days dedicated to providing services at shelters for individuals experiencing homelessness. One day per week will be spent at encampments throughout the County, reaching pets in need where they are. An additional day each week will be devoted to providing spay/neuter services for shelter pets at Bradshaw Animal Shelter.

Dr. Cynthia Metcalf, who joined Sacramento County Animal Care Services earlier this year as the full-time veterinarian for PAWS, emphasized the clinic’s commitment to making a tangible difference in the lives of both pets and their owners. “PAWS is not just a pet clinic; it’s a lifeline for those who do not currently have access to veterinary care. We’re breaking down the barriers to that care and ensuring that every pet, regardless of their circumstances, receives the love and attention they deserve, and that every pet owner’s concerns are heard,” Dr. Metcalf said.

The public can learn more about PAWS and view a calendar of upcoming service areas at the Sacramento County Animal Care Services website.



Dr. Metcalf assesses a new patient. Photo courtesy of Sacramento County

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Gift Card Scam and Arrest



Over 5,000 gift cards were found in Ningning Sun's possession. Photo courtesy of Sacramento County Sheriff's Office

Sacramento County Sheriff's Office News Release

SACRAMENTO COUNTY, CA (MPG) - During our recent retail theft Operation Bad Elf, detectives observed an individual, later identified as Ningning Sun, acting suspiciously near the gift cards in the payment aisles in a Sacramento Target store. Detectives observed him placing all the gift cards on a rack inside his jacket, then replacing the gift cards with another set of seemingly identical ones. After Sun was stopped trying to exit the store with the stolen gift cards, detectives discovered over 5000 gift cards from Target and Apple in his possession.

Their investigation revealed Sun was part of a scam that tampered with gift cards, scanned

the bar code, and stole money from the gift card as money was loaded on them. Victims are completely unaware it is happening, and the money is often siphoned to an off-shore account within seconds. Their investigation revealed that the operation spanned across California and several regions nationwide.

The Sacramento County Sheriff's Office urges residents to be cautious when purchasing physical gift cards from any retailer. Be observant of any signs of tampering, especially scuff marks or scratches near the bar code on the back of the card. These operations are very sophisticated, and modifications to the gift cards are often virtually undetectable, even to the trained eye. Detectives suspect Sun has done this at many stores and

are requesting the public's help to potentially link him to other crimes.

This investigation is still ongoing, and detectives are asking anyone with information about this incident to contact the Sheriff's Office at (916) 874-5115 or Sacramento Valley Crime Stoppers at (916) 443-HELP (4357). Tips leading to additional charges are eligible for a CASH reward of up to \$1000, and tipsters remain anonymous. Tips are paid in cash, and you are never asked for identification. Contact Sacramento Valley Crime Stoppers at (916) 443-HELP (4357), 1-800-AA-CRIME, or **TIPS. Use the "P3 TIPS" app or online at www.sacvalleycrimestoppers.com. Tip information may also be left anonymously at www.sacsheriff.com or by calling (916) 874-TIPS (8477). ★

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